

Trafalgar Square and the Free Speech Fight

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“But you have free speech in England. Look how the Government allows you to use Trafalgar Square and Hyde Park for meetings.” How often we hear such statements, usually accompanied by a rebukeful suggestion that we ought to be grateful. The truth is we were never granted such rights. The means of holding meetings in the streets and public places of Britain was fought for and torn from the ruling class. Let us take first the popular and ever-topical case of Trafalgar Square.

The year of 1886 was one of depression and on February 8, Black Monday, a great crowd of unemployed met to hold a meeting in Trafalgar Square. The police dispersed them and the men re-formed to march to Hyde Park to hold their meeting. At their head walked John Burns, later a Socialist M.P. and Liberal Cabinet minister, until he resigned in protest against the 1914 war. Burns carried a red flag.

The orderly, quiet procession marched along Pall Mall, but on passing the Tory Carlton Club they saw the windows crowded with well-fed, well-drunk, wealthy Tories, who, not content with laughing at the unfortunate unemployed, shouted sneers and insults at their ragged clothes, their broken boots, and hungry looks.

The road was being repaired and the crowd seized the opportunity, pelting the club’s windows with large stones. The Tories’ laughter vanished with their courage. Yelling for police protection they retreated to the back of the premises. As police reinforcements dashed to the spot, and a general struggle began, shop windows in nearby St. James’ Street and Piccadilly were broken.

Burns and three others arrested were charged with seditious conspiracy, but the jury refused to convict. The Lord Mayor’s Fund for the relief of the unemployed, which had slowly crept up to £3,000 and looked like stopping there, suddenly leapt to £70,000.

The following year, 1887, brought Bloody Sunday on November 13, when another demonstration was planned in Trafalgar Square. Using the powers given them by the Trafalgar Square Act of 1844, the Government prohibited the meeting and procession. As in the earlier revolutionary struggles of Paris and later St. Petersburg, the State garrisoned the river bridges with police and infantry, preventing by merciless use of batons, the South London workers from reaching the Square, many being injured.

North of the river the processions were to be halted in streets leading to Trafalgar Square, but some groups got through and one contingent, the North London, reached the Square in procession and were met by police and cavalry, the Life Guards. Among the wounded were John Burns and Cunningham Grahame, a Radical M.P. Both were arrested and suffered six weeks’ imprisonment.

G.B.Shaw opposed this fight for free speech, but Annie Besant entered the struggle wholeheartedly. Three months later a free speech demonstration was batoned by the police and a young worker, Alfred Linnel, beaten to death. A great procession followed Linnel’s coffin to the grave, where William Morris gave the funeral oration. Then the vast crowd stood bareheaded while the Death Chant, written by Morris, was sung:

They will not learn; they have no ears to harken,
They turn their faces from the eye of fate,
Their gay-lit halls shut out the skies that darken,
But lo! this dead man knocking at the gate.

And the refrain, often repeated in the years that followed:

Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,
But one and all if they would dusk the day.

The fight went on, the Square was won for free speech, but in more recent times permission has had to be obtained from the Ministry of Works and only one meeting at a time is allowed.

Hyde Park

The Reform League, a continuation of Chartism demanding democratic reform of the electoral laws, had planned a mass procession and demonstration in Hyde Park for the evening of July 23, 1866. On the afternoon of that day Sir Richard Mayne had notices posted throughout London, declaring the Park closed from 5 p.m. The organisers decided to go on to the Park and attempt a meeting there. When the great procession, with many bands, banners, and wagons arrived at Marble Arch, the three principal speakers, Edmund Beales, Colonel Dickinson, and George Brooke, descended from their wagon and asked permission to enter the Park, the gates of which were guarded by a large force of police. After a little polite conversation and an adamant refusal, the leaders turned away and called on the demonstrators to follow them to Trafalgar Square. The procession — well, some of it — went along Oxford Street and on to the Square where, after a few brief speeches and thanks to Mr. Gladstone and others, the meeting ended.

But at the Park — oh boy! This was a Bank Holiday to remember.

In a movement which includes a large middle class, as well as a large working class following, critical events usually find the middle class turning to constitutional compromise after many brave words, while there has often been a large section of the working class which has wanted to use Direct Action. So it was on that glorious Monday.

As the procession wended its musical way along Oxford Street, the tens of thousands who had remained, struck at the garrisoned Park in two places. In Bayswater Road a throng hurled themselves at the massive iron rails, which were thrown down; at the same time workers in Park Lane tore down the park railings and the two sections joined forces in a fight with the police.

The fight died down as the Foot Guards marched in. The workers, seeking to fraternise, checked the troops, who halted near the gates. Then the Horse Guards cantered in — and again the crowd cheered. Soon the cavalry trotted off to another part of the Park and the police were again attacked.

Now more Foot Guards marched in under orders to shoot “if necessary”. Then more cavalry, the Life Guards. Many were wounded that day, but the workers triumphed. Let us turn to a newspaper¹, at that time Radical and Republican, for an on-the-spot account.

The people have triumphed, in so far as they have vindicated their right to speak, resolve, and exhort in Hyde-park. True, the gates were closed against them, and lo! in twenty minutes after the Park all around was one vast, gaping gate. The ordinary gates were the only closed part of the fencing.

A long pull, a strong pull, and a push all together, down went the iron railings and the stones on which they were fixed in hundreds of yards, so that in less time than it takes to tell the story, the iron barriers which excluded the people from Hyde-park were levelled to the ground, or inclined against trees, for miles.

Then the people poured in hundreds of thousands into the park and then, under the nose of Sir Richard Mayne, and before the masses of the bludgeon-brigade and through the scarlet lines of Foot Guards and Life Guards, with bayonets fixed and sabres drawn, were flanking police and ready to charge, a meeting was held, a chairman appointed, speeches made, and resolutions proposed, seconded, and carried.

The Streets

Even more important than these two famous London spots were the market places and street corners of Britain, where a struggle for free speech went on for more than 100 years, until about the mid 1920s. Every city had its meeting place, which was also a big open-air club — the Mound, Edinburgh; the Bigg Market, Newcastle; the City Hall Square, Leeds, and a hundred others.

Not content with such places, the radical movement and also some religious movements, such as the Salvation Army and the Methodists, struggled for the right to hold public meetings at any street corner they thought suitable. At the end of last century and the beginning of this, the free speech fights seemed to come in waves,

and seasons, or at times, city by city. Sometimes a lone agitator or preacher would champion the cause, often successfully.

When the authorities made a general attack on public meetings, an impromptu united front would often form and Socialists, Anarchists, Syndicalists, and Radicals would queue up to be hauled off by the police. I recall one such incident, told me by our late comrade, George Cores. Brighton was having a free speech fight and, running out of speakers, sent a call to London. George went down to Brighton, began a street meeting and was in a police cell before he had time to sniff the ozone. With him was a Salvation Army captain, also arrested for speaking in the streets. After a few hours both were called to the station desk and told they must appear in court on the following Monday, it then being Saturday. The Salvationist would be let out on bail, but George held in custody.

Then came a surprise. “This is unjust,” cried the Salvationist, “if I go this man should go too.” “It’s none of your business,” said the inspector, “Get out.” “Not until you let this man go,” was the gallant reply, “if he stays, so do I.” As accused persons were not provided with chairs, the captain sat on the floor — surely the grandfather of the Committee of 100. Dragged to the door he returned. Pleading, threats were useless and after an hour of rather bewildered and highly emotional contest, the preacher and the revolutionary left arm in arm — free until Monday morning.

Free speech came the hard way. It could go the easy way.

Endnotes

1. *Reynolds*, July 29, 1866.

Additional Information

Taken from Kate Sharpley Library’s “[British Syndicalism: Pages of Labour History](#)” (1994) by Tom Brown. We moved the original in-text citations to endnotes.