

Immobilizing the Catholic Foe: A 'Popery' of Protestation in London 1780

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On June 2nd, 1780, Lord George Gordon called a mass meeting of the Protestant Association, of which he was the president, and 50,000 members gathered in St. George's Fields to march together upon parliament to present their petition for the repeal of the 1778 Catholic Relief Act.¹ When the Commons refused to review the petition and adjourned until the 6th of June, the massive crowd started looting and burning Catholic schools and chapels.² When on the 6th the Commons again refused to repeal the Act, the riots quickly escalated into the most tumultuous public demonstration of the century;³ protesters ransacked and pulled down hundreds of buildings and private dwellings, threatened public buildings with destruction, and broke into prisons and freed prisoners. This continued until the military intervened to re-establish order, and ended with over two hundred people shot dead in the street.⁴ The Gordon Riots and the behaviour of the participants tell us about the political and religious conscience of London's working population, and reflect the fact that even among the lower orders there existed a deep conviction about the way British society should be structured. While on the surface, the riots may appear to be simply yet another expression of xenophobia; they were connected to a

¹ Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 159.

² Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 160.

³ Nicholas Rogers, "Crowd and People in the Gordon Riots," in *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the Late Eighteenth Century*, ed. Eckhart Hellmuth (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 39.

⁴ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 152.

growing nationalism tied to religion, global economics, and a strained domestic situation. The methodical, discriminate, nature of the riots reflects the deeply held belief in the rightful supremacy of Protestantism as essential to the identity and security of Britain. It demonstrates that anti-Catholicism could unify different social classes under a single cause.

A series of Catholic relief bills aimed at tolerating Catholicism in England, Scotland, and Ireland were proposed by the British government in the wake of the American alliance with France in the War of Independence.⁵ Officials saw them as a pragmatic way to swell the ranks of the British Army and to ensure the loyalty of Catholics,⁶ but many ordinary Britons saw them as a threat to the Protestant foundation of their empire.⁷ After a short but intense debate, the Catholic Relief Act was passed, and it repealed some of the penal laws that restricted the religious and political rights of Catholics.⁸ Catholics would be able to lease land up to 999 years, to pass their property undivided to a single heir, and to teach in schools after taking an oath of allegiance to the King.⁹ Although the concessions were minor, the conditions were not ripe for reform. After two failed Stuart invasions, the endorsement of Catholic establishment in the colony of Quebec, and the emergence of radical, anti-establishment politics, Protestant Britons were ready to distrust anything that favoured "Popery."¹⁰ It was amid

⁵ Brad Jones, "In Favour of Popery: Patriotism, Protestantism, and the Gordon Riots on the Revolutionary British Atlantic," *Journal of British Studies* 51, no. 1 (2013), 79.

⁶ Jones, "In Favour of Popery," 79.

⁷ Rogers, "Crowd and People in the Gordon Riots," 42.

⁸ Jones, "In Favour of Popery," 85.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁰ Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 367.

this increasingly tumultuous political climate that Lord George Gordon formed the Protestant Association to campaign for the repeal of the Relief Act.¹¹ The association began to gather momentum, repeatedly presenting petitions to Parliament and publishing pamphlets heavy with anti-Catholic discourse.¹² This momentum culminated in a petition of 60,000 signatures, the march upon Parliament of June 1780, and the following five days of burning and looting.

Competing explanations have been offered as to the true motive underlying these mass acts of protest and public destruction. Contemporary elites were prone to dismiss the mob as a drunken rabble, fuelled by drink, and a love of looting, and consisting mainly of the “criminal elements,’ social riff-raff, or ‘slum population.”¹³ George Rudé suggests that economic circumstances and a rudimentary class-consciousness motivated the riots, and that the poor rioters desired to achieve “some rough kind of social justice” against the richer members of society.¹⁴ Brad Jones argues that the riots were just as political as they were religious, and that fear of Catholicism was so interwoven with a fear of tyranny and arbitrary rule, that the rioters actually believed that they were defending their Protestant identities and liberties.¹⁵ Nick Rogers offers an explanation that combines all these elements, arguing that while at their core these were religious riots motivated by a deep-rooted antipathy towards all things Catholic, they escalated because the anger of the crowd turned against the aristocratic establishment in general.¹⁶

¹¹ George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England 1730-1848* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996), 58.

¹² Jones, “In Favour of Popery,” 95.

¹³ Rudé, *The Crowd in History*, 60.

¹⁴ George Rudé, “The London ‘Mob’ of the Eighteenth Century,” *The Historical Journal* 2, no. 1(1959), 13.

¹⁵ Jones, “In Favour of Popery,” 81.

¹⁶ Rogers, *Crowds Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain*, 172.

E. P. Thompson argues that the London “crowd” in the eighteenth century had a moral and political conscience. Contrary to some opinions, the people of London never rioted purely out of a love of looting, an anger at high food prices, nor a mob mentality – there was always some “legitimizing notion” that caused the men and woman involved to believe that they were defending something deeper and more fundamental – tradition, rights, or customs.¹⁷ This means that those who rioted gave some thought to their actions; they were not merely responding to instinct, fear, or anger. Even the “lower orders” had an inner sense of justice, religion, morality, and the proper order of things, and they were willing to take measures to defend what they saw as infringements upon traditional social norms and obligations by authorities and government.¹⁸ Rudé continues this thought by pointing out that the London crowds were generally not disorderly nor indiscriminate in their actions or targets; by the eighteenth century the “London mob” was showing signs of a kind of social idealism and a “dawning of political awareness.”¹⁹ He draws attention to the demographic makeup of the crowd in general, pointing out that while most of the participants came from the lower classes, this did not mean that they were the criminals or vagrants of the city; rather, the majority were wage earners, craftsmen, shopkeepers, and tradesmen.²⁰

Many of the generalizations about eighteenth century English mobs also apply to the Gordon Riots. Contrary to contemporary belief, the crowd during the Gordon Riots was made up of “a fair cross section of London’s working population.”²¹ The members of the Protestant Association

¹⁷ E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present*, no. 50 (February 1971): 78.

¹⁸ Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd,” 79.

¹⁹ Rudé, “The London ‘Mob,’” 7.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 5.

²¹ Rudé, *The Crowd in History*, 61.

who followed Lord George Gordon were largely the “better sort of tradesmen” and minor gentlemen, but when the actual riots broke out they were replaced by London’s “lower orders” – small traders, journeymen, apprentices, servants, shopkeepers, and artisans.²² For example, among those brought to trial were Samuel Solomons, a pencil-maker; William Pateman, a wheelwright; and William Lawrence, a sailor.²³ Comparatively, few of the accused were unemployed, only a handful had prior convictions, and many received testimonials of good character during their trials.²⁴ In fact, many were acquitted because those that testified against them were found to have less social credit and poorer reputations than the men they had accused. In spite of this, retribution was swift and harsh. Of the 78 cases recorded in the Old Bailey, 31 rioters received the death sentence and 25 were publicly executed. Among the executed felons were men with families, boys as young as 15, and people tried on seemingly thin evidence.

What was it then, that roused these generally respectable, productive members of society to such destructive violence? The catalyst of the riots was the Commons’ refusal to review the petition to repeal the Catholic Relief Act. But what was it about the modest concessions offered to English Catholics that so threatened London’s Protestants that they felt it necessary to resort to such an extreme form of protest? While the English hatred of Catholicism had its roots in the Reformation, the growth of the popular press and the spread of literacy by this period meant that anti-Catholic ideology could be promulgated among a much wider

²² *Ibid*, 199, 205.

²³ Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.2, 01 April 2015), June 1780, trial of WILLIAM LAURENCE RICHARD ROBERTS (t17800628-1), trial of WILLIAM PATEMAN (t17800628-52), and trial of SAMUEL SOLOMONS (t17800628-23).

²⁴ Rudé, “The London ‘Mob,’” 7.

audience and manipulated by the authors to convey very specific messages.²⁵ The press intentionally set up a dichotomy between Protestantism, which embodied natural rights, liberty, and legitimate government, and Catholicism, which was equated with idolatry, persecution, tyranny, and foreign slavery.²⁶ This rhetoric was so pervasive that the majority of Protestant Britons connected Protestantism with their enlightened constitution, economic prosperity, and religious toleration, and Catholicism with an absolutism that created backwards and barbaric subjects unable to think or reason.²⁷ These arguments resonated deeply with a population already gripped with a pervasive mistrust of anything that seemed foreign or un-British.²⁸

The behaviour of the crowds reflects these widely held beliefs and shows how far these ideas had permeated the social hierarchy. The angry crowds abused and assaulted both prominent and ordinary Catholics, while others “paraded through the streets burning effigies of the pope amid cheers of ‘No Popery,’”²⁹ the official slogan of the disturbances.³⁰ William Macdonald was among the crowd that pulled down the house of John Lebart, a publican. He was heard crying “Popery, popery, who will have any

²⁵ Colin Haydon, “‘I love my King and my Country, but a Roman Catholic I hate’: Anti-Catholicism, Xenophobia and National Identity in Eighteenth-century England.” In *Protestantism and National Identity*, ed. Tony Claydon and Ian McBride (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 40.

²⁶ Rogers, “Crowds, Culture, and Politics,” 156.

²⁷ Jones, “In Favour of Popery,” 86.

²⁸ Haydon, “Anti-Catholicism, Xenophobia, and National Identity,” 39.

²⁹ Jones, “In Favour of Popery,” 80.

³⁰ Rudé, *Ideology and Popular Protest* (London: Camelot Press Ltd., 1980), 139.

of Langdale's³¹ gin?"³² He was also heard crying "Down with Popery!" Witnesses claimed to see Macdonald going to a nearby house, banging on the door, and demanding to see a Protestant Bible as proof that the owner was not a Roman Catholic.³³ His actions testify to the fact that the real target of the riots was "Popery" and not Lebarty himself, it also demonstrates that the rioters were willing to accept proofs of Protestantism deemed legitimate by the crowd. Owning a Protestant Bible could in many cases spare an individual from becoming the mob's next target.³⁴ This suggests that the riots were not indiscriminate but focused and specific, and that at least certain members of the mob were sober enough to remember who their real targets were.

This popular ideology, placed within the larger political context of the day, helped historians to understand why this Relief Act caused such a dramatic reaction. The real issues were not in the details of the Act itself, but in what the Act as a whole represented. The Catholic Church had grown in strength over the past two decades, and many people believed the Act would expand the political powers of Catholics as a group and aid in a Catholic resurgence.³⁵ The Act itself reflected the new ideologies of England's ruling elite and represented a larger move towards political pragmatism and religious toleration that had been gaining ground since the Enlightenment.³⁶ These ideas were not yet shared by the average Briton, as the Gordon Riots quickly made apparent. In the eyes of the

³¹ Thomas Langdale's distillery had been another target for destruction by the rioters.

³² Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.2, 24 March 2015), June 1780, trial of WILLIAM MACDONALD (t1780o628-38).

³³ Old Bailey Proceedings, trial of WILLIAM MACDONALD.

³⁴ Haydon, "Anti-Catholicism, Xenophobia, and National Identity," 50.

³⁵ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics*, 156.

³⁶ Jones, "In Favour of Popery," 86.

people, concessions like removing the reward for reporting on Catholic mass took religious power away from ordinary people and placed it instead in the hands of an increasingly powerful aristocratic elite.³⁷ The newspapers called it national treachery and a betrayal of libertarian ideals.³⁸ The ideological threat loomed all the more large because of the physical threat posed by war with France and America.

Many Britons had originally supported their fellows in the colonies, especially when the Quebec Act of 1774 promoted Catholicism in Quebec at the same time that the government was denying New England colonists their rights of representation and economic freedom.³⁹ The Protestant Association resonated so strongly with local communities because it provided a reaffirmation of national identity and in the context of two Stuart Invasions, the Quebec Act, and war with the colonies, they were able to position Catholic relief as nothing but an attempt on the part of the ministry to spread despotism through the whole Empire.⁴⁰ Newspapers reported on the relationship between "arbitrary power" and an "arbitrary religion," arguing "Popery is best adapted for slavery, and Protestantism for freedom."⁴¹ In this way, political radicals were able to link repeal of the Act with other libertarian issues agitated in the past century. Pamphlets and other populist newspapers tried to rile people up to "resist" the government's "arbitrary" measures, accusing the Relief Act of being only the latest attempt by the government to weaken the Protestant faith in all of Britain and thus to "destroy the very fabric of British society."⁴²

³⁷ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics*, 156.

³⁸ Rogers, "Crowd and People in the Gordon Riots," 42.

³⁹ Jones, "In Favour of Popery," 84.

⁴⁰ Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, 367.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 367.

⁴² Jones, "In Favour of Popery," 81.

American alliance with France in 1778 changed how Britons understood the rebellion and what it stood for.⁴³ In their eyes, it exposed the hypocrisy of a cause supposedly based upon superior rights and liberties and provided proof of its illegitimacy.⁴⁴ If the Americans were willing to ally themselves with the Catholic French, the eternal enemies of both Britain and Protestantism, how could they claim to be fighting for liberty? One of the reasons for the swift passage of the Relief Act was the Government's desperate need for more troops,⁴⁵ but this "alliance" with British Catholics was read as a traitorous act. People believed that aiding Catholics would actually undermine the national war effort because it would taint the purity of their Protestant cause.⁴⁶ They held to a deeply entrenched worldview in which Catholicism and France was in direct conflict with the Protestant values that shaped Britain's identity and culture.⁴⁷ This ultimately brought about a renewed sense of Protestant-based patriotism within the British Isles.⁴⁸ Thus, when the government moved to relieve Catholics instead of supporting this renewed patriotism, ordinary Britons were convinced that their government was conspiring to topple the Protestant nation they so desperately sought to defend.⁴⁹

The threat seemed very real to the participants of the Gordon Riots, and many of those tried for their parts in the riots displayed the fundamental belief that they were attacking an existential threat. When a mob came to the house of Cornelius Murphy around six o'clock in the evening on the 7th of June, they demanded to see his

⁴³ Ibid, 84.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 84.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 84.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 86.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 86.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 82.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 84.

books as proof that he was a true Protestant.⁵⁰ They seemed satisfied when he showed them his Protestant bible, and they went away shaking his hand, crying three times “No Popery!” When the mob had gone down the street about thirty yards, a certain Susannah Clark came out of her own house nearby, “halloo'd to the ring-leaders of the mob as they were going off, and called them back.”⁵¹ She then told the ringleaders that Murphy was a “rank Papist” and that his house must come down. She said that “there had been an Irish wake in the house, and down it must come.”⁵² The mob then went back to Murphy’s house, pulled it down, and burnt the furniture. Why was Susannah so adamant that Murphy’s house come down? Her words, and the mob’s actions, suggest that they believed the presence of a Catholic house to be a threat to the whole community. The mob was specifically targeting Catholics for the fact that they were Catholic, and their property represented a physical symbol of their existence in society that could be just as symbolically torn down.

This tells us that ordinary 18th century Britons were more “religion-conscious” than class-conscious. Rudé believed that behind the slogan of “No Popery” were deeper social motives: a “groping desire to settle accounts with the rich, if only for a day.”⁵³ He points out that the victims were wealthy Catholics, poor Irish Catholics were generally left alone, and that one man sentenced to death for his part in the riots said he had no religion at all.⁵⁴ Rogers counters this argument by saying that the ultimate

⁵⁰ Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.2, 25 March 2015), June 1780, trial of SUSANNAH the wife of Edward CLARK (t17800628-76).

⁵¹ Old Bailey Proceedings, trial of SUSANNAH the wife of Edward CLARK.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics*, 154.

⁵⁴ Rudé, *The Crowd in History*, 232.

goal of the protests was the repeal of the Catholic Relief Act, and that the protesters generally did not stray from their original purpose.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the victims of these riots were not especially wealthy men. While they were propertied, very few were part of the Gentry and none were prominent noblemen. Rather, the majority of victims were brewers, publicans, food retailers, dealers, or pawnbrokers, such as John Lebarty, John Lynch, and Thomas Langdale.⁵⁶ This would seem to suggest that it was not their wealth or status that singled them out as targets, but rather the roles they played as service providers and their status within the Catholic community, as sources of information, sociability, and credit.⁵⁷ Thus, British Protestants were rioting, not because they felt unjustly oppressed by the rich, but because they felt threatened by the physical existence of influential Catholics living in their midst.

The identity of British citizens as Protestants was inseparable from their identity as free citizens. They feared Catholicism not just as a hated religion but because they believed it threatened their treasured civil liberties and political freedoms.⁵⁸ First-hand accounts of the riots demonstrate the presence of this national Protestant conscience. Theophilus Brown helped pull down the house of a widow that was next to a “mass-house.”⁵⁹ When confronted and told to stop pulling up the floorboards of the house, he replied, “D - n my eyes, there shall be no Popery in the country.”⁶⁰ Having been

⁵⁵ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics*, 169-170.

⁵⁶ Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.2, 26 March 2015), June 1780.

⁵⁷ Rogers, “Crowds, Culture, and Politics,” 167.

⁵⁸ Jones, “In Favour of Popery,” 86.

⁵⁹ Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.2, 26 March 2015), June 1780, trial of THEOPHILUS BROWN (t1780o628-110).

⁶⁰ Old Bailey, trial of Theophilus Brown.

confronted in this way by someone who knew him, he must have been aware that he ran the risk of being prosecuted for a felony, since destruction of private property was a capital offence. Despite this, he deemed the very presence of Catholicism in his country to be more of a problem than the legal repercussions he might face. Indeed, he was found guilty for his part in the riots on the 28th of June and executed.⁶¹ Numerous other rioters professed anti-Catholic sentiments like these. A witness to the mob that pulled down Langdale's distillery heard one of the rioters say that "there was a Roman chapel in the house, and the house must come down."⁶² Thomas Crankshaw, among the crowd assailing the house of the keeper of Fleet Prison, was heard crying, "No Popery! No Popery!"⁶³

Further underscoring the fact that this was a battle over religion, and not social status or wealth, is the membership of the Protestant Association, which cut across both political allegiances and social classes. It was made up of both Whigs and Tories, men and women of all ranks were bound together by shared fears "about the nature of arbitrary power and its relationship to Catholicism."⁶⁴ The enormous petition presented to the House of Commons on the 2nd of June drew on an extremely wide constituency that was remarkably socially heterogeneous, boasting signatures not only from prominent businessmen and merchants but also from the illiterate sections of the urban population, preachers, and

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.2, 25 March 2015), June 1780, trial of THOMAS MOONEY THOMAS TIPSON (t1780o628-68).

⁶³ Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.2, 25 March 2015), June 1780, trial of THOMAS CRANKSHAW (t1780o628-78).

⁶⁴ Wilson, *The Sense of the People*, 366.

parish officials.⁶⁵ This demonstrates the unifying effect of anti-Catholic ideology. It showed people what it was to be English, by emphasizing what it was to be “unEnglish,”⁶⁶ and this drew people together rather than pitting classes against each other.

Although political ideologies were generally formed and directed by London’s upper classes,⁶⁷ their ideas permeated the entire social hierarchy. Many of the pamphlets denouncing Catholic theology were written in simple English and aimed directly at the lower orders.⁶⁸ Many of these pamphlets did not go into deeper theological issues, but focused instead on the crimes of Catholics, the tyranny and cruelty of the Pope, and Catholicism’s “outlandish character.”⁶⁹ Mary Roberts and her black servant, Charlotte Gardiner, were both found guilty and executed for their part in attacking and destroying the house of John Lebart, an Italian publican. Roberts was heard threatening Lebart prior to the riot, saying, “You outlandish bouger, I will have your house down; you outlandish Papist, I will have your house down.”⁷⁰ “Bouger,” meaning “not native” and “foreign,” was often applied to the catholic minority in England.⁷¹ Her use of the term “outlandish” shows that the lower classes were conscious of Catholicism’s foreign and “unEnglish” nature and believed that it didn’t belong within their conception of British national identity.

Connors and Falconer have argued that British identity was more local and ethnic than national, and that while

⁶⁵ Rogers, “Crowd and People in the Gordon Riots,” 44.

⁶⁶ Haydon, “Anti-Catholicism, Xenophobia and National Identity,” 49.

⁶⁷ Rudé, *Ideology and Popular Protest*, 140.

⁶⁸ Haydon, “Anti-Catholicism, Xenophobia and National Identity,” 40.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 41-42.

⁷⁰ Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.2, 24 March 2015), June 1780, trial of MARY ROBERTS CHARLOTTE GARDINER (t17800628-65).

⁷¹ Haydon, “Anti-Catholicism, Xenophobia and National Identity,” 39.

Protestantism was indeed important to early modern British identities,⁷² it is problematic to assume that this identity was uniform throughout Great Britain or that it was a unifying force that brought the majority of Britons together. Instead, they argue that identities were forged more specifically out of “membership in specific ethnic, political, and...ecclesiastical communities” that were far from monolithic.⁷³ The Gordon Riots, however, appear to suggest that anti-Catholicism was common among a variety of localities and that it perhaps provided the one cause that could unify people of different local identities. However, it was probably more a fear and hatred of Catholicism that united people, rather than any monolithic Protestant beliefs or theology. Particularly interesting is the conspicuous presence of the blue cockade, the symbol of the Protestant Association, on the hats and coats of the rioters. Clearly, they identified themselves with a cause much larger than the specific house they were burning. Indeed, several men were indicted for their participation in the destruction of multiple houses, such as William MacDonald, Samuel Solomons, and Thomas Crankshaw.⁷⁴

Not all the rioters, however, appear to have been so clearly and consciously focused on the deeper religious issues at hand, and some certainly seem to fit the drunken, rabble-rousing stereotype. Rogers warns that historians should not exaggerate the sobriety and respectability of the rioters.⁷⁵ Although the Protestant Association had been a legitimate political group with a wide membership, the rioters quickly lost all middle-class

⁷² Richard Connors and J. R. D. Falconer, “Cornering the Cheshire Cat: Reflections on the ‘New British History’ and Studies in Early Modern British Identities,” Review, *Canadian Journal of History* 36 (2001), 98.

⁷³ Connors and Falconer, “Cornering the Cheshire Cat,” 98.

⁷⁴ Old Bailey Proceedings, trials of William MacDonald, Samuel Solomons, and Thomas Crankshaw.

⁷⁵ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics*, 164.

support by threatening private property, and newspapers turned against them, condemning them as a licentious mob.⁷⁶ James Bulkley is comically described by a female witness as being drunk and cursing with his “hat full of gin.”⁷⁷ He apparently shoved this hat in the face of a passer-by and said “D - n you smell it, it has been full of gin, and if you want any I will fetch you some.”⁷⁸ Even Bulkley was hardly a social misfit by trade. An astounding eight people testified to his good character, a good deal more than the majority of rioters, although four of those admitted that he had a tendency to become “like a madman” when drunk.⁷⁹ Thomas Cleeves, Edmund Haworth, Thomas Cockin, and John King were all tried together, and multiple witnesses said they were “filled with liquor.”⁸⁰ They themselves admitted to having gotten “heavily into drink,” but were all acquitted after multiple witnesses testified to their good characters.⁸¹

While the Gordon Riots began as a popular outburst against the Catholic Relief Act and quickly devolved into a protest against Catholicism in general, historians have also argued that once the riots turned violent and destructive, the lower classes were protesting against authority and social institutions in general.⁸² Rogers argues that while a deep-rooted anti-Catholicism formed the foundation of belief upon which the riots emerged, at their core the Gordon Riots were a protest against the “religious urbanity” of the “cosmopolitan

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁷⁷ Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.2, 24 March 2015), June 1780, trial of JAMES BULKLEY (t1780o628-24).

⁷⁸ Old Bailey Proceedings, trial of JAMES BULKLEY.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*.

⁸⁰ Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.2, 25 March 2015), June 1780, trial of THOMAS CLEEVES EDMUND HAWORTH THOMAS COCKIN JOHN KING (t1780o628-43).

⁸¹ Old Bailey Proceedings, trial of THOMAS CLEEVES EDMUND HAWORTH THOMAS COCKIN JOHN KING (t1780o628-43).

⁸² Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics*, 153.

establishment."⁸³ What this means is that the political mobilization of the Protestant Association in the wake of the Relief Act caused people to stop and examine the whole cosmopolitan hierarchy, whose urban and "modern" ideas of toleration and pragmatism now emerged as a threat to traditional ways of life.⁸⁴ The attacks on the prisons of Newgate and Clerkenwell can be seen as symbolic attacks upon both the prison system and the law in general.⁸⁵ Jones points out that the crowd's attacks on symbols of Catholicism coincided with attacks on representations of political and economic authority in the city.⁸⁶ Both Tory and Whig MPs were assaulted without reference to their religion, and drunken crowds ransacked the homes of many prominent politicians and leading government officials.⁸⁷ This does not mean, however, as Rude argues, that the riots were not as religious as they have been made to appear.⁸⁸ Political oppression and arbitrary rule were so intertwined with religious fears and beliefs that ordinary Britons could equate defending political rights with defending their Protestant faith.

It is impossible to attribute the Gordon Riots to a single cause or simple motive, and historians still grapple to make sense of the many social, political, and religious factors at play. Because of this, the Gordon Riots provide remarkable insight into the culture and political atmosphere of late eighteenth-century London. The campaign for repeal of the Relief Act reflects how deeply entrenched anti-Catholicism was across all social strata; the methodical nature of the destruction demonstrates the narrow focus of the riots; and the careful selection of

⁸³ Rogers, "Crowd and People in the Gordon Riots," 44.

⁸⁴ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics*, 172.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁸⁶ Jones, "In Favour of Popery," 80.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

⁸⁸ Rude, *The Crowd in History*, 232.

targets suggests that the rioters were not crazed religious fanatics nor drunken looters. Rather, the actions of Lord Gordon and his sympathizers were the product of an increasingly aggressive and patriotic political culture that was shaped by religious, ideological, and political beliefs that had the strength to bind together members of different social classes. The Gordon Riots were not an isolated phenomena but instead were part of an empire-wide Protestant British political culture that appeared to be under attack in the final years of the American War.⁸⁹ The rioters saw themselves as the “shock troops” of the Protestant Association, and believed it their legitimate right and duty to exert political pressure upon a Parliament that refused to listen to their demands.⁹⁰ The crowd assumed the place of authority and did what in their eyes the Anglican establishment should have done – immobilize the Catholic foe in their midst.

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⁸⁹ Jones, “In Favour of Popery,” 102.

⁹⁰ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture, and Politics*, 169-170.

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