W. J. Muller and T. L. S. Rowbotham,
*The Grand Reform Dinner on Brandon Hill* (lithograph, 1832)

Steve Poole

In the summer of 1832, Bristol artist William Muller followed an extensive series of paintings and sketches recording the previous year's Reform riots, with this interesting drawing of a Reform celebration. Unsurprisingly, it is not, given the contention surrounding the stormy passage of the Reform Act during 1832, a straightforward and objective record of events, but a representation of Muller's own political and cultural position – or rather, perhaps, the political and cultural position of his more conservative patrons.
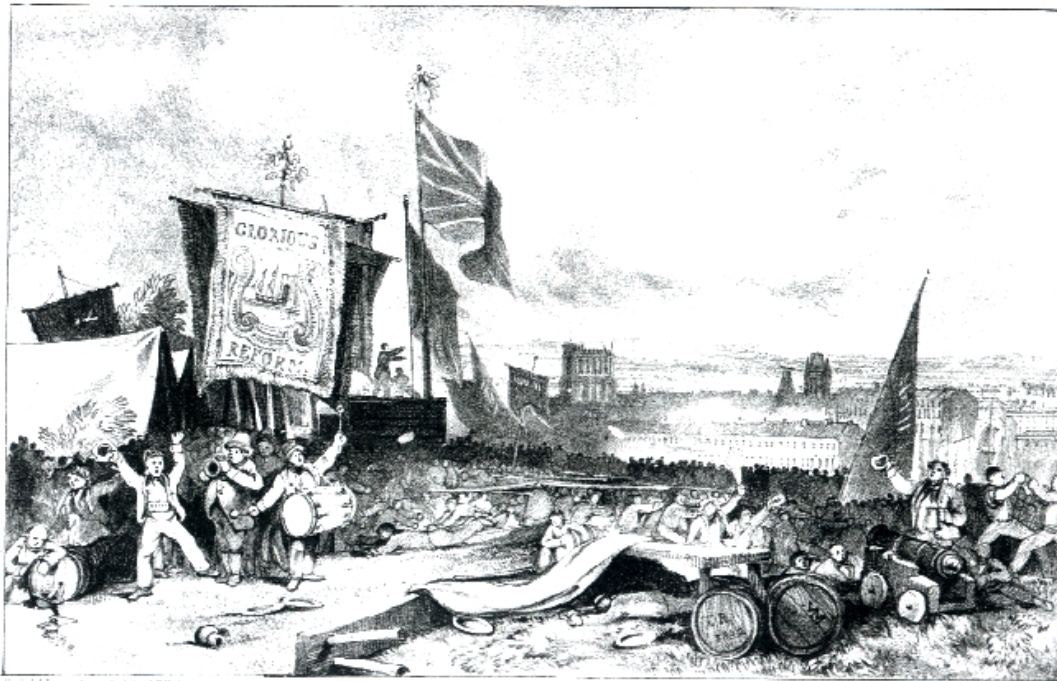


THE GRAND REFORM DINNER ON BRANDON HILL.

What do we see in the print? A large crowd of Bristolians have gathered on the summit of Brandon Hill. Some tents have been erected and some benches and tables provided for food and drink. Somebody appears to be speaking from a central hustings surmounted by Union Jacks in the distance, but nobody seems to be listening. On the left a procession is marching towards us carrying a banner emblazoned with the slogan, 'Glorious Reform', topped by a small cap of liberty and a laurel wreath. At the front of the procession, a shouting man in ungainly posture and wearing a 'Reform' favour around his neck, waves his hat while two unrefined musicians make a racket on drum and trumpet. The 'musicians' look in different directions, suggesting neither one is paying very much attention to what the other is playing. To the left of them, a drunken man props himself up on a barrel and pours beer into his hat until it overflows onto the grass. In the centre a fight appears to be in

progress. Men sprawl on the grass across overturned benches and tables, arms flail and punch and silver platters are being tossed into the air over their heads. To the right, more men lie under tables or clutch barrels of beer and one rough looking man, possibly a sailor, waves an enormous flitch of bacon in mock salute towards a man holding a beer tankard close to an abandoned cannon. To his right, two pugilists batter one another in an improptu boxing bout. Behind the chaos on the Hill, the once great city of Bristol, its mute churches dwarfed by the banners of Reform, slumbers under a troubled sky.

Conservative fears that the granting of the parliamentary franchise to 'respectable' middle class male householders would open the floodgates to plebeian democracy and mob rule were understandably strengthened by images like this one. Reform at Bristol, it would seem, was anything but 'Glorious'. In fact, Muller's image is very similar to his best-known picture of the previous year's Reform Riot itself, in which identikit drunken Bristolians either cavort or lie in an abandoned state beneath the statue of William III in the smoking ruins of Queen Square. Whilst the debauchery in the foreground of that picture was ironically presided over by the King who guaranteed British liberties by granting the Bill of rights in 1689, the debauchery on Brandon Hill is overlooked by the equally ironic emblem of the National flag.

So much for the sentiment behind the picture. But how accurately does it record actual events? The Reform Banquet on Brandon Hill did take place in August, 1832. Its organisers, middle class supporters of the victorious Whig candidates Protheroe and Baillie in the general election that followed the passing of the Reform Act, intended a respectable and peaceful celebration. To ensure good order, they applied firstly for leave to hold the banquet at the new cattle market or on Durdham Down where fences could be erected and tickets checked as fee-paying guests arrived. But the Corporation, still smarting from the blame heaped upon it for the Autumn riots, refused permission. Sensing a political conspiracy, the reformers opted for Brandon Hill on the grounds that this was land granted in perpetuity to the people of Bristol in the sixteenth century and so beyond any right of the Corporation to deny them access.

Problems arose, however, when the organisers tried to restrict access themselves. Tickets were issued to 6,000 respectable tradesmen through local benefit societies at 2s 6d a head, tables set out on the grass overlooking the city, and 'barricadoes' erected around the perimeter to keep out the excluded. The enterprise was an unmitigated disaster. While the 6,000 ticket-holders waited patiently to be shown to their seats, a crowd of 14,000 uninvited extras overcame the barricadoes, occupied the ground and appropriated the feast. A party of grandees on the top two tables sat in sullen silence, it was reported in the press, while 'a number of men and women of a very low description took possession of the other tables and conducted themselves in a most disorderly manner. On the fourth or fifth table from the chairman, a woman was seen dancing…' Waiters were punched and a remonstrating tradesman was stabbed. In a masterstroke of dislocation, Protheroe made a hurried speech of thanks to the people around him, and abandoned his seat. Barrels of beer were rolled away towards the poor districts beside the Hotwells Road where a covered wagon full of puddings was also commandeered. The evening firework display went ahead as planned (without barricadoes) but it was no more successful. A number of respectable celebrants were systematically robbed and humiliated by the appearance of 'rabble' gangs who stole their hats and shoes.

Muller and Rowbotham's print, ostensibly a straightforward record of the 'Grand Reform Dinner on Brandon Hill', was intended as both an ironic comment on the disorder that took place on the day, and as a critical allegory of Reform sentiment generally. Conservative hostility to parliamentary reform was often expressed through linguistic play on the word 'reform'. The lower orders were certainly in need of reform, so the thinking ran, but it was their moral laxity rather than their voting rights that required attention. Equally problematic were their collective social habits. The meritocratic rhetoric of the middle classes was often deeply antagonistic to the whole ethos of urban crowds. In the crowd, individualism and reason were both lost, swallowed up in the bold anonymity and unpredictable madness of immoderate collective behaviour. So it was in the Reform riots of 1831, and so it was here on Brandon Hill in 1832

Looked upon from this perspective, the print allegorises collective plebeian coarseness with the apparent endorsement of their political allies, the parliamentary Whigs. Pugilism, drunkenness, disorder, wastefulness, theft, gluttony and even ungainliness are all vices on parade here, and the idea that such hoy-polloy should appropriate the banners of Reform, over-run the respectable celebrations of the middle classes and render impotent their platform speakers must have seemed to Muller too good an opportunity to overlook. Some care has been taken, it would seem, to emphasise the dangerous social combination of the crowd, particularly in the gestures of shared enterprise adopted by the tankard-swilling man on the right, and the man waving the flitch of bacon, and by the corresponding figures of the drummer and his waving companion on the left. The wages of reform, Muller's powerful image argues, is social chaos, combination and the destruction of deference. What price Bristolian civic consensus now?

**Further reading:**
For more on Muller, including a useful survey of his Bristol Riots paintings, see F. Greenacre and S. Stoddard, *W. J. Muller, 1812-1845* (Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, 1991). The best sources for the politics of the reform movement in Bristol are J. Caple, *The Bristol Riots of 1831 and Social Reform in Britain* (1990), and M. Harrison, *Crowds and History: Mass Phenomena in English Towns, 1790-1835* (1988), but see also S. Poole, 'To be a Bristolian: Civic identity and the social order, 1750-1850' in M. Dresser and P. Ollerenshaw (eds.), *The Making of Modern Bristol* (1996). For Brandon Hill and its symbolic political importance, see S. Poole, 'Till our liberties be secure: popular sovereignty and public space in Bristol, 1750-1850', *Urban History*, 26, 1 (1999)