

II

LIVERPOOL'S POLITICAL CLUBS, 1812-1830

BY BARBARA WHITTINGHAM-JONES, B.A.

UNTIL the Reform Act of 1832 remodelled the franchise in the boroughs, Liverpool, in electioneering parlance, was a freeman borough. Originally votes for freemen had been tantamount to household suffrage, but as the population of the town grew rapidly from Restoration days onwards, the gap between the number of households and the number of freeman-voters widened rapidly. In 1734 about 20% of the total population voted. By 1761 this had fallen to about 8%, by 1812 to hardly 3%, and by 1830, despite a big increase in the number of freemen, to 2%. Every freeman was a member of the gild merchant, but by the eighteenth century the gild merchant had become an anachronism. Most of Liverpool's trade was in the hands of non-freemen. In practice only the franchise remained to distinguish freemen from the rest of the townspeople. Sons and apprentices of freemen could apply for the franchise on coming of age or on completing their indentures. Occasionally, until the practice was forbidden in 1777, the gild elected new freemen.

During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the corporation of Liverpool had often found itself struggling against the electoral influence of Knowsley and Croxteth, but from the election of 1734, when its two nominees, Thomas Brereton and Richard Gildart, defeated Lord Derby's candidate, Thomas Bootle, until the election of 1761, when Charles Pole was ousted by an interloper, Sir William Meredith, the corporation used its patronage cleverly enough to fill both borough seats with its own men. Sir William represented a new challenge. Outside the corporation, many rich citizens were now prepared to use their influence and patronage to support an "independent" candidate in opposition to the two candidates nominated by the mayor and aldermen. The corporation exercised control through "charity", pensions, and minor appointments in the customs and on the docks. Correspondingly, the non-freemen employers could control the votes of those freemen who either directly or indirectly depended upon their goodwill. The election was an open one: it was folly for any freeman to vote against his master's or his patron's interests.

In most Liverpool elections from 1761 to 1835 the corporation and the "independents" divided the honours. At first, opposition to town hall influence united the independents sufficiently to support one candidate: the corporation member supported the government, and the independent member usually opposed it. But the political and local issues raised by the French Revolution, the wars, and the prohibition of the slave trade divided the leaders of the independents into two opposing factions. One half supported Pitt and the authoritarian tradition, the other Fox and the radical tradition. No longer could the opponents of the corporation remain united, and in the 1812 election three strongly sponsored candidates opposed General Isaac Gascoyne, the corporation's nominee. John Gladstone and John Bolton led those independents who put forward the challenge of George Canning. They liked his "imperial" ambitions, his open mind upon the East India trade, and his Pittite views on the war. William Roscoe led the more radical independents, and persuaded both Henry Brougham and Thomas Creevey to fight the election in their interests. It was a close contest. At the end of the sixth day of polling Canning had 1,076 votes, Brougham, 1,030, Gascoyne, 1,003, and Creevey 991. In desperation, but much against the grain, Canning then agreed to team with Gascoyne and plead for the remaining voters to divide their two votes between them. These tactics succeeded, and two days later Brougham and Creevey resigned. Banastre Tarleton, retiring member though he was, had no local interests to sponsor him in this election. He polled ignominiously: only eleven voters declared for him, and five of those gave him their votes after he had retired from the election.

No candidate could hope to succeed in an election without the support of at least one political society, often referred to as his *fireside*. Early nineteenth-century Liverpool sported seven political clubs: they appeared in the town in this order—Backbone Club, Liverpool Freeman's Club, Canning Club, Concentric Society, Independent Debating Society, Pitt Club, and True Blue Club. Abortive attempts were made in 1814 to found a Whig Club, in 1818 a Pink Club for "the concentration of an independent interest", and in 1820 a Shipwright's Club for strengthening the corporation's patronage, but the original seven seem to have been sufficient for Liverpool. The True Blue and Pitt supported the corporation, the Backbone and Canning the Tory independents, and the other three Whig and opposition interests. The duplication did not lead to rivalry or strife. The Backbone and Canning clubs co-operated in amity; the True Blue's purpose was to provide the nucleus of an election

organisation, but the Pitt did little more than hold occasional dinners; both the Freeman's Club and the Debating Society looked up to the Concentric Society, the political home of the Whig intellectuals. All the clubs were alike in being "charitable, convivial and political"; they hoped that social activities would strengthen political loyalties and provide a headquarters for electioneering and a platform for political propaganda. Sitting members also used their clubs as administrative units for the distribution of patronage.

I THE BACKBONE CLUB

The Backbone, the elder of the two Canningite clubs, was born during the preparations for the 1812 election. It usually celebrated its birthday in November, but it must have been born before 7 October when John Gladstone, its founder, was derided in a squib which contained the following lines:

"In short, of the good loyal town, be it known
You see now before you the very BACKBONE;
Nay more, (for I will not my simile narrow)
My friends are the *bone*, I myself am the *marrow*."

The squibbers often returned to this theme during the election, and forced home their point whatever happened to their scansion.

"John Gladstone, so well by his eloquence known,
Says 'his friends are of Liverpool town the Backbone'.
But Sephton's Earl says he the name misapply'd,
And instead of Backbone, should have said the Backside."

On 23 October the *Mercury* saluted the club as "The Bonaparte of Liverpool":

"The Tories say they're the BACKBONE of your town,
You'll find it is true to your smart;
Despotic they'll rule you, your rights trample down,
Like Europe's BACKBONE—BONY-PART."

The Backbone first met at the Shakespeare Tavern, Liver Street, but in 1816 it moved to Mrs. Ellis's hotel in Duke Street. Its rules required each member to be "a strenuous supporter of our glorious constitution, and a decided enemy to all changes in the State, save only such as may be found expedient by the united wisdom of Parliament." It charged "not less than 2s. 6d." as entrance fee, and undertook to give what it could to local charities. On 21 May 1813, about six months after the

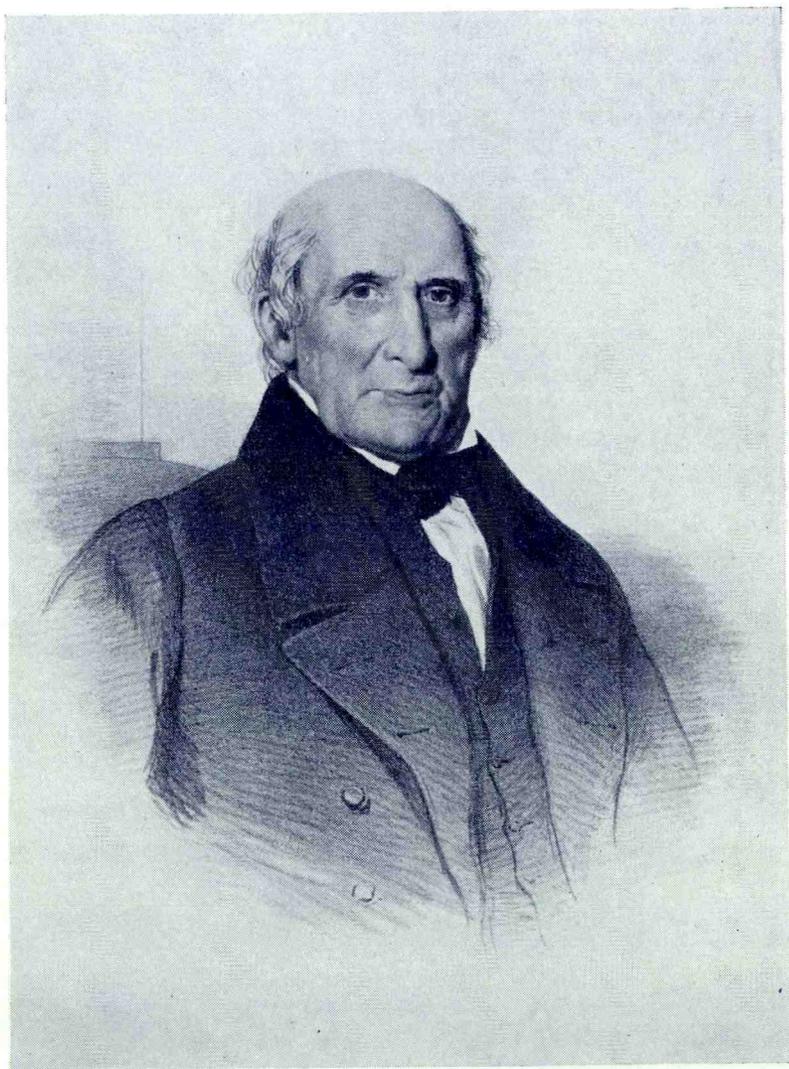


Plate 16. JOHN GLADSTONE, FOUNDER OF THE BACKBONE CLUB

club's foundation, the *Mercury* recorded that the Backbone had given £105 to "the Suffering Russians", and £20 each to the Blind Asylum, the Infirmary, the Dispensary, the Blue Coat Hospital, and the Ladies' Charity.

The club held its first anniversary dinner at the Golden Lion on 16 November 1813. The president, Jonathan Fisher, was in the chair, and John Gladstone, replying to the toast of "The President and Members of the Canning Club", made the principal speech. He referred to himself as a very humble rib of that backbone which he saw around him, a backbone made up of the chief merchants, shipowners, and tradesmen of Liverpool. Other speakers included Alderman Aspinall, Benson the member of parliament for Stafford, Henry Clark, and Sylvester Richmond.⁽¹⁾ Fifty members enjoyed the second annual dinner in November 1814 at the Shakespeare Tavern, and thereafter until 1824 the Backbone celebrated its birthday each year first at Liver Street and from 1816 at Duke Street. The popular time for the dinners to begin was four o'clock in the afternoon.

Apart from election times when the club met every night, the annual dinner saw the Backbone at its busiest. Its normal work was recommending applicants for patronage to Canning and to Huskisson his successor. Canning visited the club in 1814, 1816, 1818, and 1820, and Huskisson in 1823 and 1826. These were notable occasions. The distinguished guests were fêted and flattered: in return they praised their hosts and exaggerated the importance of the gathering. "In this assembly now collected here", said Canning in 1820, "I see virtually represented the commercial wealth, and skill, and industry of Liverpool. It represents, in a peculiar degree, that most valuable part of the population, the middle classes of society, in which the staple interest as well as the staple good sense of the community reside".⁽²⁾ Such speeches ensured popularity, and votes and workers at the next election.

II THE CANNING CLUB

On 12 November 1812 forty-three local gentlemen invited James Ackers of Knotty Ash to "establish a Society, under the Title of the Canning Club, for purposes that may promote the Principles of the late Rt. Hon. William Pitt".⁽³⁾ Ackers accepted,

⁽¹⁾ *Mercury*, 19 November 1813, p. 163.

⁽²⁾ *Canning's Speeches*, ed. T. Kaye, p. 286

⁽³⁾ All facts relating to the Canning Club are taken from the Minutes unless otherwise stated. The Minutes can be studied in the Liverpool Record Office.

and held the inaugural meeting at the Leaden Hall Tavern, Pall Mall, on 21 December 1812. The following July the club moved to the house of Mrs. Jones, "known by the name of the York Hotel, Williamson Square".

The purposes of the club were set out as follows: "That the Club be open every night as a Fireside, but that every Tuesday night be considered the regular Club night for transacting Business of Importance, and that the Chair be taken by the President at 7 o'clock, but nothing relative to the Society to be transacted after 10 o'clock; the Members may, however, if they think proper, prolong the Hour of Conviviality".

Apart from the promotion of "the Principles of the late Rt. Hon. William Pitt", the club made no formal statement of its political principles until an outrage committed against the Prince Regent in January 1817 provoked its members to condemn all radical agitators, and to declare themselves loyal supporters of Lord Liverpool's government, and in favour of the existing distribution of parliamentary seats and method of elections, "the most perfect representation ever yet devised by the Wisdom and Experience of Man".

Canning visited the club on the same occasions as he visited the Backbone. The members always decorated the club room in honour of the visit, but in 1820 they took extra trouble and directed "the sword and mace to stand at the door of the large room with the register of the members" and admit none but full members. Canning, who never failed to strike the right note on such occasions, rewarded the club with a gracious and flattering speech. He declared it to be "the offspring of our first victory, the promise and security of all that have followed or may follow it". He had no doubt at all that such clubs should exist—"where bad men combine, the good must associate"—and cleverly used his son's recent nomination to membership of the club to drive home basic principles. "Upon being shown the book in which my son's name had been enrolled, I perceive that, either from inadvertence or timidity, he has suppressed a part of his denomination. His name is *William Pitt Canning*. The illustrious person whose name he bears was his godfather. Gentlemen, the political principles which I inherit from the godfather, I shall endeavour to instil into my son, and through him I hope I may transmit them to my latest posterity".⁽⁴⁾

Two years later, 23 August 1822, the club entertained Canning to a formal dinner at the York Hotel. It had tried to do this on Canning's previous visits, but he had always declined

⁽⁴⁾ *Canning's Speeches*, pp. 278-82.

the honour. Now that he thought himself about to be exiled from home politics to take up the post of governor-general of India, Canning accepted, and about one hundred and sixty club members attended to pay homage to their distinguished guest and patron. John Gladstone, now member of parliament for Woodstock, took the chair and proposed Canning's health. The members received the toast with extraordinary enthusiasm. Not only did they drink it "nine times nine" twice over, but clapped and cheered for minutes on end. Canning's reply to "the flower of the youth of Liverpool" sitting in front of him could not help being sentimental and emotional. He spoke of his gratitude for his overpowering reception and of his pride in representing Liverpool, and he assured them that "in whatever part of the world I may be stationed, the members of this society will have a place in my remembrance and regard".⁽⁵⁾ It was a gift of a speech for a parodist, and Canning's opponents did not refuse it. The *Mercury* of 6 September carried a long poem which began,

"I am quite overpower'd (you'll believe me, I trust)
 With the claps and the shouts of a club *so august*;
 And shall never forget with what transport and glee,
 You have toasted yourselves, our great monarch, and *me*.
 When some ten years ago, by the weight of your purse,
 You resolved you would have me for better or worse,
 And by methods so *pure*, put me in my seat,
 I declar'd I'd reward your exertions so great. . . ."

Between elections the chief function of a fireside was to keep its members united in the warm glow of personal association round a common shrine. The Canningites understood the use of impressive paraphernalia in this task, and, according to an inventory made in November 1818, the club had among its possessions a chest marked *Canning Club* containing swords maces, wigs, and robes; two gilt-framed portraits of Canning and the Prince Regent; the president's chair made in mahogany with elevating foot-stool, and the vice-president's of stained wood with a scarlet cushion; a scarlet merino canopy and valance; and a framed copy of the inscription on Pitt's memorial. The officers of the club wore colourful robes, and for the 1820 election the club ordered "a handsome Colour of silk, the ground to be white, fringed with scarlet, bearing the arms of the Rt. Hon. George Canning with the words *Canning Club* printed on the top fringe". The president held office for a year,

⁽⁵⁾ *Ibid*, p. 346.

and he invited whom he wished to be lady patroness during his period of office. In the first year James Ackers invited Miss Blundell Hollinshead, and in the second George Syers Miss Molyneux. In 1821 Sir John Tobin asked Miss Gladstone, and in the following year John Gladstone returned the compliment by asking Miss Tobin.

The Canning Club was efficient enough in fighting elections, but, despite its imposing list of officers and elaborate ceremony, it was most unbusinesslike in the management of its domestic affairs. The minutes are littered with votes of censure on officers for not carrying out committee instructions. Notices failed to appear in the press. Recommendations for patronage were bungled, and the club was never solvent. The minimum subscription was five shillings a year; the lady patroness paid five guineas on appointment, and Canning made periodic contributions of ten guineas. But most of this money went to the Blue Coat School, the Dispensary, or the School for the Blind, and the club's creditors waited years for their money. No one worried unduly, not even in 1818 when the treasurer, John Brooks, absconded with £42 out of club funds. The secretary wrote to him about the missing cash. He received no reply, and so eighteen months later he wrote again. He still received no reply.

The big event of the club's year was the anniversary dinner. Tickets cost a guinea each. The dinner began at five o'clock and went on till midnight, but the president retired about ten o'clock and left a more junior and convivial member to take his place. Such toasts as *The Canning Cycle*, *Our Sister Club*, *the Backbone*, *The Rt. Hon. George Canning*, *The Immortal Memory of the Rt. Hon. William Pitt*, and *The Worshipful the Mayor of Liverpool* were standing toasts at these dinners, but each dinner had its own topical toasts as well. Attendance numbers averaged between fifty and sixty, about a third of the subscribing members.

The club continued to exist even after Canning had ceased to represent Liverpool. It supported Huskisson with enthusiasm, and greeted him "with renewed demonstrations of attachment" when he visited the York Hotel in 1823 and 1826. But the inspiration of the club ever remained its namesake. When, in 1826, John Eccles, the vice-president, proposed *Our patron saint, the Rt. Hon. George Canning*, the toast was greeted with "thunders of applause and drunk with the greatest enthusiasm".⁽⁶⁾

⁽⁶⁾ *Gore's Advertiser*, 15 June 1826, p. 4.

III THE PITT CLUB

The Pitt Club, founded in May 1814, was as much a historical society as a political club. It took no part in elections; it was content to celebrate each 28 May, Pitt's birthday, with a dinner. The mayor had presided over the birthday dinner for several years before 1814, but when support began to flag, J. B. Aspinall, encouraged by the success of the London Pitt Club, founded his club in Liverpool to "celebrate the anniversary of a day which gave to England a Statesman whose memory is revered by the lovers of law, religion, and liberty".

The *Courier* of 1 June 1814 gave a sympathetic account of the first club dinner held at Lillyman's Liverpool Arms Hotel. The club had only been founded a few days before, but almost a hundred members had enrolled. Present at the dinner were representatives from the Backbone and True Blue clubs as well as from the Pitt clubs in London, Manchester, Warrington, Nottingham, Newcastle, Bolton and other towns. The toasts were patriotic and the songs jingoistic. *The King*, *The Prince Regent*, *Lord Melville and the Navy*, *Our Glorious Constitution*, and *His Majesty's Ministers* were all drunk "three times three", and were followed by the National Anthem, *Hail, Star of Brunswick*, *Rule Britannia*, *The King and the Church*, and the glee, *Glorious Apollo*. The toast to Pitt's memory was drunk in silence; that to Spencer Perceval's was followed by *Dead March in Saul*. But the later toasts to *The Pitt Club in London*, *The Wooden Walls of Old England*, *British Valour and British Beauty*, and *The Good Old Town of Liverpool and the Trade thereof* allowed the meeting to recover its hilarity and bombast. Membership of the Pitt Club overlapped with that of the Backbone, Canning, and True Blue, but the most active members were Aspinall, William Barton, Sylvester Richmond, the two Hollinsheads, Drinkwater, and Ewart.

Canning declined an invitation to attend the 1817 dinner because the Orange toast, *Protestant Ascendancy*, was to be proposed. "It assumes to express the opinion of the club," he wrote, "upon a question of great political importance on which Mr. Pitt's friends are divided".⁽⁷⁾ Despite his eulogies of their namesake Canning was not very popular with the Pittites, and after this episode his health was drunk somewhat perfunctorily.

Enthusiasm for the club quickly evaporated. The radical *Mercury* reported with glee in 1819 that attendance at the dinner was diminishing, and professed to have noticed a shyness about

⁽⁷⁾ *Courier*, 4 June 1817, p. 3.

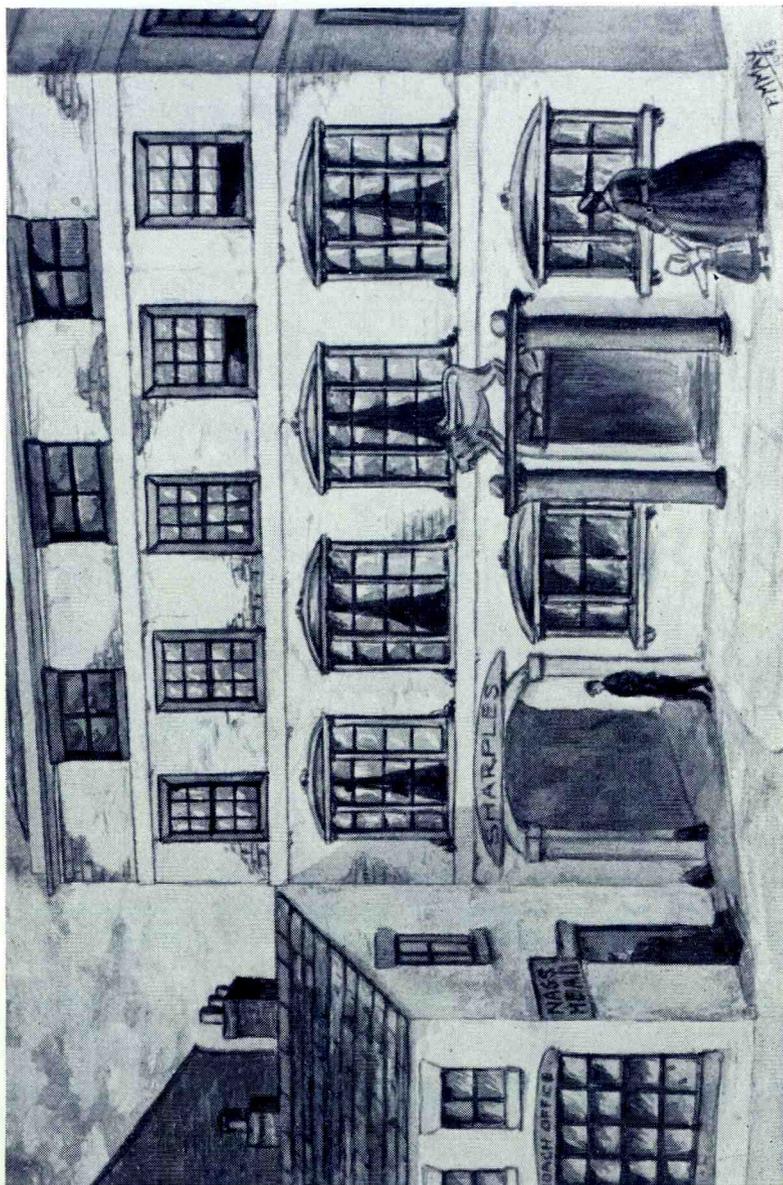


Plate 17. THE GOLDEN LION INN, DALE STREET

P. M. MAY 1908

the club members, "who take every precaution to keep out spies, who might see the nakedness of the land". Two years later the same newspaper announced "the Demise of the Liverpool Pitt Club". It bordered its notice with heavy black lines, and with mock solemnity went on to say that death was due to "internal and *constitutional* decay, producing a severe *mortification* and a most alarming *falling off* of the *members*". It pleaded shortage of time for failing to toll the bell and write the epitaph.⁽⁸⁾

IV THE TRUE BLUE CLUB

The Backbone and the Canning clubs flaunted their enthusiasm first for Canning and then for Huskisson, and worked hard and openly for their return to parliament each election. Aspinall and the other founders of the Pitt Club were Gascoyne men, but they seemed reluctant to use the club as a Gascoyne platform. His name was hardly mentioned. The election of 1818 came as a warning that such reticence did not pay: the traditional methods of corporation patronage still ensured Gascoyne's return, but Canning was more than two hundred votes ahead, and the earl of Sefton less than two hundred votes behind. The leaders of the Corporation party bestirred themselves to create a fireside of their own, and at Gascoyne's victory dinner held at the Golden Lion on 1 July 1818 it was proposed to form the True Blue Club, so called because blue was Gascoyne's colour at elections. No time was lost. Meetings for enrolling members were held on 9 and 24 July and on 10 August, and on Wednesday 12 August the club held its first dinner to mark its inauguration and the Prince Regent's birthday. J. B. Aspinall was elected the first president, and Miss Gascoyne the first lady patroness.

From 1818 to 1830 the True Blue fulfilled its purpose by supplying Gascoyne's election organisation, celebrating his victories and supplying him with lists of candidates for honours, promotion, or patronage. It met quarterly, held its annual dinner each August, and in its heyday could claim about eighty active members. Yet curiously it never officially admitted that it was a Gascoyne club. It preferred to be associated with wider and vaguer aims—the upholding of "our glorious constitution in church and state" or, in the words of its motto, "rex, lex et pontifex".

⁽⁸⁾ *Mercury*, 1 June 1821, p. 400.



Plate 18. EGERTON SMITH,
A LEADER OF THE CONCENTRIC SOCIETY

V THE CONCENTRIC SOCIETY

After 1812 the Canningites and the supporters of Gascoyne were anxious to maintain things as they were, but their opponents were planning to change them. Consequently the Whigs and Radicals had to give more time and energy to propaganda. Their meetings had to be more frequent, their organisation more active, and their press reports more voluminous. Desire for success spurred them on. Gascoyne and his reactionary supporters were easy to oppose, but Canning's more liberal outlook and Huskisson's policy at the board of trade after 1822 stole some of their thunder and won support that might have been theirs.

The chief instruments of Whig propaganda were the *Mercury* and the Concentric Society. They worked in close collaboration under the inspiring direction of Egerton Smith. The *Mercury* was the Concentric's minute book, faithfully and sympathetically reporting its meetings and speeches. Like the Canning Club the Concentric Society was a child of the 1812 election. It was born on 1 December 1812. In its letters of invitation to Brougham and Creevey it claimed that its objects were charitable, convivial, and political; "charitable as its funds are to be applied to charitable purposes; convivial as affording rational entertainment and necessary relaxation . . ., and political in as much as it is intended to consist, exclusively, of such members, who are united in political principles, which principles are the principles which have ever distinguished your public conduct, and deservedly rendered you the object of our esteem and veneration".⁽⁹⁾ Six years later the Rev. William Shepherd gave a more precise definition of the society's political aims. He explained that the series of concentric circles which constituted the society's emblem intimated "that our society contains within its compass various classes and descriptions of the friends of freedom . . . advocates of annual, and advocates of triennial parliaments. Some of our members wish for universal suffrage; others of us deem it expedient to restrict the elective franchise to householders only. It is the object of the founders of the Concentric Society to unite these various classes and descriptions of reformers in one close system of benevolence, candour, and liberality to each other; and in a firm phalanx as opposed to our common foes—the advocates of corruption".⁽¹⁰⁾ Nevertheless, despite its claim to represent a wide range of

⁽⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, 22 January 1813, p. 238.

⁽¹⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, 11 December 1818, p. 186.

reformers, the Concentric Society was essentially a middle-class society, and owed its escape from suppression in 1817, when its humbler satellites were snuffed out, to this very "respectability". It numbered among its figure heads Samuel Whitbread, M.P., Sir Francis Burdett, the duke of Norfolk, and Coke of Holkham as well as its two original candidates, Brougham and Creevey. The earl of Sefton was more than a figurehead. He was a prominent speaker and worker in the 1812 election. He entertained Creevey throughout the contest, contributed well to the election funds, and in 1818, though illness compelled him to send his son, Viscount Molineux, to represent him in the campaign, he agreed to stand as a candidate against Canning and Gascoyne. Sefton was a tall man with a powerful voice and a vigorous way of speaking. He was an enthusiastic gambler, a reckless horseman, and a desperate driver of the four-in-hand. Add to such characteristics a disfiguring hump on his back and it is easy to see why he was an easy target for the caricaturist and the squibber. He appears in many political verses as *Lord Dashalong*, *The Bang-up Peer*, and *Lord Hump*. His son earned the nickname of *Lord Doodle Dandy*.

"Lord Four-in-hand, the Bang-up Peer, in bed was
 on his back,
 Their Requisition when he read, he jump'd up in
 a crack, . . .
 Says he, 'I can't attend myself, because you know I'm ill,
 But Dandy will be with you soon, and dance them a
 Quadrille;
 When a Polling we will go, will go, will go,
 A polling we will go'."⁽¹¹⁾

In the early days of the Concentric Society guidance and energy came from competent leaders such as Egerton Smith, Parson Shepherd, William Roscoe until bankruptcy took him out of active politics, and Colonel George Williams, who was renowned for his scowl and his biting tongue. As the years passed other men became prominent workers in the society. Among them were the merchant Ottiwell Wood and his son, John, who was member of parliament for Preston from 1826 to 1832, Dr. Peter Crompton of Wavertree who in a battle of wits could usually force Canning to look to his reputation, Edward "Roaring" Rushton, the son of the blind poet, Robert Preston the brewer who lived in Clayton Square, James Kenny Casey the Irish merchant whose excitable eloquence distressed and angered his opponents, Peter Woods the Unitarian attorney,

⁽¹¹⁾ T. Herring, *An Impartial Collection* (1818), p. 7.

and Rev. John Yates, the minister of Toxteth Park Chapel. Alongside them in the society were a number of merchants and bankers, especially Thomas Booth the corn merchant, the second William Rathbone, Arthur Heywood whose long and gloomy face the satirists so enjoyed, and Thomas Leyland, the self-made millionaire banker, who never gave generously to election funds and often seemed afraid of the radical principles he professed to hold.

Between elections the Concentrics were considerably more active than their opponents. In addition to their regular weekly meetings at the Vine Tavern they held quarterly and anniversary dinners. A star speaker like Sir Francis Burdett could draw as many as two hundred and fifty to such functions. The *Mercury* frequently indulged in an impish "counting of noses" at the rival firesides, and easily proved to its own satisfaction the superiority of the Concentrics over the Canningites or the True Blues. They held their first anniversary dinner at the Vine on 1 December 1813, and the *Mercury* faithfully reported the event in the fullest detail. "The attendance was so numerous that many of the company could not gain admission into the long room until the cloth was removed, when the whole party, consisting of about one hundred and twenty, contrived to gain seats". The toast list was as exhausting and as tedious as in the societies which supported the government. It began with loyal toasts so phrased that there was no loss of political principle—*The Prince Regent: may his declaration that the Crown is held in trust for the people be exemplified in his conduct*, and *The Prince Regent's Ministers: may they continue to acknowledge the sovereignty of the people*. Then followed a succession of toasts to local and national heroes such as Roscoe and Brougham, to *The immortal memory of Charles James Fox*, and to *The grand panacea of all political complaints—Parliamentary Reform*.

The Concentrics were alive to every development in domestic and international politics. On 6 April 1815 they celebrated the end of the war with America, on 31 August 1815 Brougham's return to parliament, and on 5 April 1816 the abolition of the property tax. They co-operated with the Hampden Club in agitating for parliamentary reform, and sent delegates to conferences on this problem. But in 1817 the government's determination to suppress hostile political societies threatened the Concentric Society's very existence. In some alarm it convened a special meeting on 5 March 1817, and in a series of resolutions affirmed both its loyalty to the crown and its belief in the need for parliamentary reform. It ended its meeting by calling on the Prince Regent "not to give his assent to measures which have



Plate 19. ARTHUR HEYWOOD, THE BANKER

been framed by persons who cannot be friendly to the claims of the Brunswick Family, while they are inimical to the liberties of the people".⁽¹²⁾ The Concentrics escaped suppression, but continued to be critical of all illiberal measures and government policy in general. In December 1818 they entertained Sir Francis Burdett as their guest of honour, and in two of the principal speeches Egerton Smith denied that the Concentrics entertained "any tenet which may not be published at the market cross", and Shepherd attacked the bad distribution of wealth in England. "I do maintain", he said, "that the cultivator, who moistens our soil with the sweat of his brow, that the artisan, who wastes his strength in the production of those manufactures which are said to be so necessary to our existence as a nation, has as much right to the means of existence as the lord has to his land".

For several years after this banquet, the Concentrics continued to be active. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that the Society vanished after 1822. It held its tenth anniversary dinner at the Castle Inn, 66 Lord Street, on 23 December 1822. The *Mercury* reported this function with its usual enthusiasm, but after that its columns contain no further mention of the Society. Yet the leading Concentrics fought just as hard for the cause of reform throughout the 'twenties, and in 1831 reformed themselves into a new organisation, the Liverpool Parliamentary Union. The death of the Concentric Society was inexplicably unexpected and sudden.

VI THE INDEPENDENT DEBATING SOCIETY

Clubs whose main purpose was to provide an electioneering organisation were unknown in Liverpool before 1812, but a number of literary-debating societies had been founded much earlier. A Conversation Club met as early as 1768 at George's Coffee House and debated such radical topics as voting by ballot,⁽¹³⁾ but it took the French Revolution and the subsequent suppressive policy of Pitt's government to rouse widespread debating enthusiasm in Liverpool. In December 1792 the mayor, Clayton Tarleton, called a meeting in order to vote a loyal address to the crown. Roscoe and his friends tried but failed to counter this action by forming a radical society, but to support government policy there were immediately formed the Association for the support of the King and Constitution which met at the Buck and Vine, Hackins Hey, the Friends to the King and

⁽¹²⁾ *Mercury*, 7 March 1817, p. 287.

⁽¹³⁾ *Chronicle*, 17 March 1768, p. 142.

Constitution at the Eagle and Child, Redcross Street, and the Constitutional Society at William Watson's Tavern, Byrom Street. Out of their customary seclusion came several other societies, such as the Amicable, the Social, and the Batchelors', to congratulate the mayor, but none of these took any part in electioneering, and even those which professed political principles contented themselves with expressing their opinions in addresses and resolutions.

Much more formidable was the Debating Society founded by Dr. James Currie and William Roscoe about 1795. It met weekly in the Large Room, Marble Street, and attracted large audiences. But it had to dissolve itself early in 1797 because it was held to contravene the Seditious Meetings Act of December 1795. Some years later an actor, Samuel William Ryley, founded a new debating society, The Liverpool Forum, which also met in Marble Street. It met weekly, and later fortnightly, between 8 p.m. and 10 p.m., admitted women to its meetings, and charged a shilling for admission. Gradually the Forum became more and more political in its discussions, and John Wright, a schoolmaster, became more prominent than Ryley. By 1813 the debaters were discussing such subjects as the liberty of the press, trial by jury, and parliamentary representation, but when they chose Catholic emancipation as their subject the mayor sent a messenger to forbid the debate. Ryley proposed to change the subject, but since the messenger carried no warrant or formal credentials, the members refused to accept his suggestions, voted John Wright into the chair, and held the debate. The following week the Forum discussed the equally "dangerous" subject of "Parliamentary Representation, the greatest bulwark of British Freedom", but a day or two later, on 25 March 1813, the *Mercury* announced that John Wright requested "Friends of Free Inquiry and the Dissemination of Useful Knowledge" to attend a meeting at Marble Street on 31 March "to consult and adopt the most Legal and Constitutional means of *maintaining* inviolate the Sacred Right of freely discussing interesting and important subjects". This meeting was the outcome of an interview between John Wright and the mayor. Two weeks later, 15 April, the *Mercury* announced "the Liverpool Forum is now given up, and an Independent Debating Society established on a perfectly legal plan". The only difference between the two societies appears to have been that the new one was not a money-making concern. It made no charge for admission to its meetings.

John Wright took charge of the Independent Debating Society, and with the help of some of the younger Concentrics

such as Edward Rushton, John Smith, and F. B. Wright, steadily made it more politically minded and more radical in sentiment. The chosen subjects were varied but never "safe": they always gave plenty of opportunity to the extremists. Political subjects, such as "The Partition of Poland was a more execrable act than the Invasion of Spain", alternated with such general topics as "Which is most injurious to Society, the highwayman, the false witness, or the seducer of female innocence?", and "Are the delusions of false religions to be respected merely because they contribute to render their credulous, but contented, votaries happy?" The presence of many women in the audiences popularised debates on marriage and the social aspects of sex, and if the oratory was not of a high standard the fun must have been plentiful. The wags of the town could have asked for nothing better than to debate the comparative culpability of "the young man who strives to seduce the wife of his friend" and "the married woman who would quit a good husband and children for the protection of a profligate man".

Not to be outdone by its betters, the Debating Society held its annual dinner. On 28 March 1814 John Wright presided over a gathering of fifty at the Castle Inn, Lord Street. The score of toasts revealed the radicalism of the Society—*The King and Royal Family: may their virtues be as conspicuous as their rank; That grand medium of discussion, a Free Press; and May the opinions of men be formed by the force of argument, not by the argument of force.* A year later, on 31 March 1815, John Smith took charge of the second anniversary dinner at the Vine Tavern, and on 1 April 1816 the Society held a third dinner at the same place. Only fifty or sixty members attended these functions, but the debates were usually crowded with hundreds of men and women. In October 1814 the attendance at one debate held in the newly-built Marble Street Hall reached nine hundred. Only four hundred votes were recorded at that meeting, so it would seem as if the women did not vote, nor, of course, take part in the debate.⁽¹⁴⁾

In May 1816 the Independent Debating Association began to hold meetings alternatively with the Society in Marble Street Hall. It is not clear whether the Association opposed the Society's political views or supplemented them, but its existence

¹⁴ *Mercury*, 28 October 1814, p. 143. Apparently there were two assembly rooms in Marble Street at this time. The earlier one, built in 1780, was first used as a storehouse for Irish linen. The second one, later known as the Liverpool Forum, is the one here described as *newly-built*. It is probable that the *Large Room* and the *Long Room* are two names for the older building. Marble Street runs northwards from Williamson Square.

shows how popular debates were in Liverpool at this time. In the government's opinion they were dangerously popular, and early in 1817 Lord Sidmouth, the home secretary, introduced a bill to suppress such "seditious meetings". The leaders of both the Society and the Association knew that they would be held to be "encouraging the habit of criticism among the lower orders", and so decided to anticipate suppression by dissolving themselves. In April 1817, however, the resourceful John Wright got round the new law by holding religious meetings in the Long Room, Marble Street Academy on Tuesday evenings. These meetings were to follow a Quaker pattern, for "instead of the whole time being occupied by *one* individual, *several* individuals may deliver their sentiments on the passage of Scripture, or Religious Subject under consideration". But the authorities prosecuted Wright for blasphemy in his first sermon. Wright fought back, and in July the charge was dropped, but it damaged the success of the new Tuesday evening "debates". Wright eventually emigrated to America, and after the Six Acts of 1819 the debaters formed a Literary Society once again under Ryley's direction. Theological and political discussions were not permitted. In 1827 Ryley readopted the old title of Liverpool Forum, but since by that time the law tolerated popular assemblies and discussions more easily, this particular group ceased to be conspicuous.

VII THE LIVERPOOL FREEMEN'S CLUB

Thomas Green was Liverpool's "Man of the People". His profession of auctioneer gave him a thorough training as a platform speaker, and for twenty years he actively maintained the rights of the working class to participate in politics. At every election between 1807 and 1826 "General Green's" little band of freemen tried to find a candidate of their own choosing. In 1807 they kept a bar open for Roscoe at the hustings, even after Roscoe had withdrawn from the election, in order that they might uphold their interpretation of "freedom of election". They were not seeking money or power, but maintaining a principle. "Whatever disappointment may be felt as to the *apparent* issue of the Contest", Green told his supporters after the election, "yet . . . I congratulate you, from my heart, on the noble exertions which you have made, and the virtuous example which you have held forth to an admiring public, of freemen unbought, and even unsolicited, rallying round the standard of Integrity".⁽¹⁵⁾

⁽¹⁵⁾ John Herring, *A Collection of Addresses, Songs, Squibs* (1807), p. 136.

Five years later, on 6 May 1812, Green's supporters gave a dinner to celebrate the exploits of 1807, but though they were genuine in their admiration of the past, they were more concerned with the possibilities of the future. The dinner was the first public feeler towards the candidature of Brougham, and possibly Creevey, at the approaching election. On 25 September Green presided over the gigantic public dinner given to launch the campaign for Brougham and Creevey, and later took an active and prominent part in the election itself. As a symbolic gesture for "freedom of election" he led a forlorn tally to the hustings after Brougham and Creevey had resigned, but found the bars closed and the election over.

To keep together the followers he had won during the 1812 election, Green founded the Liverpool Freemen's Club. The *Mercury* welcomed it on 6 November 1812, and explained that its object was to promote "freedom of election" by affording protection to the freemen "against those inconveniences which they may experience from giving their votes contrary to the wishes of their employers". The club met in Marble Street, probably on the same premises as the Forum, but its activities attracted little attention in the years between elections. After the 1812 election Green's committee resolved to present a gold cup to Brougham for his part in the repeal of the Orders in Council, and to Creevey for helping to open the East India trade, but as late as September 1815 the cups were still not ready. In the bye-election of 1816 Green and the Freemen's Club nominated Thomas Leyland, and though Leyland did not wish to stand, persisted in their intention rather than allow Canning to be returned without opposition. After the election the Freemen's Club raised a subscription in order to present a silver medal to each of the 738 freemen who had voted for Leyland, and a gold medal to Leyland himself. It also launched a new weekly paper, *The Liverpool Freeman*, which took as its motto this quotation from Charles James Fox: "If to inform the People of England of their actual situation is to inflame them, the fault is in those who have brought them into that situation, and not in those who only tell them the truth". But as election excitement died down the club failed to maintain the paper, and it published only six numbers.

The 1826 election in Liverpool was an extraordinary affair. Gascoyne and Huskisson were the retiring members. Huskisson was normally the more acceptable of the two to the Whigs and Radicals, but in 1825 he had voted in favour of the Combination Laws and "the old general" surprisingly had opposed them. Consequently Gascoyne became a Radical hero in 1826, and the

Freemen's Club set out to find him an election partner. It was easier to try and break up Huskisson's adoption meeting, which they did, than find anyone to oppose him. Green held two big meetings, one near the Botanic Gardens and the other in Clayton Square, but no better candidate could be found than Gascoyne's son, Major Frederick, who repeatedly protested against nomination. Nevertheless, the Freemen forced an election. Polling lasted only two hours, and Huskisson and Isaac Gascoyne were virtually returned unopposed.

Although they never came near to winning an election it would be wrong to dismiss Green and his Freemen's Club as complete failures. During years when individual liberty was more persecuted by the government than at any period since 1688, it must count as a worthy achievement to have kept alive the issue of constitutional rights, and to have attempted to organise the inarticulate, groping, working-class movement into an electoral force.

[Miss Barbara Whittingham-Jones, who died most unexpectedly in 1958, devoted the spare time of thirty busy years to studying Liverpool politics from the Restoration onwards. She left behind her a large box of notes and correspondence, and a voluminous, annotated, much-amended manuscript, which was obviously the first draft of the book she intended to write. Her mother and executor, Mrs. Edith Whittingham-Jones, kindly entrusted the papers to me as editor of the Historic Society. I have discussed their future with both Mrs. Whittingham-Jones and several members of the council, and it has been agreed to publish in the TRANSACTIONS the more important research, and eventually to deposit the manuscripts in the Society's library in the Liverpool Record Office.

This article is the first publication. It is a rewritten, condensed version of Chapter VI in the original draft. Though much of the wording is mine, the plan, the research, and the opinions expressed in the article are Miss Whittingham-Jones's alone.

J. J. BAGLEY.]