



**WORDS:**  
Graham Hogg  
Rare Books Curator

Two centuries after impoverished weavers were manipulated into rising up, we look back on...

# SCOTLAND'S RADICAL WAR

**200** years ago, the last armed uprising on British soil took place, led by radical reformers in Scotland. The events of April 1820, and their aftermath, are not widely known today, but profoundly influenced the political history of Scotland in the 19th century.

The years leading up to the Radical War of 1820 were grim for the Scottish working classes. The Napoleonic Wars had exhausted Britain's finances. Food was short due to poor harvests, and the Corn Laws prevented imports of cheap foreign wheat. The increasing use of steam-powered machines led to skilled workers, such as weavers, feeling their livelihoods were threatened.

Moreover, there was growing public frustration with the undemocratic British political system, where the vote was denied to the vast majority of the population, and cities such as Glasgow did not have a single MP. The unpopular King George IV, who had ruled as regent until his father's death in January 1820, was regarded as a dissolute spendthrift.

Radical political ideas regarding democracy and reform of the political

system had been circulating in British society since the late 1700s, inspired by the French Revolution. From 1815, unrest had grown in England, culminating in 1819's Peterloo Massacre in Manchester and the Cato Street conspiracy.

Scotland had also been swept up in the movement for reform. Large protest meetings were held, mainly in weaving areas in the Central Belt. A rally in Paisley in September 1819 led to a week of rioting, and cavalry was used to control about 5,000 radicals. With the country seemingly on the brink of a revolution, members of the Scottish establishment, such as Sir Walter Scott, were keen to raise armed volunteer forces to counter any potential uprising. In December 1819, Scott wrote to his son: "I am sure the dogs will not fight and I am sorry for it – One day's good kemping [fighting] would cure them most radically of their radical malady."

Scott's prognosis was wrong; preparations were under way for an armed uprising of Scottish radicals in early 1820. A Committee for Organising a Provisional Government had been formed to

coordinate nationwide action for the formation of a Scottish republic. However, government spies and provocateurs had infiltrated the radicals' meetings. The committee convened in a tavern in Glasgow's Gallowgate on 21 March, only to be arrested and detained in secret.

With the committee out of the way, Government agents decided to entice the radicals out into the open by printing a proclamation, supposedly from the committee, calling for an uprising. The proclamation, dated Glasgow 1 April 1820, urged workers to withdraw their labour and recover their rights: "Liberty or Death is our motto and we have sworn to return in triumph – or return no more!" It was distributed by enthusiastic radicals, unaware that they were actually instruments of a Government plot.

By 3 April there was a widespread strike in central Scotland.

In Glasgow, an undercover Government agent, John Craig, led a small group of armed radicals on a march to the Carron ironworks

## WILLIAM HOWATT:

One of the Strathaven radicals (pictured right) who took part in the march from Strathaven to Glasgow with James Wilson. Howatt managed to return to Strathaven safely, having hidden his gun and bandolier when he saw soldiers on patrol and then pretending to be an ordinary weaver going about his business. He was never arrested. The original photograph must have been taken 30 to 40 years after the Radical War but Howatt is supposedly dressed and armed as he would have been in April 1820.





## Large protest meetings were held, mainly in weaving areas in the Central Belt

near Falkirk to capture some arms and cannon, only for them to be scattered by a police patrol before they left the city.

Events took a more dramatic turn on 4 and 5 April. Duncan Turner, the spy who had issued the proclamation, mustered a group of men in Glasgow to march to the Carron works. He was careful to avoid participating in the march, asking a young weaver and ex-soldier, Andrew Hardie, to lead it. Turner gave Hardie half a piece of card, which would match exactly with a half card held by another radical leader and ex-soldier, John Baird, waiting for him in Condorrat, Dunbartonshire.

Hardie brought only 25 men to Condorrat, Baird only had around 10 with him, but they continued with their march, believing reinforcements were waiting for them near Falkirk. On 5 April, the men reached Bonnymuir, a moor near the village of Bonnybridge, Stirlingshire, only to be met by a small group of cavalry who had come to intercept them. The ensuing 'Battle of Bonnymuir' was a minor skirmish; the tired, hungry and poorly armed radicals were no match for trained soldiers, who routed them. Two soldiers and four radicals were wounded and 18 radicals, including Hardie and Baird, were taken prisoner and held at Stirling Castle.

Meanwhile, in the Lanarkshire town of Strathaven, a spy conned local radicals led by James 'Purlic' Wilson into thinking that a rising was successfully under way. The following morning Wilson left for Glasgow with a force of 25 men, carrying a banner that declared "Scotland Free or a Desart [sic]". They were tipped off that an army ambush lay between them and their destination at Cathkin. Wilson, sensing that the radicals had been betrayed, returned to Strathaven, while his men avoided the ambush and reached their destination to find nothing was happening in Glasgow. By the following evening, the authorities had discovered the identities of 10 group members, including Wilson, and arrested them.

There was one final act to what became known as the 'Radical War'. On 8 April the authorities tried to move a group of the prisoners from Paisley to Greenock. The citizens of Greenock, who had not been involved in any riots or demonstrations, attacked the soldiers escorting the prisoners. The soldiers had to fight their way out of the town as the crowd pelted them with stones. They opened fire,

killing eight people, including an eight-year-old child, and injuring 10 others.

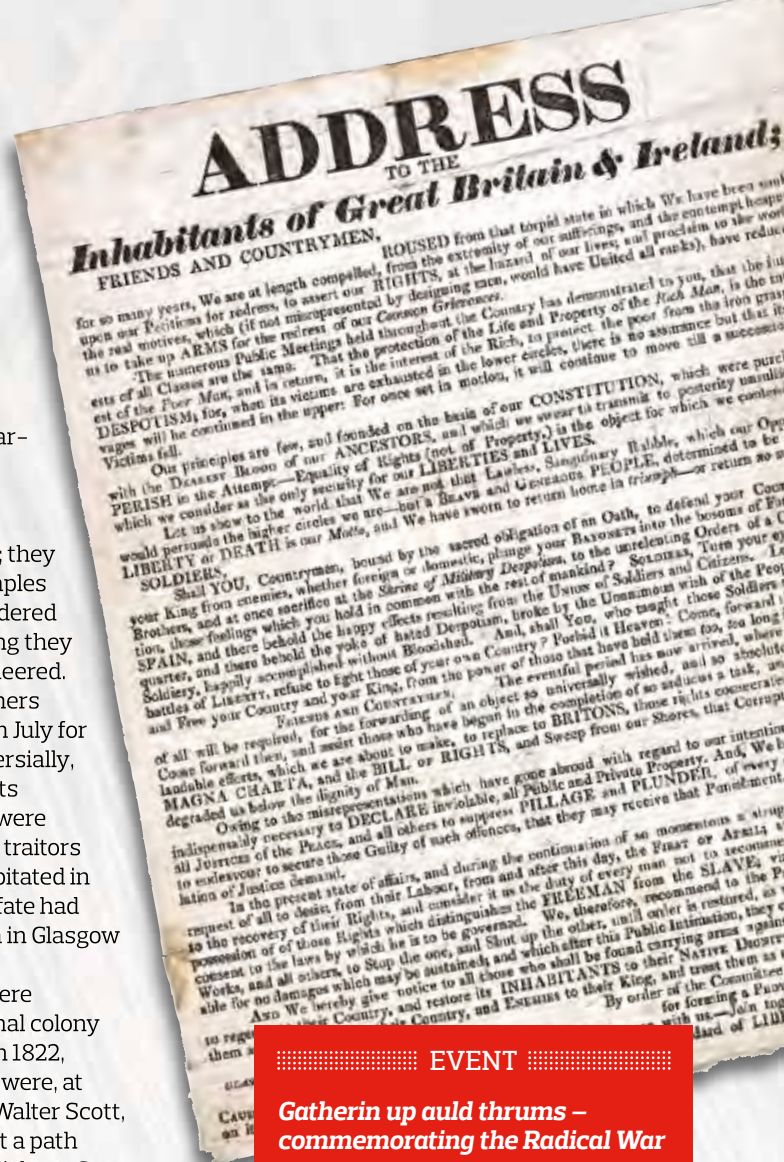
The Government's retribution was harsh; they wanted to make examples of the men they considered ringleaders of the rising they themselves had engineered. The Bonnymuir prisoners were tried in Stirling in July for high treason, controversially, under English not Scots law. Hardie and Baird were sentenced to death as traitors and hanged and decapitated in September. A similar fate had befallen James Wilson in Glasgow the previous month.

Nineteen radicals were transported to the penal colony of New South Wales. In 1822, unemployed weavers were, at the suggestion of Sir Walter Scott, employed to construct a path around the base of Salisbury Crags in Edinburgh's Holyrood Park which became known as the 'Radical Road'.

Scotland did not experience such widespread political unrest during the rest of the 19th century, but the underlying movement for change did not go away. In 1832, the Government was forced to pass a Scottish Reform Act which extended the vote from 5,000 to 65,000 adult men (out of a population of around two million) and ensured that Scottish towns and cities had some representation in Parliament. In 1835, the Government granted an absolute pardon for all the transported men.

Over the last 200 years, the radicals have been commemorated in Scotland. Monuments to the '1820 Martyrs' were put up in Glasgow, Paisley and Strathaven in the 19th century, with a memorial to the Battle of Bonnymuir erected in 2007.

In 1978, the Scottish novelist James Kelman wrote a radio play *Hardie and Baird*. Interviewed for *Scottish Review of Books* in 2012, Kelman noted: "There's also the fact that to some extent Scottish history is a radical history, it's a history in opposition to the mainstream. And radical history is marginalised, and not necessarily taught... In other countries everybody would know who Wilson, Baird and Hardie were."



### EVENT

#### Gatherin up auld thrums – commemorating the Radical War

- 1 APRIL 6–7.30pm, Kelvin Hall, Glasgow
- 9 APRIL 2–3.30pm, George IV Bridge, Edinburgh

Join Mairi Breslin, Director of Coorie Creative CIC, and Rhona Alcorn, Director of Scottish Language Dictionaries, to explore the tradition of handloom weaving and the significance of the psychology of the weavers' lifestyle during their Rising. These events will be illuminated by wonderful film and song, and will also feature a live demonstration of hand weaving on a modern loom. There will also be an introduction to the Dictionary of the Scots Language as a unique record of the language – and of the history, culture and traditions – of Scotland's weavers and their compatriots. For details and booking visit our website.



# HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT SCOTLAND'S



# HERITAGE?

**I**n Scotland's story, the spoken word is as precious the written. That's why the Library allocates significant time, effort and energy to preserving and promoting the nation's sound heritage.

And it's not just spoken word but song, music and the sounds of nature.

Alistair Bell is Sound Collections Curator and he explained how the Library's sound collection is built up: "Sound and moving images are not covered by our status as a legal deposit library. Publishers

don't provide us with copies of the material they produce, as is the case with written and electronic formats. We don't currently have a procedure for active acquisition but we do ask for donations or people offer us material. We receive all sorts of formats, from wax cylinder to digital audio tape."

Although the Library has a substantial and diverse collection there is, in fact, no national sound archive. Alistair said: "A few years ago, it was suggested we address this situation since material was in danger of being lost. For example,



**WORDS:**  
**Stewart**  
**McRobert**

magnetic tape is becoming increasingly expensive and difficult to digitise. So, along with others, we developed Scotland's Sounds Network. It has more than 100 organisations, including libraries, museums and archives as well as community groups and individuals who have an interest in recorded sound and their own collection."

Alistair and his colleagues organise projects, conduct training and are involved in knowledge exchange, as well as profile-raising through the media.

Connecting Scotland's Sounds was one project. It ran in 2016 and 2017 and saw training delivered to people in organisations that held sound collections. The aim was to build knowledge, confidence and digitisation skills. It covered everything from identifying and playing formats such as open reel tape to applying for funding for digitisation projects.

The project also involved promoting public engagement

## MORE THAN PEOPLE

Scotland's sound heritage is about more than people. One collection in the archive is from the Scottish Ornithologist Club. It includes nature and bird recordings, many of which are from the 1960s. Notably, they illustrate the

enormous environmental change there has been over the past 40 or 50 years. "You can visit a spot where an original recording was made and find today's sound environment is completely different," said Alistair.





with other collection holders. In one case, the team worked with Hawick Library, employing a 30-second oral history clip and iPad animation to engage local children. The result can be seen and heard on the Scotland's Sounds website\*.

In another project, they arranged a special evening at the Scottish Fisheries Museum in Fife. A researcher picked out fishing songs to be played in the museum space, a former boatyard. Most who attended were friends of the museum. It was the first time they had gone through the museum with an accompanying soundtrack and it helped them see the exhibits in a new light.

Alistair said: "Sound is engaging, emotive and can fire people's imagination. It's our task to engage people and communities across the country so they can enjoy and make the most of our outstanding sound heritage."

\* <https://scotlands-sounds.nls.uk>

### HEAR TO HELP

Clockwise from top left: Whether it's a vinyl record or a reel-to-reel tape, the treasures of the sound archive require careful handling. They are delicately cleaned and diligently assessed before going through the digitising process and being added to the Library's catalogue. There are further checks before anything is made available for streaming or public performance.

Though most of the Sound team is based at Kelvin Hall in Glasgow there is one member, Angie Cook, based at George IV Bridge, Edinburgh. She is the Scotland's Sounds coordinator and focuses on communication and building partnerships within that network.



# UNLOCKING OUR SOUND HERITAGE

Several members of the Sound team have been specifically recruited to work on this project, which is led by the British Library. There are hubs across the UK dedicated to digitising, cataloguing, clearing rights and providing access to sound recordings.

The Library represents Scotland and has drawn in collections from 17 organisations around the country. Its partners range from Gairloch Heritage Museum and Western Isles Libraries to National Trust for Scotland, the BBC and others.

A substantial amount of digitisation has been completed and some cleared clips are on the Scotland's Sounds website.

Alistair said: "Among other things, we're ensuring all magnetic tape is digitised over the next 10 years. The cost of digitising tape will become prohibitive as machines become rarer and more expensive, parts are harder to buy and the skills and knowledge to maintain the equipment is dying out."

The team members include:

**JENI PARK**  
HUB PROJECT  
MANAGER

Jeni liaises with collection partners and is the line manager for cataloguing, rights and sound engineering. She's responsible for learning and engagement, volunteers and the project outputs. She said: "Volunteering



Jeni Park

is a major part of the project. The National Lottery Heritage Fund, which supports the project, has given us a specific volunteering target.

"As part of our learning and engagement activity we've recruited an artist in residence who will use recordings from the Scottish Ornithology Club. The artist – Val

O'Regan from Birdhouse

Studio in Argyll – will work with children and staff from Inellan Primary School near Dunoon as well as Benmore Botanic Gardens."

**CONOR WALKER**  
AUDIO PRESERVATION  
ENGINEER

Conor converts material from analogue to digital. He operates from a uniquely equipped studio at Kelvin Hall.

He said: "A lot of this material is approaching obsolescence and requires a certain amount of preservation. But we need to balance that with the need to process a huge amount in a limited timescale.

"The open reel tape machines we use are from the late 1970s

and they include former BBC machines that are very robust."

**ROB SMITH**  
CATALOGUING  
COORDINATOR

Rob catalogues material that has been digitised using a method developed by the British Library.

"One big challenge is keeping pace with the amount of material being



Rob Smith

digitised," he said. "If we want to put material online we need a high level of detail in the cataloguing, which usually means listening to most of the recording.

"Another challenge is the level of specificity. If it's a group conversation, I might not be able to identify all the people involved. Luckily, on occasion, the collection comes with associated documentation."

**MEL REEVE-RAWLINGS**  
RIGHTS OFFICER

Mel gains clearance for recordings that will go online.

"As well as copyright clearance, we need to comply with data protection legislation," she explained.

"I contact the rights holders, who can include the interviewer, interviewee, and any organisation involved in the recording, to gain permission.

"For data protection,

I assess the recordings for 'damage and distress'. If

a recording we put online features someone who is identifiable, we must make sure the recording does not cause that person damage or distress."

**NICOLA READE**  
ALEXANDER GRAHAM TRAINEE

"Before we digitise any shellac or vinyl recording, we have to clean it," explained Nicola. "That's one of my tasks.

"The next stage involves selecting the stylus. When you are transferring the recording, you have to establish who originally cut the disc; that determines the best parameters for the sound.

"I also work creatively with the archive. One aim is to create 'listening stations' that get sounds back into their original environment. That might mean having a listening station playing puffin sounds at the site of a former puffin colony, or a recording of a music hall act playing at the site of a former theatre."



Conor Walker



Nicola Reade

● A lot of this material is approaching obsolescence and requires an amount of preservation ●

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