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'Till our liberties be secure': popular sovereignty and public space in Bristol, 1780–1850

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ABSTRACT: Struggles over the symbolic ownership of Bristol's open spaces were often influenced by association with conflicts between mercantile elites and 'the people' over the definition and nature of civic identity. Shifting political and cultural readings of Brandon Hill and Queen Square are here identified and contrasted, offering a fresh interpretation of controversies over 'improvement' and gentrification via the fluid appropriation of these sites for the representation of radicalism, citizenship, liberty, respectability or commercialism.

Proudly recording the installation of two heavy Sebastapol cannons on the summit of Bristol's Brandon Hill in 1857, the *Bristol Mirror* outlined the significance of the site's civic history for the benefit of its readers. The hill had belonged to the people of Bristol for centuries, explained the *Mirror*, for 'the Corporation purchased it, giving the citizens all their rights, and up to the present time those rights stand as they did of yore, and can only be altered by an act of parliament'.[1] Sometimes, it would seem, civic associationism was mediated by topography and, within the bounds of a single city, specific topographical spaces invested with particular resonances and power. This is an exploration of popular consciousness and customary right in the public spaces of a modernizing city and, more particularly, the effect of speculative attempts to deny it.

Historians have become familiar enough with narratives about the demarcation of the nineteenth-century public sphere, the 'taming' of popular culture and the orderly systematization of leisure.[2] However, although it is tempting to imagine a general drift towards the centra-

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[1] *Bristol Mirror*, 22 Aug. 1857.

[2] The best-known works are R. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700–1850* (Cambridge, 1973); A.P. Donajgrodzki (ed.), *Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London, 1977); R.D. Storch (ed.), *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth Century England* (London, 1982); and B. Bushaway, *By Rite: Custom, Ceremony and Community in England, 1700–1850* (London, 1982).

lized, utilitarian and bureaucratic uniformity of the Victorian state, it is important to remember that space itself is neither materially nor culturally uniform. Urban public spaces were not necessarily regarded equally or in common by those who walked them, despite technically inclusive rules of access. The social tensions thrown up by these disparities can sometimes be read in the language of civic arguments over popular or exclusive ownership and appropriation.

Focusing upon the two largest and most important open spaces in Bristol between 1750 and 1850, this essay attempts a detailed exploration of their cultural representation and use. In treating them as unique and particular arenas of discourse and social action within the Bristol *civis*, it raises questions about the specificity of individual sites and their relationship to what Habermas calls the 'bourgeois public sphere'. His concern with the degeneration of democratic polity in nineteenth-century Europe has drawn a number of historians of a post-structural turn, most notably James Vernon and Patrick Joyce, to rethink those orthodox English narratives of constitutional 'progress' in which bourgeois rationalism and respectability emerge as dominant features of the public sphere.[3] However valuable such insights may be, it is important to emphasize that these were not always totalizing trends. At Bristol, the encounter between respectability and older, customary and less orderly polities was not a straightforward or homogeneous process of displacement. The antagonistic and less rational, but arguably more accessible public sphere of the eighteenth century may have owed its form and vitality to a Machiavellian past-world of creative clamours and 'désunion', but its purchase upon nineteenth-century urban sensibility was not entirely anachronistic; nor was it easily overcome.[4] My purpose here, then, is to reconsider some orthodox assumptions about the impact of elite attempts to regulate popular culture and universalize public space.

This sort of approach is absent from most work on popular politics in Bristol despite Mark Harrison's emphasis on the timing of crowd events and his interest in their location.[5] The bulk of historical writing on urban

[3] J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962; 1st Eng. trans., London, 1989). Broadly speaking, Habermas' bourgeois public sphere is the site of discursive antagonism between widening form and contracting content in popular political practice. For an excellent introduction to current academic debate on this theme see C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993); J. Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993); P. Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth Century England* (Cambridge, 1994).

[4] For an interesting commentary see C. Lefort, 'Machiavelli: history, politics, discourse', in D. Carroll (ed.), *The States of Theory: History, Art and Critical Discourse* (Stanford, Ca., 1994).

[5] M. Harrison, *Crowds and History: Mass Phenomena in English Towns, 1790–1835* (Cambridge, 1988). See also D. Large, *Radicalism in Bristol in the Nineteenth Century* (Bristol, 1981); J. Phillips, *The Great Reform Bill in the Boroughs: English Electoral Behaviour, 1818–1841* (Oxford, 1992); and a recent essay by P. Brett, 'Political dinners in early nineteenth century Britain: platform, meeting place and battleground', *History,* 81, 264 (Oct. 1996), 527–52. Brett's account of political dinners in public spaces, which includes

public space elsewhere addresses the second half of the nineteenth century and is preoccupied with the regulation of working-class crowds through the production of municipal parks. We have excellent case studies of popular struggles against the enclosure of urban fringes in the 1870s and 1880s, not only in London but in such diverse centres as Newcastle, Norwich and Southsea.[6] We also know that by the mid-nineteenth century, despite the obstructions often thrown in their way, radical outdoor meetings could be convened either at unofficial but tolerated 'speakers corners' in urban squares, or, topography permitting, by a quick march from the town centre to adjacent open moorlands. As Vernon has shown, radical influence in the vestries could help secure alternatives if the urban fringes were enclosed, and policing could always be countered by a determined retreat to still more remote locations.[7] In this way, then, popular rights of assembly were upheld but cleared from the central civic arena.

Bristol sits uncomfortably within such a framework. There was, for example, no acknowledged 'speakers' corner', no radical influence in the vestries (indeed the vestries were frequently used to mobilize anti-radical agitations in the early nineteenth century), and no encircling moorland. The most accessible open country was Durdham Down, an extensive upland area to the north-west, largely servicing the adjacent fashionable and wealthy parish of Clifton for genteel carriage rides and displays of horsemanship. The economic and social disjunctures that so transformed the industrializing towns of the north and midlands produced rather less dramatic effects at Bristol. To begin with, this was no 'city of strangers'. Long-standing commercial predominance and an unusually wide electoral franchise made eighteenth-century Bristol a keenly felt forum for mutual association and civic pride. Despite deep political division, more things, it seemed, drew Bristolians together than forced them apart.[8] But, by the end of the century, public concern over a

coverage of the Brandon Hill reform banquet fiasco, is largely unconcerned with the spaces themselves in its analysis of popular contention.

[6] A. Taylor, 'Commons-stealers, land-grabbers and jerry builders: space, popular radicalism and the politics of public access in London, 1848–1880', *International Review of Social History,* 40 (1995), 383–407; A. Metcalfe, 'Sport and space: a case study of the growth of recreational facilities in north east Northumberland, 1850–1914', *International Journal for the History of Sport,* 7 (1990), 348–64; N. McMaster, 'The battle for Mousehold Heath, 1857–1884: popular politics and the Victorian public park', *Past and Present,* 127 (1990), 117–54; J. Field, 'When the riot act was read: a pub mural of the Battle of Southsea, 1874', *History Workshop Journal,* 10 (1980), 152–61; D. Killingray, 'Rights, riot and ritual: the Knole Park access dispute, Sevenoaks, Kent, 1883–5', *Rural History,* 5, 1 (1994), 63–81; R. Allen, 'The battle for the common: politics and populism in mid-Victorian Kentish London', *Social History,* 22 (1997), 61–77. On the establishment of municipal parks in general, see H. Conway, *People's Parks: The Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain* (Cambridge, 1991).

[7] See, for example, Vernon's discussion of moorland meetings around Oldham after the Napoleonic Wars: *Politics and the People*, 208–13.

[8] J. Barry, 'Bristol pride: civic identity in Bristol c.1640–1775', in M. Dresser and P. Ollerenshaw (eds), *The Making of Modern Bristol* (Tiverton, 1996), 25–47. For Bristol's economic

perceived decline in the city's share of trade began to erode many citizens' self-confidence just as the meritocratic liberalism of the French Revolution rippled the waters of traditional civic paternalism. A growing suspicion that neither the self-electing and unaccountable Corporation nor the mercantile elite could any longer claim to hold a key to the regulation and definition of civic virtue made 'Bristol pride' an arena of shifting and contested values. This conflict found expression, in an orthodox sense, in challenges from below to the political monopoly of the Corporation over local affairs, and in growing dissatisfaction with the undynamic response of traditional elites to the threat of economic stagnation. In a less orthodox sense, however, it also arose in ways which made the geography of the city itself a site of symbolic contention, and at two sites in particular, Brandon Hill and Queen Square.

Brandon Hill

Brandon Hill, twenty acres of rough scrubland separating the city from the suburbs of Hotwells and Clifton, remains to this day the oldest public open space in Bristol. Customary rights of access were formalized in the sixteenth century when the Corporation acknowledged a duty to protect the hill and permit free exercise, clothes drying, and 'other business'. As 'Eliza's royal boon', observed the poet Henry Jones, Brandon Hill had become the property of every citizen.[9] Its position between the fashionable houses of Berkeley Square, built around a small green park for the use of its well-heeled residents, and the poor, densely populated streets beside the river and along the Hotwells road, made it an accessible resort for all classes, but it seems to have been particularly important to the lower orders. Rights of free unrestricted association on the hill had been intermittently linked with contention over civic polity throughout the eighteenth century. In open defiance of the Whig Corporation, for instance, Jacobites used it with apparent impunity for anti-Hanoverian revels in 1716 and 1718, and a 'confederacy' of over a thousand striking sailors resorted there in 1745 to pass formal resolutions demanding higher pay from their merchant masters.[10] Yet the authorities often recognized the hill's popular associations by sanctioning its use for more approved displays of power. The deserter John Faulkner was shot on the summit in 1771 before a suitably 'vast concourse of people', and the Corporation encouraged plebeian loyalist bonfire crowds on to the

development, see K. Morgan, *Bristol and the Atlantic Trade in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1993); for its eighteenth-century electoral culture see N. Rogers, *Whigs and Cities: Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole and Pitt* (Oxford, 1989), ch. 8. Through the escalating creation of freemen electors before a number of sharply contested polls, the borough franchise rose from 3,600 in 1713 to nearly 6,000 by 1781.

[9] H. Jones, *Clifton, A Poem* (Bristol, 1768). My thanks to Jonathan Barry for this reference.

[10] P.K. Monod, *Jacobitism and the English People, 1688–1788* (Cambridge, 1989), 211; *Bath Journal,* 11 Nov. 1745.

slopes on a number of occasions before 1832, although carefully demarcating them from simultaneous gatherings of the elite in the more formal dining atmosphere of the Assembly Rooms in the city below.[11]

But in the aftermath of the French Revolution (with the advent of a reform movement in which criticism of the exclusive and self-appointing Corporation was just as vital as the assault upon Old Corruption in Parliament), the hill and its symbolic representation as a landscape of civic liberty would become contentious ground. In the politically tumultuous 1790s, the Corporation stood accused not only of standing idly by while the city's economy was pounded by opposition from northern ports, but of complicity in Whig/Tory electoral pacts which had, with increasing regularity over the last forty years, robbed Bristolians of a political voice. The close association between membership of the Corporation and membership of locally influential bodies like the Society of Merchant Venturers led some radicals, particularly those associated with the pantisocratic young poet, Coleridge, to renounce vulgar commerce altogether, questioning its suitability as a basis for civic pride.[12]

When the mayor and magistrates met the radical challenge by excluding oppositional meetings from public buildings, there were predictable repercussions for Brandon Hill. The election of 1807 witnessed its first use for electioneering and unsurprisingly it was the anti-coalitionist independent Whig, John Jervis (an associate of Henry 'Orator' Hunt), who claimed it. As Independent candidates settled their hustings on the hill in the years between the close of the Napoleonic wars and the passing of the Great Reform Act,[13] its use quickly became synonymous with opposition to corporate privilege and civic exclusion. When Hunt himself took the post-war reform platform to Bristol in 1816, his attempt to hold a meeting on the hill was contested by the Corporation who surrounded it with constables and soldiers and went to extraordinary lengths to dissuade Bristolians from attending. Cobbett's assertion that the Corporation were guilty of a 'conspiracy to obstruct petitioning' only emphasizes contemporary linkage between popular constitutionalism, civic liberties and public space.[14] Edward Kentish convened the radical

[11] *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal (hereafter FFBJ)*, 14 Dec. 1771. For bonfire crowds, see for example the arrangements made for civic celebrations honouring the coronation of George IV: *FFBJ*, 28 Jul. 1821.

[12] This argument is advanced in greater detail in S. Poole, 'To be a Bristolian: civic identity and the social order, 1750–1850', in Dresser and Ollerenshaw, *Making of Modern Bristol*, 82–6.

[13] *Bristol Mirror*, 9 May 1807; E. Kentish, *Narrative of the Facts Relative to the Bristol Election as Connected with the Meeting on Brandon Hill* (Bristol, 1818); *Bristol Mercury*, 27 Jun. 1830.

[14] Poole, 'To be a Bristolian', 84–5. Christmas boxes were withheld from tradesmen who took part, workers threatened with instant dismissal and, at the behest of the Corporation, the whole city subjected to moral exhortations to stay indoors by the select vestries: *Cobbett's Political Register*, 11 Jan. 1817; *FFBJ*, 4 Jan. 1817; Bristol Record Office (hereafter BRO), *Harford Papers*, 28048/C.62, J.S. Harford to J. Harford, 6 Jan. 1817; BRO, *Town Clerk's Letter Boxes* 1816 and 1817, letters from St Werburghs, St Nicholas and Castle Precincts vestries, and Addington to Mayor of Bristol, 23 Dec. 1816; H. Hunt, *Memoirs of*

hustings on the hill during the 1818 election, declared it a 'Folkmote for Bristol', and demanded the citizens' rights of election. By 1820, in the wake of several mass anti-ministerial (and anti-corporate) platform meetings on the hill following the Peterloo massacre, the connection between 'people's' space, Brandon Hill and political radicalism had been firmly established. It was the right of 'the People', declared independent radical James Acland in 1829, to meet 'on their own Brandon Hill'; and accordingly he led a march there to protest assized bread prices. The hill had indeed, concurred the *Bristol Mirror*, become 'famous for political meetings'.[15]

In the first half of the eighteenth century, Samuel and Nathaniel Buck published a successful series of topographical British townscapes including a 'North West Prospect' of Bristol (1734) (reproduced as the cover for this issue of *Urban History*). Like most Bristolians, the Bucks found Brandon Hill an ideal platform from which to take in the whole urban panoply. In the foreground of this picture, an unostentatious gathering of citizens make sexual trysts, or make pointed reference to their civic selves and liberties: a woman hangs laundry on a bush, and a man points his telescope towards the open sea. Beneath them sprawls a congested city, bisected twice by dense forests of mercantile masts, and packed with jumbled housing of every description. Behind the cathedral, however, and surrounded on three sides by shipping, two long and elegant facades fronting on to a large, regular and well-ordered square can easily be seen. After a short walk across College Green from the rough slopes of Brandon Hill, Bristolians could enter the enclosed grandeur of this, the city's second most important public space.

Queen Square

Built on the city marshes at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the seven-acre residential space of Queen Square is one of the largest in England, and the first of its kind to be built outside London. From the outset, the square's corporate landlords leased building plots to the wealthy and confirmed their respectable intentions with estate purchases in the surrounding ropewalks to enforce the closure of unseemly adjacent industries. What had once been a marsh open to all social classes had now become a generously proportioned forum for respectable recreation before the uniform houses of the wealthiest merchants. With the Merchants' Hall to the rear and a new showpiece Custom House built into one side, the square quickly became a resonant and

Henry Hunt Written by Himself, 3 (London, 1821), 397–401; Public Record Office (hereafter PRO), *Home Office (HO) 42/157,* T. Daniel to Lord Sidmouth, 19 Dec. 1816, enclosing annotated poster.

[15] Kentish, *Narrative of the Facts*; PRO, *HO 42/196,* T. Cole to Lord Sidmouth, 5 Oct. 1819, enclosing *A Full, True and Particular Account of the Meeting on Brandon Hill* (Bristol, 1819); *FFBJ*, 16 Oct. 1819; *Bristol Mirror*, 19 Aug. 1820; *Bristolian*, 26 Dec. 1829.

powerful emblem of the city's commercial heritage and growing prosperity. With typically formal geometry, tree-lined walks were laid out on the inside to shade the promenades of the fashionable. Anxious to muster civic unity against the divisive schisms of party politics, the Corporation conceived Queen Square partly as a reconciliatory social arena for Tories and Whigs, dissenters and Anglicans. With the addition of a new house for the Mayor on one corner, the connections between civic pride, patriotism and commerce were seemingly secure here in the 1730s; but in its specific attraction to the respectable and aspirant middling sort, the 'openness' of the square was not quite that of Brandon Hill.[16]

Overtly Whiggish aspects of the square's symbolism did not go uncontested. Its naming after Queen Anne, and the addition of an ornate centrepiece statue of William III effectively conflated civic identity with Protestantism and anti-Jacobitism. Since Queen Square was built in the Jacobite years by a Whig Corporation and was home to some of the wealthiest Whig merchant families, such clear indications of loyalty to the new order may be considered both purposeful and indicative. It was not by accident that a soldier convicted of seditious words was publicly whipped there in 1732 and although coronation day celebrations were usually marked in the square by uninterrupted loyal volleys from the militia at noon, there was rioting both at coronation day celebrations in 1735 and at the unveiling of King William's statue a year later.[17] By the end of the century, Jacobitism may have been dead, but contention in the square was not. Following the Corporation's use of it as the principal arena for a 1788 'Constitution Jubilee' (commemorating the Glorious Revolution), the square – and William's statue in particular – continued its popular association with anti-oligarchical Protestant liberty. In the Jacobin-influenced 1790s, therefore, symbolic ownership of the square was just as attractive to followers of what James Epstein has called radicalism's 'constitutional idiom',[18] as it was to supporters of the vociferously anti-democratic Corporation. Whilst the civic elite saw in William the conferral of active citizenship through property, plebeian reformers saw him as the guarantor of their customary rights to assemble and petition. Barred from the Guildhall in 1795, for instance, radicals protesting Pitt's Gagging Bills threatened to meet in the square and drape William's statue in black crepe 'til our liberties be secure'. Popular

[16] On the cultural importance of eighteenth-century urban squares see P. Borsay, 'The rise of the promenade: the social and cultural use of space in the English provincial town c. 1660–1800', *British Journal of Eighteenth Century Studies,* 9 (1986), 125–40; and idem, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660–1770* (Oxford, 1989); but see also S. Kostof, *The City Assembled: The Elements of Urban Form Through History* (London, 1992), ch. 3.

[17] *FFBJ,* 12 Oct. 1728; Monod, *Jacobitism,* 225; J. Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Bristol, 1893), 193; Rogers, *Whigs and Cities*, 272–3.

[18] J. Epstein, 'The constitutional idiom: radical reasoning, rhetoric and action in early nineteenth century England', *Journal of Social History,* 23 (1990), 553–74.

subversion of a Whig iconography of power had rendered Queen Square as likely a site for oppositionist political theatre as Brandon Hill.[19]

Perhaps the most pointed demonstration of this came with the impaling of blood soaked loaves on the railings around William's statue during the provision scarcity of 1800, with attached anonymous notes accusing the magistracy of inertia amidst spiralling prices. The shattering of the mayor's Mansion House windows by radical crowds became common currency at any election in which independent candidates attempted to break the cosy arrangements of the Whig and Tory clubs, but action of this kind was not simply an expression of electoral rowdyism. The mayor was punished in the same way in 1810, for example, after the gaoling in London of the radical member for Westminster, Sir Francis Burdett. The steady radical appropriation of the square reached a climax with its use for a reform meeting in the days following Peterloo in 1819. This was the first time the by-now customary barring of radical meetings from the Guildhall resulted in crowd events at both Queen Square and Brandon Hill.[20]

The Corporation expressed its anxiety at these developments in two forms: one aimed at closure, the other at reclamation. First, it floated proposals to deny public access to the square altogether by occupying the central area with new civic buildings. This plan was first mooted in 1823 but it did not prove popular with Bristolians, either then or forty years later when fierce popular criticism at its revival forced final abandonment.[21] Second, and more successfully, the Corporation used the square for a public meeting which it hoped would reaffirm it as a site of loyalism. On these terms, the 1829 public meeting to oppose the Catholic Relief Act was a resounding success. Ten thousand people from all social classes gathered to cheer the explicit church and king rhetoric of Bristol's secular and clerical elite,[22] and its orderly nature eased the introduction of a more significant innovation the following year.

For in 1830 Queen Square was shrewdly made the central locus for electoral politics. Traditionally, voting, nominations and speechmaking at elections had been confined to a small and cramped quadrant of the city's commercial centre, centring on the junction of Corn Street and Broad Street. With the Council House and Guildhall literally no more than a stone's throw from the respective headquarters of the Tory or Whig Committee Rooms, and from the customary Independent/Radical hustings in front of the Exchange, the reluctance of the political elite to encourage electoral contests was partly a factor of urban geography.

[19] *FFBJ*, 1 and 8 Nov. 1788; T. Beddoes, *A Word in Defence of the Bill of Rights Against Gagging Acts* (Bristol, 1795).

[20] BRO, *Corporation Letter Book 1789–1813*, J. Morgan to the Duke of Portland, 26 Feb. 1800 (with enclosures); *Bristol Mercury*, 30 May 1796; *FFBJ*, 9 May 1807 and 21 Apr. 1810: *Bristol Gazette*, 13 Oct. 1819.

[21] J. Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the Nineteenth Century* (Bristol, 1887), 108–9 and 418–19.

[22] *Bristol Mercury*, 16 Feb. 1829.

Costly and disruptive election rioting was not only virtually unavoidable in these conditions, but difficult to police. By moving the polling booths to Queen Square and encouraging its use for public hustings meetings, the Corporation were able to answer accusations of their compliance in no-contest electoral pacts, provide an open, impressive and eminently controllable new location for voting, and challenge popular associations between Brandon Hill, liberty and citizenship. Contemporary opinion quickly declared Queen Square a most suitable arena for the electoral theatre of the middling sort. 'This situation has the great advantage', enthused the *Bristol Mirror*, 'that there is room enough both for the voters and for the lookers on'. In theory, disorder could not only be minimized but removed from commercial territory, effectively creating separate geographic spheres for the worlds of politics and commerce. In practice it was less simple. Rioting did not suddenly cease around the party rooms in Corn Street and Broad Street in 1830, but the distance established between the two sites may at least have contributed to a separation of elite and popular electoral culture. The square itself took on 'the appearance of a large fair', it was remarked during the 1837 election. 'Booths to the number of 44 had been reared as if by magic . . . the flags, the banners, the music, the colours, the cheering and exultation of partisans . . .' As men conducted their public business in the booths below, 'the windows of the surrounding houses were crowded with ladies, who appeared highly to participate in the interest of the day'.[23] The representation of electoral theatre as a colourful and exuberant yet manly and purposeful 'fair' is particularly interesting at this time. Between the end of the French wars and its final suppression in 1838, the once important St James's Fair had become the focus for a torrent of clerical and middle-class invective linking its commercial decline with the moral decline of the city. St James's Fair was increasingly equated with everything that the electoral fair in Queen Square was not: bush houses, prostitution, disorder and petty crime contrasted with the exercise and celebration of civic responsibility.[24]

Retrenchment and closure

The year 1830 was therefore a crucial one for the transformation of popular culture at Bristol. While election crowds thronged in Queen Square, the independent candidate held a desultorily small meeting on Brandon Hill. The hill became further marginalized a year later when reform issues completely dominated the general election. Due to a political climate in which Tory organization and morale was too poor to

[23] *Bristol Mirror*, 31 Jul. 1830 and 29 Jul. 1837.

[24] See for example, C. McDowall, *The History of William Jones and his Two Sisters with an Account of their Visits to the Bristol Fairs* (Bristol, 1815), and idem, *An Address to the Inhabitants of Bristol Respecting the Evils of the Fairs* (Bristol, 1815).

field a candidate and the Whigs were only electable on a pro-reform ticket, electoral meetings in the square became synonymous with respectable demands for reform. On the back of an easy electoral victory for the unopposed Whigs, J.E. Baillie and Edward Protheroe, the Political Union regularly enticed 'large concourses' into the square, described variously by the press as 'mostly mechanics', the 'humbler class', or the 'labouring class'. As the constitutional crisis of 1831 loomed closer, these by now respectably endorsed open air reform meetings had become a consequence not of banishment from the Guildhall, but of sheer weight of numbers and a mounting conviction that Queen Square was the more rightful venue. Answering a cry of 'Adjourn, adjourn; there are thousands outside!' from the floor of a respectable middle-class reform meeting at the Guildhall, Protheroe led a crowd of 5,000 into Queen Square, 'twelve abreast without noise and tumult'. Their visible presence in the square would be, he maintained, a far more effective manifestation of 'public opinion' than the mere words of their speeches. The liberal press agreed. Inclusive and open meetings under the 'canopy of heaven' invested themselves with an 'honesty' that was unattainable in 'fashionable halls and gilded rooms'. Significantly, Protheroe made no attempt to lead anyone to the more traditional open slopes of Brandon Hill.[25]

But Queen Square's projection as a popular political forum was brought to a juddering halt in October by three days of unrestrained rioting by the unfranchised.[26] As two sides of the square were systematically destroyed by fire, the elegant central space became a bacchanalian arena for all sections of the Bristolian underclass: prostitutes, labourers, small artisans and the liberated felons of burning gaols, whose civic allegiance the elite had previously taken for granted but rarely encouraged independently into the open. Interestingly, in this final act in the saga of symbolic appropriation, King William's statue was not only spared desecration but 'improved' with a tricolour of liberty. Contemporary reportage of the riots was much preoccupied by a Romantic disjuncture between palladian civic splendour, an out of touch, exclusive and anti-reforming corporate junta, and the interloping barbarians who danced in the ruins.[27]

The shocked and shaken Political Union retreated indoors after the riots. When they were barred from the Guildhall the following May, and the Assembly Rooms deemed too small to accommodate the crowd, the

[25] *Bristol Gazette*, 28 Apr. and 11 Aug. 1831; *Bristol Mirror*, 30 Apr., 7 May, 13 Aug. and 15 Oct. 1831.

[26] There is not room for a description of the Bristol reform riots here; the best accounts will be found in Harrison, *Crowds and History*, 289–314 and J. Caple, *The Bristol Riots of 1831 and Social Reform in Britain* (Lewiston, 1990).

[27] Examples are endemic. See, for instance, Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the Nineteenth Century*; G. Pryce, *A Popular History of Bristol from the Earliest Period to the Present Time . . . Impartially Written* (Bristol, 1861), esp. app. LXXIV; *Bristol Mercury*, 1 Nov. 1831; *FFBJ*, 5 Nov. 1831; A.P. Hart, 'The Bristol riots and the mass media' (unpublished University of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1979), 25–9, 101–2.

leadership discounted any return to the now semi-derelict square. In these circumstances alone, a return to Brandon Hill became inevitable, but when the Union accordingly despatched a reform address from there to the King, it was rejected because the meeting was 'not properly constituted'.[28]

The more respectable Whig reformers were even less comfortable on Brandon Hill. When supporters of Protheroe and Baillie organized a public dinner to mark the passing of the Reform Act, they set their sights variously on Queen Square, the new Cattle Market and Durdham Down, but were firmly rebuffed from each.[29] Since the dinner would have to be held on Brandon Hill, the organizing committee turned their attention to the control of public access. Tickets were issued to 6,000 respectable tradesmen through the benefit societies at 2*s* 6*d* 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 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 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'.[30] Waiters were punched and a remonstrating tradesman was stabbed. Protheroe made a hurried speech of thanks to the people around him, a masterpiece of dislocation, and abandoned his place. Barrels of beer were rolled away towards the poor districts beside the Hotwells road, where a covered wagon full of puddings was also intercepted and 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.[31]

The organizing committee's precipitate attempt at enclosure had been extremely ill-judged, but the reform dinner debacle did highlight glaring disparities between competing constructions of the public sphere at Bristol. The paternalistic model of Bristolian civic sovereignty was rooted in abstract traditions of consensual identity and customary right, and the freedom of Brandon Hill was an integral expression of it. The social democratic innovations of the Reform Act had little impact upon the spread of the parliamentary franchise at Bristol, but in overtly conflating citizenship with property, a bourgeois agenda of demarcation and exclusion could nonetheless be felt. Two factors relative to such a

[28] *FFBJ*, 12 May 1832; *Bristol Mercury*, 12 May 1832; *Bristol Mirror*, 12 and 19 May 1832.
[29] *Bristol Mercury*, 30 Jun. and 21 Jul. 1832; *Bristol Mirror*, 28 Jul. 1832.
[30] *Ibid*., 18 Aug. 1832.
[31] *Bristol Gazette*, 15 Aug. 1832; *Bristol Mercury*, 18 Aug. 1832; *FFBJ*, 18 Aug. 1832.

possibility should not be ignored. First, this was the precise point at which 'respectability' attempted the formal enclosure of the hill, and second, it was the point at which the still unreformed Corporation demonstrated a rather old-fashioned and paternalistic reluctance to comply.

Although interest in 'rendering Brandon Hill magnificent' by the addition of an 'elegant observatory or some other ornamental and useful piece of architecture' had been occasionally expressed in the eighteenth century,[32] it was not until 1831 that specific proposals for exclusionary 'improvements' to eradicate the hill's social 'nuisances' were aired in public. Proposals for its conversion into a crematorium in the grand style of Père Lachaise for the propertied classes or a carefully laid out pleasure ground in which trees and walks would reflect 'taste and judgement' were aired in the press. Its current state, it was argued, was sufficiently neglected to 'repel many people from walking there'. Yet immediate difficulties were encountered. When one improvement plan was prematurely published, the designer received a writ for encroachment. Other advocates of enclosure were more cautious because, admitted one, Bristolians had been 'for so many years under an impression (not easily eradicated) that free egress is their right'.[33] The matter was raised again in the summer of 1832. Carefully avoiding language which might imply any surrender of its custodial responsibilities, the Corporation proposed leasing the hill to the Corporation of the Poor, a body over which it exerted considerable control through the ex officio membership of the mayor and aldermen, and which would in turn use pauper labour to create a pay-as-you-enter public park on the site. In a reconciliatory gesture, the skirts of the hill would remain unimproved and open to all for the drying of clothes, and special low admission days would bring the joys of the improved parkland on the higher reaches within the budget of the working classes.[34]

The Corporation's uncertainty about its own legal entitlement to sublet Brandon Hill eventually caused it to pull out of the scheme. Its reticence coincided with the introduction of a government bill to relieve agricultural distress through the cultivation of urban fringe wastelands. Enclosure would be at the discretion of the landowner and, importantly, would not be subject to the usual permissive Acts. Such a bill might theoretically have encompassed not only the enclosure of Brandon Hill, however, but of Durdham Down as well, and for this reason it was vociferously opposed by both the Corporation and 'public opinion'. The campaign to save Bristol's open spaces, launched by the mayor at the Commercial Rooms, certainly helped to safeguard the downs from

[32] Letter from 'A plebeian', *FFBJ*, 2 May 1772.
[33] *Bristol Mirror*, 4 and 11 Jun. 1831 (letters from 'a Bristolian' and 'a Nurseryman'); *Bristol Gazette*, 12 Jul. 1832 (letter from G. Cumberland).
[34] *Bristol Mirror*, 9 and 16 Jun. 1832.

encroachment, but it made continued civic interference with Brandon Hill seem hypocritical to some.[35] 'No sooner is it discovered that Durdham Down may be enclosed', commented 'B' in the *Mercury,*

> than all the gentry are in arms at the crying injustice of the measure; no sooner is it proposed to enclose Brandon Hill than they all cry 'Capital'!; what a beautiful spot it will make ... (Durdham) may be said to be a place of enjoyment for the aristocracy of the neighbourhood, for it is out of the way of the poor; but Brandon Hill ... is a convenient place of resort for the mechanic in his spare moments and the rich are not, comparatively speaking, often seen there.

Why should a 'poor man, of whose needs and wants they know nothing and seem to care less ... be compelled to pay a penny to exercise his limbs on a spot which his father and his grandfather have had free access to for a century?'[36] 'A Guardian' took 'B' to task in the *Gazette* for making such 'sneering comparisons' between the hill and Durdham Down, but the latter insisted: 'Except at uncertain intervals, the working men of this city are excluded from Durdham Down by the nature of their employment. It is too far away from their avocations and their homes. The rich go there every day'.[37] Other writers were less acerbic than 'B', but most acknowledged the 'difficult and dangerous' problems of interfering with custom. 'These are ticklish times', remarked one, 'for interfering with popular rights and privileges'.[38]

The floundering of these improvement schemes secured the continued availability of the hill for the working-class mass platform during the 1830s, first for the National Union of the Working Classes,[39] and then for Chartism. Containment during the Chartist years was piecemeal. A new permanently staffed police station was built on the respectable Clifton side of the hill in 1836 and officers despatched to monitor radical crowds. Denouncing the reformed Council's 'Bourbon' police from the hustings, Chartists responded by creating their own stave-carrying Brandon Hill 'police force', ostensibly to steward their meetings but in practice to intimidate and threaten the intruding official constabulary and forcibly reassert popular ownership. The Chartists' determination to resist what they saw as an executive encroachment on civic sovereignty put the Council in a difficult position. The police were reluctant to provoke a disturbance by arresting or disarming the Chartist stewards, and the Council was reluctant to let them. On the other hand, the now weekly evening use of the hill for Chartist meetings was straining the patience of nearby respectable residents and the Council were put

[35] *Bristol Mercury,* 9, 16 and 30 Jun. 1832.
[36] *Ibid.*, 23 Jun. 1832.
[37] *Bristol Gazette*, 27 Jun. 1832; *Bristol Mercury,* 30 Jun. 1832.
[38] *Bristol Gazette*, 12 Jul. 1832 (letter from G. Cumberland); *Bristol Mercury,* 30 Jun. 1832 (letters from 'ABC' and 'Utilitarian').
[39] For NUWC meetings on the hill, see *Bristol Mercury,* 1 and 8 Jun. 1833; *Bristol Gazette*, 5 Jun. 1833.

under increasing public pressure to step in and prevent, in the words of one resident, 'another Queen Square affair'. In March 1839, the Council proposed improvement of the hill by private subscription, but declined to take a leading role and refused to sanction entrance fees or fences. Chartist meetings suddenly stopped on the hill in August 1839, partly as a result of the draconian regime of surveillance and harassment introduced on the arrival of an experienced London officer on loan from the Metropolitan force in May, but partly also because the Council at last began work on gravel walks around the summit as a first step towards creating a regulated public garden. The step was taken with some trepidation amidst assurances that the discouragement of 'disorderly persons' and 'gross scenes of indecency' would not infringe customary rights of access, that no fences would be erected, and no trees be cut down.[40] Two proposed meetings during the general strike of 1842 were dispersed by police and magistrates, 'determined not to permit (them)', and although Chartist meetings were briefly revived on the hill in 1848, a second public subscription had by this time already netted some £800 for further tree-planting, shrubberies and rock gardens. As we have seen, in 1857, two Sebastapol cannons were mounted on the summit with full civic pomp and ceremony, and reinvention was completed at the end of the century by the symbolic erection on the summit of a high viewing tower commemorating the mercantile explorer, Sebastian Cabot.[41]

Conclusion

Election hustings returned to Queen Square in the later 1830s, and continued to be talked about in the most approving language, despite frequent brawling and rioting around the polling booths. In 1837 the under sheriff was badly injured and stones were hurled up at spectating women on the balconies before the new police arrived and sealed off the approach avenues.[42] If electoral disorder could not be entirely obviated, Queen Square was still an eminently more controllable space than either the narrow streets of the commercial centre or the grassy banks of

[40] Chartist meetings on the hill are reported in *FFBJ*, 5 and 26 Jan. 1839; 2 Feb. 1839; *Bristol Gazette*, 26 Dec. 1838, 2 May, 12 Jun. and 17 Jul. 1839. Particularly revealing references to the inverted discipline of the Chartist 'police' are contained in a police court report in *Bristol Mercury*, 4 May 1839. The almost military precision of Supt. Mallalieu's offensive against the Chartists is made clear in BRO, *Proceedings of the Watch Committee, 1838–41*, esp. the entries for 15 and 22 May 1839. For the final resolution of calls for improvement in the council chamber, see *Bristol Gazette*, 20 Mar. and 21 Aug. 1839; *FFBJ*, 24 Aug. 1839.

[41] *FFBJ*, 20 and 27 Aug. 1842; *Bristol Gazette*, 13 Aug. 1842; 6 Apr. 1848; *Northern Star*, 8 Apr. 1848; Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the Nineteenth Century*, 353–4. Cabot was not the first choice of the elite; an earlier proposal was for 'a colossal statue of Edward Colston [the eighteenth-century merchant philanthropist], overlooking the city which contains so many records of his worth', *Bristol Gazette*, 27 Mar. 1839.

[42] *Bristol Mercury*, 29 Jul. 1837; *Bristol Mirror*, 29 Jul. 1837.

Brandon Hill. It did not need to be surrounded with a wall of soldiers as the hill had been during Orator Hunt's visit in 1816; instead a relatively small number of police could control access in each avenue. But the loss of Brandon Hill to improvement, coupled with a lingering association between Queen Square and working-class disorder effectively robbed the radical platform of an outdoor arena after 1839. The revived reform movement of 1866–67 was the cause of large public meetings in Bristol (one was attended by 7,000 people), but all were held indoors. In many other urban centres outdoor public meetings remained viable in these years.

Associational conflict over space at Bristol is more coherently read with reference to the contradictory languages of 'citizenship' and post-Reform Act 'democratization' than the more orthodox agendas of social class. Arguments over local rights of association and assembly were linked to national issues of citizenship and constitutionalism through the more parochial concerns of civic identity. Citizenship at Bristol meant more than just membership of the political nation; it meant active, visible and unrestricted access to the public and civic domain, symbolically represented, as I have argued, in social conflicts over particularly resonant topographies and spaces. This is not to argue that languages of class are inconsequential, however. We may locate these not only in the familiar sense of middle-class desires to tame the savage, to regulate working-class leisure, and to confront and gentrify the disorganized chaos of nature itself, but in representations of particular public forums. We may understand the untamed, unregulated and disreputable character of Brandon Hill as an essentially 'middle class' reading of plebeian culture, and the purposefully constructed order, regulation and respectability of Queen Square as its antithesis.

Above all, perhaps, the customary inclusivity of Brandon Hill represented a side of civic consciousness that was anathema to the nineteenth-century bourgeois ethos of demarcation and difference. In its popular context, Brandon Hill was emblematic of a civic commonwealth in which the values of commerce and markets were interwoven with radical ideas about independent and active citizenship. To this extent, at least, the battles discussed in this essay are inherently ideological. Brandon Hill is a natural public space, Queen Square a manufactured one. Yet by investing the square with readable signs of civic and national legitimacy, by deliberately juxtaposing mercantile and constitutional symbolism in a purpose-built public arena, the Bristol elite fashioned a rival to the hill that was contestable, interpretable and enduringly controversial.