

Barnaby Rudge: A Review and an Excuse for a History Lesson



Charles Dickens

To aid the reader navigate my incorrigible prolixity I have separated the Review from the Quotes and again from the actual History, so you may choose to read only one. The Quotes are, obviously, the best bit, being Dickens's own words. The History, however, is what justifies the inclusion of this, apparently off-topic, post – however tenuously.

I apologise to purists who will rightly object to my usage of “Catholic” as shorthand for “Roman Catholic”, as per the usual convention, though the disconnected adjective strictly carries no coherent meaning.

Contents

- Barnaby Rudge: The Plot / Review
- Quotes / Extracts
- History: The Tangled Web

Barnaby Rudge: The Plot / Review

Barnaby Rudge is not one of Dickens's most popular novels. It is rather a melodrama, and was perhaps largely an excuse to write about the 1780 Gordon riots. Those London riots would have been within the living memory of elderly people at the time Dickens wrote the book (published 1841). Whether he profited from first-hand accounts I don't know, but there are aspects of the riots as described in Barnaby Rudge that I have not read elsewhere.

Well-constructed stories, they say, have a beginning, a middle and an end. History is different. Every event, every movement, every opinion, every motive is entangled with past events, movements, opinions and motives in an infinite regress that defies curtailment and refuses to be captured between the covers of any finite book. There is neither beginning nor end to history, just an incessant present. Nevertheless, I attempt to put the Gordon riots in their historic context following the review & quotes.

The Gordon riots, instigated by Lord George Gordon, were indisputably anti-Catholic, though Dickens presents them as equally motivated by the mad lust for destruction by people prone to be wicked and lawless in any case. The antecedents of the riots – I will not say the root causes as these eternally defy definitive capture – can be traced back two and a half centuries.

Nor is it possible to separate the religious from the political, but I get ahead of myself. Firstly, the story of Barnaby Rudge.

It is a morality tale. Early we are introduced to Geoffrey Haredale, a gentleman though not wealthy. Haredale is a decent if severe sort of man with unshakable personal integrity - and Catholic. He is well respected by the locals, the religious difference being no barrier to this. The locals are represented by the denizens of The Maypole Inn, proprietor Old John Willets. Dickens clearly sets this up as an exemplar – and, one presumes, a faithful depiction of religious tolerance as it was in practice – if not in law – in 1780.

The Protestant counterweight to Haredale is Sir John Chester, a silken-tongued slime-ball if ever there was one. Haredale and Chester were at school together, from which time their intense personal antipathies date – and remain undiminished. In true melodramatic style, Chester's son, Edward, falls in love with Haredale's niece, Emma (for whom Haredale is *in loco parentis*).

To represent the decent Protestant we have Gabriel Varden, locksmith and all-round good egg. That Varden and Haredale are firm friends is the centre-piece of Dickens's portrayal of the state of relations between the religions which should – and apparently mostly did – prevail. Both Varden and Haredale are heroic figures and behave in exemplary fashion, especially during the riots.

Early in the story we find Varden being attacked in a lonely place at night by a mysterious and sinister stranger. This sinister stranger forms a narrative thread through the story, at times threatening Barnaby, at times threatening Barnaby's mother; the stranger has some unsettling connection with Haredale. This is the murder mystery sub-plot, with which I will not take up your time.

The other sub-plot is that between Old John Willets' son, Joe, and Varden's buxom daughter, Dolly. This love interest is the compositional echo of that of the more aristocratic Edward and Emma. Dolly plays hard to get rather too successfully, and Joe, in despair, runs off to join the army only to return five years later to play the hero in the riots. (Hint: he ran off to join the army in 1775 – think American war of independence). Meanwhile, Dolly is useful as a go-between for Edward and Emma, their would-be union being frustrated by both parents.

So, who the heck is Barnaby? He is the son of Haredale's late steward, apparently murdered along with Haredale's brother (Emma's father) by the family's gardener – who escaped capture. Spoiler alert: nope – it turns out that Barnaby's Dad is not only alive, but is the sinister stranger and the murderer – this revealed, of course, only at the end.

Barnaby is an “idiot” in the very un-PC language of the time. His portrayal by Dickens is dreadfully unconvincing, in my opinion. We are supposed to understand that Barnaby is severely intellectually impaired – yet he speaks in perfect Dickensian prose – eh? This is odd because Dickens had a genius for characterisation, and whilst this might often err towards caricature, such excess would not be out of place when describing “an idiot”, one might have thought. Nor can it be that Dickens was ignorant of the reality of such individuals – there were plenty about in common circulation. Perhaps he was constrained by the conventions of the time to depict such a lad in a stylised way; unadorned verisimilitude was to arrive later.

The purpose of Barnaby, and the reason he is elevated to such significance by being eponymous, is that he exemplifies the innocent caught up in a horribly wicked sequence of events, orchestrated by those more knowing.

And those “more knowing” were... Lord George Gordon and his stupendously unpleasant secretary, Gashford (think Tolkien’s Wormtongue and you have him). The protesters were demanding the repeal of the 1778 Papists Act, which had relieved some of the official discrimination against Catholics. Gordon formed the Protestant Association, which enjoyed some popularity at the time (this popularity being displayed by Varden’s wife, who was...err, “ardent”? OK, bigot, then).

On the ground, as it were, the riots were led – at least in Dickens’s account – by nasty criminal types, such as Hugh – the barely housetrained ostler from The Maypole Inn – and Ned Dennis, professional hangman – as well as by despicable young fools, such as Simon Tappertit, Varden’s apprentice. To establish their characters beyond doubt, Hugh “importunes” Dolly in a lonely place, and later he and Tappertit kidnap Dolly and Emma with sexual intent. Ned Dennis, it turns out, hung Hugh’s mother, which gives their wicked friendship a certain frisson.

The violence and destruction lasted a week, during most of which time the rioters were unopposed. Magistrates were later criticised and the Lord Mayor faced a heavy fine for failing to read the Riot Act, which would have legitimised the deployment of the military against the rioters. As it was, the king, George III, had to do so himself. After five days of the rioters being unopposed, ultimately the military were deployed and rioters were shot or captured and many were publicly hung in several places around London. In final melodrama style, Haredale and Chester settle their differences in a duel. Is this the only Dickens novel in which there is a sword fight?

So the moral is clear, the heroes are those who remain faithful to their true virtuous principles and personal integrity, without regard for unimportant “identity” issues (religious, in this case), whereas the wicked, who get their ultimate comeuppance, either engineer the unrest for reasons of personal gain, or use it to justify indulging the darker side of their psyches. Good job, Dickens – we need constant reminding of what valid morality consists.

Quotes / Extracts

You may get the measure of the instigators of the riots, that is Lord George Gordon and his secretary Gashford, from the following extracts. (Gordon was real, of course, though I am not so sure about Gashford).

“Called”, said the secretary, “by Heaven”.

“I am”.

“Chosen by the people”.

“Yes”

“Faithful to both”.

“To the block!”

It would be difficult to convey an adequate idea of the excited manner in which he gave these answers to the secretary's promptings; of the rapidity of his utterance, or the violence of his tone and gesture; in which, struggling through his Puritan's demeanour, was something wild and ungovernable which broke through all restraint.

Of Lord George Gordon, and his exploitation by his secretary, we read,

A nature prone to false enthusiasm, and the vanity of being a leader, were the worst qualities apparent in composition. All the rest was weakness – sheer weakness; and it is the unhappy lot of thoroughly weak men, that their very sympathies, affections, confidences – all the qualities which in better constituted minds are virtues – dwindle into foibles, or turn into downright vices.

Gashford, with many a sly look towards the bed, sat chuckling at his master's folly.

Of the Machiavellian slime-ball Sir John Chester, MP, we read,

He wrote himself MP – but how? Why, thus. It was a proud family – more proud, indeed, than wealthy. He had stood in danger of arrest, of bailiffs, and a jail – a vulgar jail, to which the common people with small incomes went. Gentlemen of ancient houses have no privilege of exemption from such cruel laws – unless they are of one great house, and then they have. A proud man of his stock and kindred had the means of sending him there. He offered – not indeed to pay his debts, but to let him sit for a close borough until his own son came of age, which, if he lived, would come to pass in twenty years. It was quite as good as an Insolvency Act, and infinitely more genteel. So Sir John Chester was a Member of Parliament.

But how Sir John? Nothing so simple, or so easy. One touch with a sword of state, and the transformation was effected. John Chester, Esquire, MP, attended court – went up with an address – headed a disputation. Such elegance of manner, so many graces of deportment, such powers of conversation, could never pass unnoticed. Mr was too common for such merit. A man so gentlemanly should have been born a Duke; just as some dukes should have been born labourers. He caught the fancy of the king, knelt down a grub, and rose a butterfly. John Chester, Esquire, was knighted and became Sir John.

In contrast, below is an extract from Edward Chester's confrontation with his father having discovered for the first time that they are massively in debt and his father's only plan to reverse their fortunes is that Edward should marry a rich heiress.

From my childhood I have been accustomed to luxury and idleness, and have been bred as though my fortune were large, and my expectations almost beyond limit. The idea of wealth has been familiarised to me from my cradle. I have been taught to look upon those means by which men raise themselves to riches and distinction, as being beyond my heeding, and beneath my care. I have been, as the phrase goes, liberally educated, and am fit for nothing.

The division in society between those supporting the Protestant Association and those who perceived it to be pernicious is represented by Varden's wife, Martha, and Varden himself respectively. Here is Varden incredulous that his wife regards opposition to the rioters ("volunteering") to be reprehensible,

"How strange it is of you to run down volunteering when it's done to defend you and all other women, and our own fireside and everybody else's, in case of need."

“It is unchristian”, cried Mrs Varden, shaking her head.

“Which would be most unchristian, Martha – to sit quietly down and let our houses be sacked by a foreign army, or to turn out like men and drive ‘em off?”

And when the egregious Sir John Chester calls upon the Vardens, Martha is completely taken in,

Mrs Varden was but a woman, and had her share of vanity, obstinacy, and love of power. She entered into a secret treaty of alliance, offensive and defensive, with her insinuating visitor; and really did believe, as many others would have done who saw and heard him, that in so doing she furthered the ends of truth, justice, and morality, in a very uncommon degree.

Mrs Varden is supported in her views by her maid servant, Miggs,

This Miggs was a tall young lady....slender and shrewish...of a sharp and acid visage. As a general principle and abstract proposition, Miggs held the male sex to be utterly contemptible and unworthy of notice; to be fickle, false, base, sottish, inclined to perjury, and wholly undeserving.

These views did not stop the misanthropic Miggs from pining after the appalling Simon Tappertit, however.

Dickens gives us a taste of the extent of violence and criminality endemic in 1780’s London in the following passage.

It was not unusual for those who wended home alone at midnight to keep the middle of the road, the better to guard against surprise from lurking footpads; few would venture to repair at a late hour to Kentish Town or Hampstead, or even to Kensington or Chelsea, unarmed and unattended; while he who had been loudest and most valiant at the supper-table or the tavern, and had but a mile or so to go, was glad to fee a link-boy to escort him home.

Clearly, gentlemen did not carry a sword merely for decoration.

Even after the rioting has started, Dickens expresses the decidedly phlegmatic response of the ordinary Catholic citizenry here,

Even the Catholic gentry and tradesmen, of whom there were many resident in different parts of the City and its suburbs, had no fear for their lives or property, and but little indignation for the wrong they had already sustained in the plunder and destruction of their temples of worship. An honest confidence in the government under whose protection they had lived for many years, and a well-founded reliance on the good feeling and right thinking of the great mass of the community, with whom, notwithstanding their religious differences, they were everyday in habits of confidential, affectionate, and friendly intercourse, reassured them, even under the excesses that had been committed; and convinced them that they who were Protestants in anything but name, were no more to be considered as abettors of these disgraceful occurrences, than they themselves were chargeable with the uses of the block, the rack, the gibbet, and the stake in cruel Mary’s reign.

I leave the reader to translate that to present day relevance in respect of rioters and their supposed causes. But – again with recent resonance – the rioters went unopposed for five days. Of the public who did nothing to stop the rioters Dickens writes,

...round the smoking ruins people stood apart from one another and in silence, not venturing to condemn the rioters, or to be supposed to do so, even in whispers.

Self-censorship, eh? It seems not to be so new a phenomenon.

But the most shocking account of the riots which Dickens records – and we must suppose he had some reason for writing this rather than merely making it up – concerns the breaking of vessels in a distillery and the resulting spillage of spirits...

...there was a worse spectacle than this – worse by far than fire and smoke, or even the rabble's unappeasable and maniac rage. The gutters of the street, and every crack and fissure in the stones, ran with scorching spirit, which, being dammed up by busy hands, overflowed the road and pavement, and formed a great pool, into which the people dropped down dead by dozens. They lay in heaps all round this fearful pond, husbands and wives, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, women with children in their arms and babies at their breasts, and drank until they died. While some stooped with their lips to the brink and never raised their heads again, others sprang up from their fiery draught, and danced half in a mad triumph, and half in the agony of suffocation, until they fell, and steeped their corpses in the liquor that had killed them. Nor was even this the worst or most appalling kind of death that happened on this fateful night. From the burning cellars, where they drank out of hats, pails, buckets, tubs, and shoes, some men were drawn, alive, but all alight from head to foot; who, in their unendurable anguish and suffering, making for anything that had the look of water, rolled, hissing in this hideous lake, and splashed up liquid fire which lapped in all it met with as it ran along the surface and neither spared the living nor the dead.

Of those rioters punished afterwards, many by hanging, Dickens writes, after giving a specific account of several of them, including boys, women and cripples...

In a word, those who suffered as rioters were, for the most part, the weakest, meanest, and most miserable among them. It was a most exquisite satire upon the false religious cry which had led to so much misery, that some of these people owned themselves to be Catholics, and begged to be attended by their own priests.

In contrast, Lord George Gordon was tried for treason but acquitted, Gashford is captured and commits suicide, Hugh and Ned Dennis are hanged, but...after protracted cliff hanging tension...Barnaby is pardoned due to the efforts of Varden and Joe Willets. Haredale kills Sir John Chester in a duel, and flees to the continent where he spends the rest of his life doing penance for his great sin in a monastery – thus all wrong-doers get their just deserts, as was obligatory at the time.

Mr Varden is not a man to crow over his wife being proved so very much in error, and he refrains from any reproach more than just this.... intended, of course, as the moral of the tale for the reader's edification,

“Recollect from this time that all good things perverted to evil purposes are worse than those which are naturally bad. A thoroughly wicked woman is wicked indeed. When religion goes wrong, she is very wrong, for the same reason.”

History: The Tangled Web

So, what about the true history behind the Gordon riots? And why did I say one could trace it back at least 250 years? I was referring, of course, to the Reformation under Henry VIII, without which there would have been few, if any, Protestants in England to cause a Protestant-Catholic conflict. But the issue is far deeper than that rather pedantic observation.

There is no subject so badly obfuscated as politics as a result of the change of meaning of key words or phrases, sometimes morphing into their polar opposites. “Liberal” will immediately spring to mind as an example. But it is not only semantics which causes confusion, but also real changes of allegiances over time, viz, that the working class are now Conservative voters. Indeed, one might observe that the working class have always been rather conservative, despite only becoming Conservative recently (which nicely illustrates both the semantic ambiguity and the change of allegiance).

But my favourite semantic inversion – and the one most pertinent here – is the origin of the term “Tory”. It is of Irish (Gaelic) origin, represented as *toraigh* or *toruighe*, and literally means brigand, plunderer or pursuer. The original *toraigh* were Irish Catholic “rebels”, though the relevance of the word “rebel” depends upon whose side you are on.

The 17th century Irish Catholics were proud royalists, supporting the Catholic Stuart Monarchs. The Confederate Irish Catholics sided with the Royalists in the English civil war. Despite Charles I not being formally a Catholic, he married a Catholic and his views were regarded by the Puritans as being too Catholic in tendency. Thus, the Monarchical establishment was seen to be aligned with Catholicism, or other tendencies towards foreign or Papist influences, which the Protestants opposed vehemently. The Irish Catholics, however, including the *toraigh*, were Royalists. Hence, the originally derogatory term “*toraigh*” was used initially by the Cromwellian side, from whose perspective these Irish Catholics were rebels and brigands (and were amongst those slaughtered by Cromwell after the Siege of Drogheda in 1649).

Bearing in mind that the full name of the Conservative Party is the Conservative and Unionist Party, whose very name indicates a policy of supporting the union of Ireland and Britain – the Protestant position – the irony that the original Tories were the forerunners of the IRA is quite remarkable.

While I am on the subject I might as well mention that the opposing political philosophy, which came to be denoted “Whig”, is a contraction of *Whiggamore*, literally meaning “cattle-driver”, the term having also been coined by their opponents as derogatory. They were Scottish Presbyterian rebels, Presbyterians being Calvinist Protestants (and hence Puritans at the time). So neither of the two terms that defined the central political divide for centuries were of English origin, both were of Celtic origin, and the political alignment followed the religious division from the start.

It is worth noting that “Liberals” are the descendants of the Whigs who had their origins in Puritanism, not noted for its tolerance. So here we have another example of politics morphing into its opposite, with classical liberalism and its emphasis on personal liberty being the heir of Puritans with their draconian religious restrictions. Thus, “liberals” in the modern American sense, with their increasing tendency towards intolerance of any diversity of

opinion, are the truer heirs of their Whiggish forebears, being closer to Calvin than to J.S.Mill.

Robert Tombs argues that *“The legend of the Gordon riots as merely frenzy, augmented by fermented liquors, anarchy, primeval savagery and infectious madness – as dramatized by Dickens in Barnaby Rudge – is misleading. The rioters were not vagrants or slum dwellers, and few had criminal records. They were mainly respectable journeymen, apprentices, labourers, small businessmen and craftsmen”*. That may be so, but it hardly makes the riots themselves any less destructive, nor less Protestant. Tombs continues, *“They were well informed and consistently targeted Catholic institutions such as schools and embassy chapels, the houses of wealthy Catholics, politicians and judges, and symbols of power – magistrates houses, law courts, toll gates, several prisons (including Newgate), and the Bank of England.”*

Tombs informs us that, *“One who was certainly in the front row for the burning of Newgate was the engraver, poet and religious radical, William Blake”*. I never did think much of Blake.

Samuel Johnson saw *“the good Protestants calmy wrecking the Old Bailey...There were not, I believe, a hundred; but they did their work at leisure, in full security, without sentinels, without trepidation, as men lawfully employed in full day”*. Recalling that the authorities failed to act for five days of rioting, and recalling also the ultimate acquittal of Gordon, one suspects that there was widespread tacit political complicity with the rioters. Though I doubt that anyone “took the knee”, the milquetoast response to wanton vandalism may have current parallels.

Another key dimension to the Gordon riots was the role of the American war of independence (1775-83). Although Dickens does not say so, we are to understand it was to that war that Joe Willets was dispatched only to return *sans* an arm. The French revolution was not far off (1789) and already polarisation of sympathies were evident. At the time of the Gordon riots the (so-called) “English” civil war (which, of course, crucially involved all four nations of Great Britain and Ireland) was over 130 years distant, and yet the political divisions were still fresh and embedded within the religious divisions. Whigs would still be called “Roundheads” and the king’s supporters were still “Cavaliers”.

A key feature of Whiggish opinion was suspicion of Monarchs’ tendencies to invite foreign influence, perhaps mediated by the Pope, and especially French influence – not entirely without reason – they did keep trying to invade. Catherine Macaulay, for example, doyen of the Whiggish tendency, emphasised the “eternal struggle for Saxon freedoms against the Norman yolk”.

(Here we have another reversal. Today it is mostly conservatives who want out of the EU).

The upshot was that the Whigs (the Protestants) were supporters of American independence – as some would also be later of the French revolution.

The relevance of the American war is that the 1778 Papists Act cleared the way for Catholics to join the British army at a time when more troops were badly needed in America. But the Gordon rioters – or, at least, the political persons behind them - were American sympathisers. They were opposed to strengthening their own country’s army! That would appear to be a

significant part of the motivation for opposition to the 1778 Act, though not an entirely logical one as large numbers of Irish Catholics were already in the army (irrespective of the letter of the law).

Dissenters from the Whiggish view were frequently dismissed by them as “Jacobites”, reminiscent of the knee-jerk badmouthing of dissenters from “liberal” orthodoxy today as “fascists”.

The further irony, given the Roundheads’/Protestants’/Whigs’ view of the French, was the key role that French support played in deciding the outcome of the American war. As Tombs puts it,

“Despite the legend of lumbering Redcoats being defeated by straight-shooting frontiersmen, there is little doubt that the Crown forces, including many Americans – among them the native and the enslaved – could have defeated the half-hearted ‘Roundheads’ had Britain not also been fighting a world war.

This, however, is not how we remember it. As in so much of our history, the Whig version, in both its English and American variants, has prevailed, and we have generally accepted the idealized vision of the American revolution as a noble struggle for freedom and democracy. Here indeed is a case of history being written by the victors.”

I don’t suppose it will be news to the reader that the Black Lives Matter perspective on slavery is somewhat lacking in completeness, or that the US perspective on Native Americans (as we must call them) is somewhat awry. Here is Tombs again,

“A much greater stake in the conflict was held by Shawnees, Creeks, Mohawks, Delawares, Cherokees, Iroquois and other nations, who feared invasion if the colonists could overturn the 1763 Proclamation. Their support for the Crown was the largest and most united native American effort the continent would ever see. They sought an alternative within the empire to the prospect of long-drawn-out genocide which duly followed American independence, brought about by disease, armed force and forced relocation.

Loyalist ranks were also swelled by enslaved Africans, after freedom was proclaimed for any rebel-owned slave joining Crown forces. Whenever British forces approached, hundreds, even thousands, of slaves would join them, seeking freedom in a British uniform. Up to 100,000 slaves joined this unique mass escape, including many belonging to George Washington. British and American Whigs (“liberals”!) were outraged. Paine denounced ‘that barbarous and hellish power which hath stirred up the Indians and Negroes to destroy us’ – a comment that recalls Samuel Johnson’s jibe that ‘the loudest yelps for liberty’ came from the drivers of slaves.”

That this is the noble cause towards which the Gordon rioters were ultimately striving does nothing to mitigate their behaviour. I leave the reader to ruminate on current political parallels.