

Henry 'Orator' Hunt

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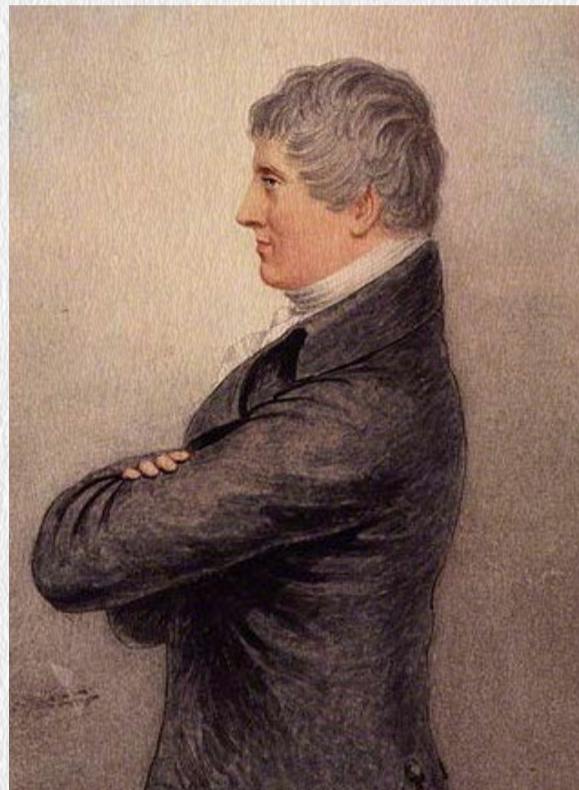
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Henry Hunt was born in Upavon, Wiltshire in 1773. He was a tall well-built man and from a comfortable background. He could easily have settled into the life of a gentleman farmer in Wiltshire. However, a minor local quarrel led to him spending six weeks in the Kings Bench prison, and he was then ostracised by Wiltshire society.

On his release, he spent some time in Brighton, and, though married, fell deeply in love with a Mrs. Vince, with whom he eloped in 1802. He had by then got interested in politics. His commanding presence and good speaking voice made him a popular speaker, and in time earned him the sobriquet of Henry 'Orator' Hunt. He was a leading radical in the following years, and was to have been the lead speaker in the mass meeting in Manchester, which became known as the Peterloo Massacre, but the Yeomanry charged before he could speak.

This paper, however, is concerned solely with his later interest in the politics of the City of London. A series of successful mass meetings in Spa Fields in 1816-17 had found Hunt at odds with Robert Waithman, an established City Tory. At that time, interest in politics was low, and Hunt judged it a good time to stand up for the interests of the rate-payers of the City against the corrupt establishment. At Common Hall, the annual meeting open to all qualified liverymen, he carried a motion for the City's accounts to be published and distributed to all ratepayers. Waithman refused to do so on the grounds that the ratepayers had no funds to cover the cost. Hunt raised the matter again, and in 1827 said "No funds! There was enough cash for gormandizing, for guzzling, for treating emperors and kings, for stuffing themselves, and for carrying some home in their pockets"

In a misguided attempt to stifle Hunt, he was nominated by a non-radical liveryman for the post of auditor, and was elected by an overwhelming show of hands. Hunt used his new post to campaign for reform, retrenchment, and accountability. He objected to the system whereby the Lord Mayor (paid twice the salary of the US president) was chosen by rotation – a system which made fools of the City liverymen who formed the electorate. He campaigned for the changes to the office of secondary under-sheriff, an office sold by the Corporation for ten thousand pounds and upwards, thus empowering the holder "to oppress, plunder, and rob" anyone arrested within the City. The recorder and other legal officers were censured for their inflated salaries, innumerable perquisites and expensive feasts at the Old Bailey.



Henry Hunt

When his term of office as auditor came to an end in 1829, he refused to have his retirement dinner, and asked that the money should be distributed to poor freemen. The Chamberlain told him that the money could only be used for 'eating or drinking' purposes, so he proposed calling together 400 widows of freemen, and giving them a dinner of roast beef, plum duff, and a pint of ale. Even that was refused, and the Lord Mayor refused to order the Chamberlain to do it.

In 1824 when Hunt decided to stand for election as a common councilman in the ward of Farringdon Without, it happened that Waithman, his old enemy, was alderman for that ward and also Lord Mayor. He did this twice, was defeated twice, and in the second election was subject to considerable personal vilification. Was Hunt such a person as you would want to introduce to your wives and daughters? Or to set as examples to your servants?

But a better chance came when the City authorities petitioned Parliament for financial assistance for the approaches to the new London Bridge. Hunt advised the Lords not to continue the tax on coals, and not to advance any public money, so the Lords set up a committee, which required Common Council to produce their annual accounts.

At the following Common Hall, a resolution was carried to compel City officials to keep receipts, and to produce timely annual accounts in stiffiest detail to be examined by the auditors.

Distress about social conditions intensified in 1830, and the City petitioned for a parliamentary inquiry on the issue. Waithman tried to restrict the scope to a few technical issues, but Hunt took over the matter, pointed to the chief cause being the long, expensive and bloody wars against the liberties of the people of America and of France, exacerbated by the unrepresentative nature of the House of Commons.

Reform was very much in the air as the Wellington/Peel Tories were replaced by the Whigs under Earl Grey, who had promised reform. Their Reform Bill was defeated in the Lords in 1830 and 1831, and only passed in 1832 when the Conservative peers reluctantly decided to abstain rather than have a flood of new Whig peers created. It was generally approved by most of the reformers, with the exception of Henry Hetherington who denounced it as a betrayal of the working class. Hunt had become MP for Preston at a by-election in 1830, and was somewhat equivocal in his reaction to the Bill, and this probably led to his defeat in the 1832 election.

In 1832, Hunt presented to the House of Commons the first individual petition for a vote. It was from Mary Smith from Stanmore in Yorkshire, who stated that she paid taxes and was subject to the rule of law, and therefore did not see why she should not vote. But it was laughed out.

Hunt's health deteriorated in 1834, and he died at Alresford in 1835.



Henry Hunt

Additional notes

Prepared by: Piers Nicholson

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Further reading: Henry Hunt and English Working Class Radicalism, John Belchem, 1985

Wikipedia article on Henry ‘Orator’ Hunt

A Collection of Particulars Relative to the Election of Common Council-Men for the Ward of Farringdon Without, in the Year 1828; With Some Preliminary Remarks Respecting the Introduction of Mr. Hunt to That Ward. (Paperback) published 2011.