

## James Murray: a forgotten Presbyterian hero

Imagine you could go back to the later years of the 18th century. You would see that in North-east of England the political power was in the hands of a few powerful families, the Brandlings, Liddells, Russells, Ridleys, Wortleys, Bells, and Strathmores, families who were the great coalowners of the time. These families were part of the 'Grand Alliance' formed in 1726, who carved up much of the land and power in North-east England between them. Very few men and no women in the region, had the vote and so it was very difficult to change any of the laws, and this helped to keep the power and wealth in such a small number of families. In the country as a whole, only 435 000 men could vote and they were always those with property. It was also a time when dissenting religious traditions, be they Quakers, Unitarians, Congregationalist or Presbyterian were denied access to political power.

The wealthy, propertied classes were also the people who received a decent education and consequently saw themselves as the only ones who understood enough about the country and how it was run. Others were not happy about this, and on numerous occasions they protested, including the 1740 Corn Riots in Newcastle, when people were aggrieved at the high price of corn and the riots were only put down by the raising of the local militia and an official promise that the price of corn would be reduced. However it was hard to really improve the situation and make life fairer as the political system was established to try and make sure that all the wealth and power was kept by those who owned a lot of land or other property. It might have seemed like this situation would go on forever, but in the second half of the 18th century, a whiff of change was in the air.

This was the time of the Enlightenment, when across Western Europe and North America the old ideas about how society should be run were being questioned. There was a tide of new thinking which led to the French Revolution and the American War of Independence and this wave of new ideas about greater freedom and equality, lapped upon the shores of Newcastle and influenced Murray and others. Even the usually conservative-minded City Burgesses joined in, when in November 1769, a petition was drafted by a Committee from the Burgesses' Party in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The Burgesses' Party could be said to represent the rank and file of the City Burgesses, who roughly played the same role as councillors do now and the aim of the petition was the dissolution of Parliament.

The story of how things began to change in our city how and people of Newcastle and the wider North-east began to claim their rights starts with the Rev. James Murray: I think it is very sad that he is an almost forgotten figure. Let me explain why. He was born in Fans in Roxburghshire, just over the border in Scotland. Murray became a Presbyterian preacher, part of a Christian tradition whose members were generally anti-authoritarian. Murray's first position was in Alnwick, before he moved south to the Newcastle Meeting House in Silver Street, Newcastle in 1765.

Murray held Sunday services and weekday lectures, where he put forward his opinions on what he saw in society around him and he was very much on the side of the poor against the powerful. There was a lot of poverty to be seen around him and a lot of suffering in North-east England, whilst a few rich families lived in big houses on large estates in the lap of luxury. This huge gap between the wealthy few and the many poor did not sit easy with a man of God such as James Murray.

It was the time when coffee houses were beginning to spring up all over the country and Newcastle was no exception in this. These were not merely cafes; they often became informal debating clubs where the new ideas spread by the Enlightenment could be discussed. New clubs which developed included Swarley's Club in Newcastle's Groat Market, which was known as 'Newcastle's House of Lords' and in a time before political parties as we would recognise them today, there were other political debating clubs, such as the Independent Club and the Constitutional Club, where men argued about how to reform society. The city was also a welcoming place to radicals such as Swiss-born physician and political theorist Jean-Paul Marat who chose Newcastle as the site for the launching of his revolutionary tract, *The Chains of Slavery*, in 1774, in which Marat wrote out about the way he felt the ruling-classes held ordinary people in bondage. Marat was to go back to France and become a vociferous defender of the sans-culottes, the working-class revolutionaries of the French Revolution. It was the murderous excesses of the Terror in the French Revolution which helped to galvanise the aristocracy in Britain into wanting to hang on to power, so that they would not share the fate of their aristocratic cousins across the English Channel.

The time when *The Chains of Slavery* was released was a period when the publishing industry in general was greatly expanding and Newcastle was at the forefront of this as well. More grammar books were published in Newcastle in the 18th century than in any other English-speaking city outside of London and along with the coffee houses, Sands' circulating library in the Bigg Market and bookshops such as Charnley's and Barker's also became popular meeting places. In 1793 the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society was opened and this provided another outlet for progressive-minded people in Newcastle to discuss how society could be improved. All this encouraged an atmosphere of debate.

As a preacher, Murray used Bible stories to question how things were. On one occasion, Murray told the story of the tyrant King Moab, who defecated his throne when the people rose up against him. Murray used this a metaphor for what he perceived to be the corruption in a political system where there was no real democratic accountability at all and the wealthy, who believed that they knew best, could make laws just to suit themselves. By preaching from the Bible and using his position as a minister in this way, Murray could preach about people resisting the ruling classes, whilst not getting into trouble himself. The people in his congregation understood very well what he was saying and loved his down to earth language and the way he poked fun at the ruling classes, whilst making serious points. It was this kind of straight-forward language that Murray used when he protested against the conservative-minded Common Council of Newcastle taking what he saw was an inordinate amount of time, to replace the old Tyne Bridge, which had been washed away in a huge flood in 1772

Murray was also a writer, his most famous book being *Sermons to the Asses*. The front cover tells us a lot about the views he expressed in this book. It depicted an ass weighed down by two panniers, one with the word politics written on it and the other with the word religion on it.. This was not because Murray was against either religion or politics; rather he was speaking out against the leaders of these professions. He had no time for the two main political parties of the time, the Whigs and Tories and saw the Anglicans as merely wishing to preserve the status quo..

Both parties were made up of people with a range of political positions, but generally speaking, the Tories were for the monarchy, landowners, the established church and the status quo, with no reform at all, while the Whigs represented the interests of trade, mercantilism, parliament, modernism and in religion, non-conformity, those who might be described as the 'nouveau riche' and limited reform. In Murray's eyes they were both only interested in relatively small sections of society and not the kind of people who packed out his services and lectures at the Meeting House.

Amongst those attending Murray's sermons was Jeremiah Spence who brought up his children to read the Bible and to think carefully about what it was saying. One of those children was the famous Newcastle radical Thomas Spence, who later went to prison during the Napoleonic Wars for having the temerity to write pamphlets suggesting that land and wealth should be shared out more fairly. As members of the Presbyterian family, we should be proud that it was one of our own who had the foresight and the courage to challenge the injustices of the day and in this part of the world lay the foundations for the advances which ordinary working people like you and I have gained over the last 200 years.

The story of James Murray and the way he interpreted the Bible in Newcastle in the second half of the 18th century seems to be particularly pertinent in 2012, this year of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, when greedy bankers are still being given huge bonuses, whilst the 'worship' of celebrities continues apace, as the Leveson Enquiry remorselessly uncovers the corruption at the heart of our media and political elites and all the while in the background we have the ever worsening economic crisis, in which we are surely not 'all in it together', as the gap between rich and poor gets ever greater. What Murray reminds us is that surely the God of Isaiah and Amos, of Micah and not least of Jesus, is not the God of the rich, or the powerful, or the privileged, but rather the God of the poor, the dispossessed and the marginalised.

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