Chapter Two

Widespread Opposition and Prison

Outside London, opposition was just as widespread as the Army, in a dynamic spiritual offensive, 'invaded' areas all over Britain from Dublin to Dunfermline. Its militant evangelism often causing fury amongst those it was hoping to convert. It was, after all, attacking the most popular pastimes of the working-class. It also faced the centuries old traditional violence against anything new which seemed to challenge accepted norms. Typically, Salvationists would congregate in front of their hall before marching, with their band playing and singing songs, towards the most ungodly places. The leaders often walked backwards beating time with an umbrella in front of the 'soldiers' marching four abreast. With their singing, bonnets, uniforms, and flags, the parades resembled a carnival or a group of circus performers advertising a performance. One newspaper thought their instruments were 'instruments of torture with giddy girls and giddier old women twanging tambourines in people's faces'.[1] At times they were accused of acting like a 'Hallelujah' press gang as they overzealously sought out bystanders to come back to their hall. They gave real meaning to Catherine Booth's mantra about disturbing the present.

There were riots everywhere. When Salvationists invaded the Irish quarter of the Welsh town of Tredegar, it sparked widespread rioting and took the enrolment of 80 special constables to calm things down. (The 'Murphy Riots' of the late 1860s had already caused religious friction in

1. *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 9 October 1884.

some towns.[2]) At Salisbury, there was nightly violence for several months. On one occasion, a Salvationist recorded, 'the procession was literally covered from head to foot with filth, many of us with our eyes, ears and mouths blocked with mud. The mob, numbering some thousands and armed with rotten eggs, bladders of blood, fireworks, soot and ochre of three or four colours, pelted us to their heart's content. . . . Two were severely injured and many had the clothes ripped off our backs.'[3] As a result, sixteen roughs received two months' hard labour.

At Guildford seventeen men, some respectable tradesmen, were fined for attacking Salvationists. (In the 1860s the town's bonfire society, 'The Guildford Guys', had rioted so badly the Metropolitan police had to be drafted in. In future Skeleton Army riots there was often a close correlation between their members and those of bonfire societies.) When 20 flying Hallelujah lasses 'invaded' Ryde on the Isle of Wight, they were pelted with liquid manure and sewage was thrown over them. The police declined to protect them. At Cowes, after Salvationists had been pelted with flour and eggs and chased into their barracks, they retaliated by throwing flour on the crowd below. Much worse was thrown at Booth's 'soldiers'. At Bath it was fish gut and the occasional sheep's head; at Romsey it was buckets of blood from a nearby slaughterhouse.

The Army 'attacked' Chester in November 1881. At their inaugural meeting a fight broke out, the collecting box was thrown into the air and there was a mad scramble for money. More seriously, there was a huge riot when they attempted to march through the Irish quarter of the town. Miss 'Captain' Falconbridge was hit by a large stone and for a week her life was in danger. Before the arrested rioters appeared in front of the bench, the magistrates received an anonymous note: 'We the Brotherhood of Chester, solemnly vow that if you pronounce one or any of the prisoners guilty you and all your brother magistrates will answer with your lives.'[4] It was signed in blood with a coffin and

2. William Murphy gave a series of anti-Catholic lectures in the late 1860s that incited rioting between Protestants and Catholics. He died in 1872 after being beaten up by a 200-strong mob in Whitehaven, Cumberland, the year before. In fact, the Murphy Riots were in the first instance anti-Murphy riots. Irish Catholic attacks were invariably followed by English Protestant counter-attacks.
3. Lieutenant-Colonel Pepper, cited in *The Times*, 20 July 1882.
4. *The Times*, 1 April 1882.

cross-bones. The magistrates discharged and bound over some of the rioters but sent eight of them for trial. Six were acquitted, including, surprisingly, Falconbridge's assailant, but the other two were found guilty and sentenced to two years' hard labour.

At Sheffield, on Easter Monday 1882, the Army held a monster rally reinforced by a thousand 'troops' from Hull. The pre-publicity declared: 'Heavy fighting was expected and great victories were certain. Shot and shell would be freely thrown into the enemy's camp and great damage expected to be done to the Devil's Kingdom.'[5]

When Booth arrived, Sheffield 'Blades' poured out of the slums in their thousands to attack the parade. The police were powerless to control the mob. Stones, mud and brickbats were thrown and many were injured. Some were aimed at William and Catherine Booth's carriage. Miraculously, neither was hurt although Catherine had some mortar on her bonnet which she was reluctant to wash off before her next speech. (They had previously been pelted in Newcastle.) The General stood unflinchingly in his carriage during the entire length of the march giving out instructions and shouting, 'Take no notice, march straight on!' Of this event, in an obituary of Booth, one newspaper recorded that: 'When the hall was reached and a group of mud-bespattered, bruised and bleeding figures with bandaged heads welcomed him at the door. The General said with a twinkle in his eye, "Now is the time to get your photographs taken."'[6]

'Lieutenant' Emerson Davidson, a converted, former champion wrestler, was concussed and covered in mud and had to cling to his horse before he was rescued. A cutter, Arthur Woolen, was charged with throwing a heavy piece of wood at him. He was acquitted by a jury although Davidson had not recovered by the time of the trial. Booth commented, 'he [Davidson] has had many a fall wrestling for the Devil, but today he had a fall in wrestling for God'.[7]

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Salvationists began to be prosecuted for blocking the highways and fined. Usually, encouraged by headquarters, they refused to pay and were imprisoned, although in some cases they did not have the money to

5. Ibid., 26 March 1882.
6. *Coventry Evening Standard*, 21 August 1912.
7. *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 17 January 1882.

pay. Louisa Lock and four of her male colleagues were the first Salvation Army prison 'martyrs'. They were sentenced to three days' hard labour for 'obstruction' in Pontypridd in South Wales in September 1879. On their release they were given a hero's welcome.

In August 1881, a Salvationist was fined ten shillings or seven days in prison for hitting a seven-year-old boy with an umbrella because he had thrown mud at him. He chose prison. More seriously, a former officer, Fred Spencer, was given eighteen months' hard labour for seducing a young woman during a meeting. There were rumours of immorality during all-night prayer meetings, begun, according to Bramwell Booth, by certain bishops of the Anglican church. 'Jumping for Jesus' or 'Creeping for Jesus' took place with the lights turned low. The 'soldiers' would be on their hands and knees simulating being lost in sin. Some critics called it 'Groping for Jesus'. One London magistrate wondered aloud how many single women in London workhouses were expecting babies after attending a Salvation Army meeting. The rumours were unfounded and an enquiry confirmed this. In reality, they were all-night prayer meetings and the gaslight was never lowered.

As disturbances grew, Salvationists were imprisoned more frequently. Thomas Maycock, the leader of the Leamington corps, was sentenced to one month for 'obstruction' after declining to pay a fine for preaching, praying and singing in the street. A large crowd of supporters went to see him taken into Warwick gaol and he shouted out to jeering bystanders that they would be 'roasted on the Devil's pitchfork'. After three days, his wife paid the fine because of his poor health. A few days later 2,000 went to a meeting to learn of his prison experience. After being sentenced, Salvationists were often led away to the court cells shouting 'Glory to God' or singing 'Anywhere with Jesus'. In the cells they would try to sing loudly non-stop which was against regulations. However, once within the harsh prison regime their spirits would sink.

Victorian prisons were notorious. After a few weeks of hard labour, prisoners were sometimes hardly recognised by their relatives when they met at the prison gates. Fortunately, few Salvationists were sentenced to more than a month. Nevertheless, they had to get used to the horrid hush at night broken by prisoners sobbing and the shrieking of someone in a nightmare. At six a.m. they were woken by the ugly voice of the prison bell which commanded prisoners to get up and dress. After washing, slopping out and cleaning the cell,

the breakfast was gruel[8] and bread. They could only attend chapel by walking, single file, on landings that reeked with the stench of slops and excrement.

Hard labour was breaking stones, the treadmill or picking oakum (used to seal ships' timber and planking). The last involved sitting on a stool in your cell disentangling thick naval rope with a nail or your fingers, which was painful. The treadmill meant spending at least six hours standing within a huge wheel and making it turn with continuous steps. It was exhausting. Prison was a real test of their faith. There was no shortage of martyrs but it could be a chastening experience. On his release after a short sentence, 'Staff-Captain' Mackenzie, with a thick beard grown in prison, was interviewed by a reporter from *The War Cry* who thought he looked very ill:

> 'After my first night on a plank bed, in a stone cell, and with nothing but the two prison blankets for covering, I came out shivering and trembling from head to foot. . . . My cell was changed but I still suffered extremely from the cold, and besides my nerves being in such a disordered state, caused the strange sensation of being locked up to act upon my fancy, and a morbid idea fastened upon me that the prison would be burned down while I and my fellow prisoners remained helpless in our cells. . . . Well I could not shake off the idea, and the feelings of horror that accompanied it are beyond description. I got in such state that I could not lie upon my bed, and but for being able to get on my knees and commit myself into the hands of God, I do not know what would have become of me.'
>
> 'Did you come into contact with the other prisoners?'
>
> 'Not much, as it is against the rules of the prison to speak or to communicate with another, but I shall not forget one of the cleaners – a fellow prisoner – who came into my cell. He was a gaunt, starved fellow, and seeing some pieces of bread I could not eat, said, "What's that, bread?" pounced upon it and gnawed it, or rather tore it like a hungry wolf.'

8. Unsweetened watery oatmeal.

During exercise he caught a glimpse of his fellow prisoners:

> 'It was the most miserable crowd of human faces I had ever looked upon, and my heart went out to the poor creatures. I felt that my prison experience had done one thing for me, i.e. strengthened my determination to seek more than ever the Salvation of the lost and wretched and drunken around me in the open air or wherever I had the opportunity.'[9]

William Booth wrote to Sir Richard Cross, the Conservative secretary of state at the Home Office,[10] to complain about prison conditions and request leniency for his followers. He claimed they contracted pulmonary and other diseases in prison and that some even died as a result. Booth blamed the prison authorities for taking their 'flannels' (underwear) away, making them sleep in unheated cells on hard wooden plank beds, the poor diet and for placing them on the treadmill even if they were not sentenced to hard labour.

Cross enquired into Booth's complaints and, according to the prison governors, they were exaggerated. The governors said the prisoners had made no complaints about conditions to anybody at the time and it was unfair to complain afterwards. Nevertheless, Cross recommended that Salvationists should be allowed a mattress and bedding in lieu of the plank bed, be allowed to write letters and receive visitors frequently, have two lengthy periods of daily exercise, have access to library books and that the medical officers could be more liberal with their diets. However, they were only recommendations and conditions for Salvationists depended on the attitude of the individual prison governor and his medical officers.

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After a while a pattern seemed to be emerging. The worst persistent violence against Salvationists was occurring in small to medium-sized towns where magistrates and councillors had close links to the drinks trade or were themselves publicans. A case in point was a small quiet town, 48 miles south-west of London, previously only famous for burying the same woman, Mrs Blunden, alive twice in 1674! Today, Basingstoke's population is 114,000 but in 1880 it was 6,681. It had

9. *The War Cry*, 'Look at Jail Life', 9 October 1886. Mackenzie had just been released from St Albans prison.
10. Home Secretary, 1874–80 and 1885–86.

Figure 4. Imprisoned Salvationists from Arbroath, as depicted in *The War Cry*, 29/6/1882.

50 pubs and beer houses; one for every 133 residents. There were four breweries and many of its inhabitants worked in the industry. It was an ideal target for Booth. Catherine Booth visited and told an audience the Army would use 'aggressive means of drawing those debauched classes out of the public houses, of letting them know they are going to hell'.[11]

In 1880, Booth sent 'Captain' Clara Green and 'Lieutenant' (Happy) Martha Ellis to open a spiritual offensive with posters declaring:

> *O Yes! O Yes! O Yes!*
> *To all you sinners who [sic] it may concern;*

11. Ken Clements, *Two Feeble Women: The Early History of the Salvation Army in Basingstoke* (no publisher noted, c. 1995), quoted in Bob Clarke, *The Basingstoke Riots: Massagainians v the Salvation Army 1880–1883* (Basingstoke: Basingstoke Archaeological & Historical Society, 2010), p. 6.

Figure 5. Salvationist Charles Gardner in prison uniform.

Being a detachment of the Salvation Army
Will open fire on Sin and Satan
At the Factory, Brook Street, Basingstoke,
On Sunday, September 19th, 1880.[12]

They were immediately opposed by William Blatch, the mayor, who just happened to be the managing director of May's Brewery, the biggest in the town, and by 'Massagainians'. (The name originated from the brewers' call to arms to the local mob to 'mass again'). After their parades were attacked with sticks and stones and they had chemicals thrown in their faces, Green and Ellis left town only to be replaced by 'Captain' Lizzie Rushforth. The Massagainians immediately tried to force her into a pub. She was only saved by sympathisers.

12. Ibid.

During the attacks, Massagainians waved Union Jacks whilst singing 'Rule Britannia', believing they were defending their town from eccentric invaders. According to Chris Hare, 'This was the anthem of small-town rioters throughout the nineteenth century. "Britons Never Shall Be Slaves" – was the key phrase – always sung with gusto by bonfire boys and other rioting groups.'[13]

On Sunday, 20 March 1881, 'The Battle of Church Square' took place, leading to what was described as 'a reign of anarchy and disorder'. A local man, George Woodman, recorded:

> In the afternoon the mob [estimated at 2,000] assembled again. They were a drunken rabble. . . . They knocked their [the Salvationists'] heads about with sticks, kicked them and many of them being drunk would have made short work of the Army had it not been [for] the timely aid of sympathizers. I saw a man led away with his arm broken and head cut, another with his neck bleeding and another with his head cut open. There were bleeding heads and faces in all directions. On this occasion the police and the Mayor W.H. Blatch, himself a brewer, stood by and did nothing.[14]

During the struggle, Charles Elms, a Salvationist described as 'muscular', had seized the Massagainians' Union Jack. In the course of the fight to regain the flag, Elms' arm was broken. Eventually Blatch and Superintendent Hibberd, the police chief, managed to persuade the Salvationists to return to their hall. As the Army left the square, their attackers gave three cheers for the mayor. In the evening, the Salvationists stayed in. Back out on the streets, their sympathisers, if spotted, were attacked.

Booth complained to Sir William Harcourt, the Liberal home secretary (1880–85), about the lack of protection. He argued 'that [in Basingstoke] through their processions and public meetings hundreds of men and women have been reclaimed from lives of open sin . . . of course, the trade of the Publicans and Brewers has suffered very much. They are correspondingly infuriated against us'.[15] Harcourt also received

13. Hare, email to the author, 24 July 2021.
14. George Woodman's diary, held in the Willis Museum, Basingstoke, quoted in Clarke, *The Basingstoke Riots*, p. 28.
15. The National Archives, HO 45/9607/A2886, 'Disturbances: Salvation Army Meetings and Processions at Basingstoke'.

a petition signed by the vicar of Basingstoke and 498 others asking him to ban the processions which 'desecrates our Christian Sabbath'. A rival petition signed by five Nonconformist magistrates and 613 people asked for them to be allowed. Both petitions contained the signatures of town councillors. Harcourt replied that law and order were a matter for the magistrates and he could not interfere.

Meanwhile, after 130 Salvationists and their supporters were attacked by a mob of 3,000, Blatch was forced to read the Riot Act and call in the troops, already stationed in the town. (Under the Act, if twelve or more people remained at the scene and did not withdraw, they would be liable to penal servitude for life.) Twenty mounted horsemen and 40 foot soldiers charged down the main street, surprised to find Salvationists back in their barracks and the mob good-tempered. The Massagainians went home peacefully, singing 'Rule Britannia' in triumph.

Later, after another riot, ten Massagainians were jailed for two weeks after failing to pay sureties to keep the peace. As they were marched off to the railway station on their way to Winchester prison, they again sang 'Rule Britannia' and were cheered by flag-waving crowds. On their release, the 'Massagainian Martyrs' were treated to a banquet – organised by publicans – at the Corn Exchange and each received a silver watch. Married men were given one pound and single men ten shillings to make up for lost wages. A band played, 'Hail the Conquering Heroes Come', as 521 sat down to enjoy the feast. Afterwards their supporters smashed the windows of the police station.

After the latest attacks, the magistrates and Booth agreed on a compromise. If Salvationists were allowed to hold meetings in a meadow, they would not sing on their way there. Things gradually quietened down. The publicans realised Salvationists were not such a threat to their profits after all. Indeed, during the rioting they had benefited from the influx of curious outsiders. Moreover, the authorities knew that, if they did not quell the attacks, the continual hiring of extra policemen would become costly.

For two years the small community had been divided between pro- and anti-Salvationists. If you belonged to the former, you risked being assaulted in the street, having your windows smashed and even your house broken into. Church and chapel had found themselves on opposing sides; signing different petitions. 'As for the Massagainians', comments Bob Clarke wryly, 'what fun they must have had: parading round the town, making strange noises with a multitude of unmusical

instruments, and cackling with laughter at the cacophony they were creating; carousing at the Massagainian Banquet; and listening to the satisfying sound of breaking glass.'[16]

The reading of the Riot Act in a hitherto quiet, small town had raised Basingstoke's national profile and, by the same token, that of Booth and the Salvation Army – and perhaps also provided the inspiration for the riots that followed elsewhere.

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Most of the early opposition the Army faced was spontaneous and relatively disorganised. The earliest named opposition was in Whitechapel in 1880 when a group calling themselves 'The Opposition Salvation Army' or 'The Unconverted Salvation Army' paraded the streets with banners proclaiming 'Fear Not and Be Just' and marched against the Army whenever they could. However, the Basingstoke Massagainians had been the *first* fully mobilised and persistent mob supported by members of the local elite. In 1881 they were superseded by a more durable threat: groups calling themselves the 'Skeleton Army'. It became the general term for opposition to the Salvation Army. To some observers it was no surprise the Army provoked organised opposition. The *Bristol Times & Mirror* declared: 'How far a people, who call themselves an Army, who adopt a military organization, and who go out ostensibly to fight, can complain if they are taken at their word and are fought.'[17]

16. Clarke, *The Basingstoke Riots*, p. 123.

17. 23 September 1984.