



The infamous Gordon Riots

WHEATLEY, Francis

The Riot in Broad Street, on the Seventh of June 1780. To the Gentlemen of the Light Horse Volunteers and Military Foot Association, This Memorial of their Patriotic Conduct, is Inscribed by their obliged Servants, John & Josiah Boydell.

London: John & Josiah Boydell, 1790. Engraving with etching. Sheet 470 x 625mm.

£700

The famous scene of the Gordon Riots (2nd - 9th June, 1780), engraved by James Heath after Francis Wheatley. A column of troops fills a street in Broad Street ward, as one soldier fires his musket at a crowd outside the house of a rich Irish Catholic, Mr Donovan, which is being looted. Another soldier tends to a wounded man. In 1779 Lord George Gordon became President of The Protestant Association of London and started a campaign to stop the enactment of the Papists Act of 1778, which loosened anti-Catholic restrictions. Gordon enflamed public opinion, suggesting Catholics would join the army to undermine control, at a time when Britain was fighting France and Spain in the American War of Independence. An orderly march towards Parliament descended into a riot, with attacks on the Bank of England, Newgate, Fleet and New Prisons and the chapels of both the Bavarian and Sardinian Embassies. The army were called out on the 7th June, with orders to fire upon groups of four or more who refused to disperse. This print understates their response: about 285 protestors were shot dead, another 200 wounded. About 450 were arrested, of whom close to thirty were tried and executed. Gordon himself was



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found Not Guilty of high treason. One consequence of the Riots was that Spain withdrew from secret peace talks that would have ended their military support for the American Revolution, expecting civil unrest to cause the collapse of the British government. Wheatley took a £200 commission from the great print publisher John Boydell (later a Lord Major of London) for the original painting shortly after the event. It was destroyed in a fire at James Heath's house in Lisle Street before the engraving was completed.

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