

The Polling

The third scene in the series, The Polling, takes place on the day of the election and depicts the polling booth, a rough wooden construction to which all the electors are coming to publicly cast their votes. The booth is set against the backdrop of an expertly executed landscape, the background and foreground perfectly unified, the atmosphere that of an idyllic spring day, the deep blue sky, white clouds and warm sunlight caressing the group of houses and church in the middle distance and evoking a sense of calm, peace and control that is completely at odds with the scene in the foreground at the poll and background on the bridge.

The booth is decorated with two flags, the blue Tory flag on the left and the orange Whig flag on the right. The two candidates sit on chairs on the corresponding sides of the booth, elevated slightly above the mass of men standing in front of them under the awning. Between them, the beadle or constable who should be ensuring fair play and an orderly election has fallen asleep. Neither contestant looks particularly content or confident. On the left the Tory candidate pushes back his dark grey wig and scratches his bald head in perplexity whilst looking down at a thick wedge of papers in his hands, the uppermost inscribed 'Bill': he is clearly aghast at what the election may have cost him, but his bribes appear to have been effective. Judging by the throng of supporters in plain country clothing adorned with blue rosettes who have already cast their votes and are now talking and drinking together. On

the right-hand side the Whig candidate, in his blue coat with fawn trim, sits primly upright, hands resting

upon his cane. Staring at him is a red-coated caricaturist with a bag-wig¹⁷ who has produced an unflattering sketch of him to the great mirth of two rough looking men. Few in the booth wear the Whigs' orange colours and the candidate is peering out towards the distant bridge leading into town which appears to be thronged with people on foot, on horseback and in carriages, travelling in both directions, waving both blue and orange flags. Many are brandishing sticks, it is a scene of violence and chaos, one horse's legs rearing over the bridge's balustrade. The Whig candidate is surely hoping that some of them are coming to cast their vote for him and wondering at the delay; perhaps more electoral shenanigans are at play and the passage into town has been barred to prevent electors from voting. The scene probably refers to an incident that took place on Magdalen Bridge in Oxford during the 1754 election when a Tory mob engulfed a carriage belonging to a Whig and threatened to overturn it. A Captain Turton broke the stalemate by shooting a Tory chimneysweep dead after which the crowd

broke up.¹⁸

In front of the polling booth there is a queue of electors arriving to vote who are evidently in no fit state to exercise their judgement, or are arguably ineligible, neither circumstance apparently a concern to the equally duplicitous party agents. On the right of the canvas is a

smartly dressed ex-soldier in black waistcoat and breeches and a long red coat, a sword at his waist and a tricorn hat adorned with the Whig colours wedged under his armpit. He has lost both arms and one leg fighting for his country and is taking the oath that he is eligible to vote, but with no right hand to lay on the bible and only a hook in place of his left, there is doubt as to the legitimacy of his oath.

Behind the soldier a lively exchange is taking place between two lawyers, presumably representing each of the parties, seeking to promote or defend every remotely viable vote. One, slender and bony-featured, points in anger at the soldier's hook, apparently deeming it insufficient for swearing his oath. The other, fat and garrulous, throws his hands wide in a gesture of repudiation. Ironically, the soldier is, of all the queuing electors, most fit to choose between Whig and Tory. Behind him a man who has lost his reason and doesn't know who he is voting for is nonetheless carried on a chair to the poll by a man whose legs are shackled, presumably a prisoner on parole. The criminal wears a long drab coat and the Tories' blue colours in his hat and is whispering the words of the oath to the simpleton in order for his vote to be registered by the Tory recorder in his grey coat who leans out of the booth to better capture his words. Between the fool's feet and the booth is an orange rosette, just visible in the shadows indicating that the voter's preference, had he been allowed to, or capable of indulging it, would have been for the Whig party.

Another Whig, wearing an orange rosette, is also carried to the poll, this time by Whig supporters but the grey blue tinge to his face suggests that if he is not already dead, he is

certainly dying and in no fit state to vote. The dying man is followed by a blind one, one hand on the shoulder of a young boy who is guiding him, the other holds a stick to help him feel his way, his eyes are clouded, possibly by cataracts. Like the fool who was deceived into voting for the wrong party the blind man, proudly wearing the blue Tory colours on his hat has had those on his coat obscured by the orange of the Whigs and by inference he too cannot direct his vote as he would wish due to his disability. At the rear of the queue is a disabled Tory struggling to climb the stairs. The tips of four staves just visible in the right-hand bottom corner of the painting suggest a physical barrier of thugs ready to prevent too many voters of the ‘wrong’ party – whichever that may be – from reaching the poll.

To the left of the polling booth is an elaborate coach, carrying Britannia clinging to a strap and clutching at the door as evidenced by her flowing draperies and the Union flag painted inside a cartouche on the coach door, the coach clearly symbolising the nation. It has utterly broken down, its axle snapped cleanly in two, the white Hanoverian horses denoting the monarchy rearing and plunging to no avail. The two coachmen, symbolic of the nation’s parliamentary leaders, are oblivious to the plight of the coach and its passenger, being fully preoccupied with a game of cards at which one is clearly cheating, hiding the three of clubs behind the other’s back. They are incapable of repairing the coach or leading it to safety. The political state is revealed as flawed, broken, corrupt and arguably

beyond repair both physically at the poll and allegorically in the guise of Britannia's carriage.

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