

Chairing the Member

The Humours of an Election IV: Chairing the Member, refers to the practice, familiar in the eighteenth century, of the two successful candidates processing around the town carried on elaborate chairs by their supporters, usually part of a day of feasting and celebration but often an occasion for mob violence or protest if the winning candidates were considered unpopular or corrupt. Hogarth depicts the chairing of the new Tory Members of Parliament for his imaginary 'Guzzledown' as a scene of chaos, catastrophe and discord, using mock heroic allusions, not least to Charles Le Brun's (1619-90) *The Battle*

of Arbela¹⁸ to exaggerate the complete absence of control or discipline in the scene.

The setting is the main street of a small market town which bridges a large stream and is almost enclosed by three buildings. Each building alludes to one of the three pillars of the state, and each is revealed to be corrupted or weakened in some way. On the right is a church made of solid brick, its arched window covered with wooden louvres and a sundial with the date '1755' affixed to its wall representing morality and convention. However the graveyard's consecrated ground has been desecrated by two cheeky children, who have scavenged a skull-and-crossbones and perched it on the gate-pier in front of the church to display it to the procession below. Secondary literature describes

them variously as black chimney sweeps,¹⁹ or chimney sweeps.²⁰ Their occupation is significant. The sweeps recall the fatal shooting of a chimney sweep, Joseph Holloway, by a Captain Turton, during the

1754 Oxfordshire election. Turton, after a seven-hour trial, was found not guilty in just seven minutes.²¹ Hogarth's depiction of the sweeps is a typical example of his work highlighting the injustice often endemic in eighteenth-century society. In the central background is the town hall or civic centre, with its neat modern sash windows, plain and unimposing, reflective of local administration and government. To the left is a red-brick building still being constructed to the rear and which is stylistically incoherent, the good solid red-brick of the Augustan era supporting both a classical Serlian window and Chinoiserie fretwork overdoor. This edifice houses a group of Whigs on the first floor and on the second someone writing at a desk in front of laden bookshelves, perhaps a lawyer or clerk as the associated print labels it an 'Indintur[e]' [sic]. The building is incomplete and seems uncertain as to the form it should take, not unlike the ever-changing party-political allegiances and burgeoning commercial and industrial interests of its inhabitants.

In the foreground one of the two successful Tory candidates is shown as he is starting to topple from a carved and padded chair which is being carried shoulder high by four Tory supporters, the characters

around him creating a complex vignette of interlinked mishaps.²² In front of the procession two men are fighting. A sailor with a peg-leg wearing Whig colours, blue coat and wide trousers is brandishing a club at a white-shirted country labourer, stereotypically Irish according to his curly ginger hair, presumably supporting the Country or Tory interests, who in turn has swung his threshing tool behind his head ready to attack the sailor and accidentally caught one of the chairmen on the temple. The chairman stumbles, causing the candidate's downfall. A goose flies over the candidate's head, mocking him: by comparison Lebrun's *The Battle of Arbela*, depicted an eagle flying above the head of a victorious Alexander the Great but this MP is no Alexander. Lebrun's *The Battle at the Milvian Bridge* (1666) is also recalled, but unlike the Milvian Bridge spanning the Tiber in Rome, the candidate's bridge spans a slurry-filled stream. The skill with which Hogarth depicts yet another still life – the red, white and blue flowers beneath the bridge, only serves to highlight the comparative unsightliness of the gloomy arch beneath the bridge and murky water. As the candidate tumbles, his wife, finely dressed in peach and lace, watching the procession from the elevated position behind the church wall, 'faints away' and needs to be supported by her Black maidservant whilst her old nursemaid attempts to revive

her by holding a phial of hartshorn under her nose.²³ Between the brawling labourer and the toppling chair, a sow and her piglets are charging towards the stream and have knocked a countrywoman over, her feet just visible

flailing over the sows back. This is a reference to the miracle of the Gadarene Swine - when Jesus cast the demons that had possessed a madman into the bodies of pigs which as a result ran down a steep cliff into the sea - is pointed and indicates the mindless flight to danger and destruction implicit in the state of the rotten and venal British political system.

Not only is the candidate falling but the procession has been halted by an ass belonging to a butcher carrying a load of offal, stopping to eat a thistle and blocking its way. The butcher's long stringy red

hair suggests he is a Scotsman.²⁴ A tame, muzzled dancing bear belonging to the sailor also stops, attracted by the offal. The bear and the monkey sitting on its shoulder are presumably an act with which the sailor makes his livelihood, the blue colours on the monkey's hat suggesting the show ridicules the Tory interest. Incensed, one of the Tory chimney sweeps sitting on the church wall urinates onto the monkey, the monkey rolling his eyes and chattering as the stream of urine hits his back. The whole group is symbolically 'led' by a blind fiddler with a long grey beard and ragged clothing who is blithely skipping away oblivious to the chaos and disorder behind him.

On the left-hand side of the painting is a brawny soldier, stripped to the waist, shirt over his arm, red coat lying next to a fence-post and a broken backsword behind him. He has a Whig cockade in his hat and his head is wrapped in a

bandage through which blood shows. His broken broadsword suggests he

has been fighting in the Whig and has stopped to roll some tobacco from a paper marked '...ton^s Best'. We see only the backs of both the soldier and the embattled sailor standing in the stream, which could imply the Government's lack of concern for the wellbeing of its military forces during a period of

significant warfare in Europe.²⁵ The soldier leans against a milestone inscribed 'X ... MILES / FROM / LONDON', a reference to unpopular turnpike legislation which insisted upon accurately marked milestones but could also levy tolls. In this context it probably suggests that no-one can reach the

Whig politicians without paying to secure access to them, the bruiser doubling as a gate-keeper.²⁶ The Whigs have congregated in the incomplete building on the left side of the painting and are feasting rather than commiserating with each other over their loss. Three servants or cooks carry food towards the building on platters with covers reminiscent of a Chinese hat and the chinoiserie overdoor decoration. Through the first-floor windows can be seen a bewigged man wearing the Garter ribbon,

presumably the Duke of Newcastle the Whig Prime Minister,²⁷ addressing a supporter. Another Whig places a comforting hand on the losing candidate's shoulder. Three more Whigs peer gleefully through the window at the

Tory's misfortune. In Oxfordshire in 1754 the Tories won the election but the poll was so close that the returning officer sent all four candidates to parliament, a 'double return'. Parliament had to adjudicate as to the legality of some of the votes cast in Oxfordshire and in April 1755 - the same year shown on the sundial on the church and during which the painting was completed - the Whig-dominated House of Commons declared the Whigs the legal winners. The inscription on the sundial 'PULVIS ET UMBRA SUMUS', 'we are but dust and shadows', is before the eyes of the candidate for Guzzledown as he begins to fall from his chair. He is reminded that his life and his triumph is fleeting,

as indeed was the Tories' success in Oxfordshire.²⁸

In the background the second candidate's shadow is cast on the wall of the town hall: he is quite literally, we can infer, a shady character. Between the two candidates is a crowd who have theoretically come to celebrate the Tory victory: on the left is an empty beer barrel into which a reveller has crawled to drink the dregs, whilst a second full barrel is manhandled towards the procession by two stout workmen. Most of the crowd are wearing Tory colours but they are also carrying clubs and meat-cleavers, perhaps anticipating violence from the Whigs or intending to inflict it: a motley crew. The only person sporting Whig colours, a woman, is attacking a Tory man with a club while he turns away from her to protect himself. It is rare for Hogarth to depict the 'crowd as a mass or a mob, generalised into

patches of colour or linear approximations,'²⁹ his crowds are usually groups of individuals, finely articulated, performing specific actions. That all the scenes in *The Humours of an Election* show a rioting mass is surely significant, though whether Hogarth is commenting on the mass disaffection of the un-enfranchised population or the futility of the masses' attempts to raise their voices or seek reform in a corrupt, venal and unprincipled electoral system is open to interpretation. Notwithstanding their subject matter Hogarth dedicated the engraved prints of the series to governing politicians such as Henry Fox, so perhaps he was himself conflicted about the nature of the relationship between the

government and the people of Britain.³⁰

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