What is the opposite of Peace?

Of all the many words written on the statue of Sturge, the most important, by far, is the word ‘Peace’. But, in order to understand why this word is key, we need to understand what it opposes. What Peace opposes.

The word ‘Peace’ is one of three inscribed in the stone at the base of the statue of Sturge. The other two words are ‘Temperance’ and ‘Charity’. Unveiled in June 1862, chiselled into the stone by the sculptor himself, these three words constitute the artist’s own plaque, his own explanatory statement, about his statue. This nineteenth-century plaque is supported by supplementary sculptures, also by the artist, to help us understand to what each word is referring.

Beneath the word ‘Charity’ is a woman racialised as white, holding in one arm and feeding from her other hand, two children racialised as black. Beneath the word ‘Temperance’, another name for teetotalism, is a basin for a fountain of water. And beneath the word ‘Peace’ is a second woman racialised as white, this time, holding a dove in one hand, an olive branch in her other hand, and with a lamb lying at her feet.

The origin of this three word summing up of Joseph Sturge appears to have been a line in what might possibly be the last letter that this prolific letter-writer ever wrote. The month before his death, Sturge said that ‘the Temperance, Anti-slavery, and Peace cause I feel to have a paramount claim upon me, especially the two latter’. There are two things to note about this deathbed self-description. First, although Sturge did mention ‘Temperance’, he put his emphasis instead upon the other two words. The Birmingham Journal—when, in November 1860, it criticised an exhibition of the two submitted designs for the memorial, one from John Thomas, the other from Peter Hollis—emphasised this, too. Whereas, it noted, Hollis had proposed to accompany the statue of Sturge with two ‘female figures emblematical of Peace and Temperance’, Thomas, by contrast, had relegated ‘Temperance’ to the basins, freeing him up to focus his two female figures on what the newspaper described as ‘the leading characteristics of Mr. Sturge’.
The second thing to note about what Sturge said on his deathbed is that, from Sturge’s own perspective, his ‘leading characteristics’ were ‘Anti-Slavery and Peace’. The word ‘Charity’ is what John Thomas has rather presumptuously chosen to replace the word Sturge actually used: ‘Anti-Slavery’. Sculptors are not reliable historians.

In summary, then, given that the word ‘Temperance’ is less important, and the word ‘Charity’ is spurious, the most significant word on the statue of Sturge is the single word ‘Peace’. Indeed, although only Thomas’s design included the virtue of Anti-Slavery, the one constant across the designs submitted by each of the two competing sculptors was ‘Peace’. How, therefore, are we to understand the meaning of the word ‘Peace’ on that statue? To what does ‘Peace’, in the statue of Sturge, refer?

Unfortunately, these are not questions that subsequent plaque-writers, with their many additional words, have attempted to answer with any accuracy or attention to detail. On the contrary, in the following two centuries, Birmingham City Council, in June 1925, and the Birmingham Civic Society, in March 2007, added, respectively, a twentieth-century and a twenty-first century plaque, both of which carelessly perpetuate the error of John Thomas’s three word summing up, failing to focus, with clarity, on the meaning of ‘Peace’.

For example, the twentieth-century plaque—a bronze plate affixed to the front of the base of the statue of Sturge—structures its interpretation into a single sentence, containing three corresponding phrases, as follows: ‘He laboured / to bring freedom / to the negro slave / the vote to British / workmen and the / promise of peace to / a war-worn world’. Observe the way ‘Peace’ is positioned in this plaque: it is in relation to the concept of war. A concept forcibly introduced into the memorial. It wasn’t there before. In fact, the description of the world being ‘war-worn’ seems less appropriate to the belligerent war-mongering Victorians who put the statue up, than it does to the World War One veterans who put this plaque up.

For its part, the twenty-first century plaque—a colourful, yet faded, plastic panel, raised at knee height on a wedge of stone, full of illustrations: photos, paintings and documents, all from the archives—structures its interpretation into three corresponding paragraphs, bearing the following three titles: ‘The Anti-Slavery Struggle’, ‘Political and Social Reform’, and ‘The Quest for Peace’. In the paragraphs themselves, we are told, respectively, that ‘he led a campaign which, in connection with events in the [West Indian] islands, finally resulted in full freedom in 1838’, that ‘he also played an important role in the campaign to extend the vote to all working men’, and, finally, that
'in 1854, he lead [sic] a Quaker delegation for an audience with the Tsar of Russia in an effort to avert the Crimean War.'

Observe, yet again, the way ‘Peace’ is positioned in this plaque. The plaque positions ‘Peace’ as an outlier. On the one hand, the plaque narrowly focuses our attention upon the 1830s. For that is the decade of Sturge’s personal campaign against British Slavery, between 1831 and 1838, and that is the decade of Sturge’s participation in the national campaign to extend the vote, between the day he joined the Birmingham Political Union in 1831 and when he set up his own doomed-to-fail Complete Suffrage Union in 1842. Yet, on the other hand, when it comes to ‘Peace’, the plaque attempts to throw our attention some twenty years forward, into the future, in the mid-1850s.

In doing so, the plaque invites us to give Sturge marks for effort, rather than marks for achievement. Just like the twentieth-century plaque, which tells us that ‘he laboured’, but not that ‘he succeeded’, the twenty-first century plaque attempts to put a failed diplomatic trip—widely condemned at the time as unpatriotic, economically self-serving, and ridiculously foolhardy—on a par with the achievement, acknowledged as such at the time, that was abolition. The plaque preposterously suggests that a Sleigh Ride to Russia in the 1850s and the Abolition of Apprenticeship in the 1830s were events of the same magnitude. The Crimean War is not merely an outlier, here, it’s totally irrelevant. Because, with all due respect to the people who wrote these plaques, this statue isn’t about everything-that-Joseph-Sturge-ever-did-in-his-whole-life; this statue is about a very particular point in Sturge’s activist career, namely that window of time, 1835 to 1839, that I have, in an earlier podcast, called the Gap in official British memory of Anti-Slavery.

Let’s take a step back. ‘Caption This’ is a fun game and is essentially the game we play when we deal, when we traffic, in plaques. Write a caption under, or slap a plaque on top of, any visual representation, and you can spin it in whichever direction you choose. Yet, if we are to understand exactly why this statue exists, why it is here, what is dispositive is not the perspective of any fly-by-night plaque-writer, not even the perspective of the sculptor, to the extent that the sculptor is also a writer of plaques, but rather the perspective of the commissioner. As Aris’ Birmingham Gazette put it, in a scathing criticism of the choice of design: ‘it is no light thing to erect on a fine site a monument which will probably stand for ages, and evidence to future inhabitants of Birmingham the taste of their forefathers in 1860’. So what were the tastes, the perspectives, and the purposes of the Birmingham forefathers who commissioned this statue?
Earlier in that very same week, in August 1859, in which Charles Buxton first approached the Drinking Fountain Association to initiate discussions on a new memorial to Thomas Fowell Buxton in Parliament Square, the Sturge Memorial Committee agreed unanimously to a new memorial to Joseph Sturge at Birmingham’s Five Ways. The argument that swayed the committee was made in a speech, seconding the proposal to erect such a memorial, a speech delivered by the Birmingham Reverend John Angell James. Sturge’s family friend and official biographer, Henry Richard, describes it as ‘a speech so beautiful that we cannot forbear citing it’. According to James,

A statue would be emblematic of the wisdom that cometh from Heaven, that uttered her voice in the streets, and crieth in the places of chief concourse, and speaketh of piety, temperance, and philanthropy. It would be a kind of open air preacher, which would not fear the envy nor jealousy of publicans, nor summonses from the police, nor the condemnations of the magistrates.

The statue was intended as a testimony to Sturge’s belief in the vital importance of the public meeting, of the street-side teach-in, and of people’s right to protest. As Sturge himself once said, in November 1839, ‘Some might be disposed to blame him for promoting meetings such as the present at this time; but he so far differed from them that he firmly believed the public and constitutional expression of popular opinion at the present eventful period was their greatest—he had almost said their only—safety’. For ‘it was only by such 8 meetings as these [Sturge insisted] that they could hope for safety’. Indeed, Betty Fladeland reports that

in 1842, when the London labour-leader Francis Place warned Sturge that his planned suffrage conference would be in violation of the law curtailing public political meetings, Sturge’s reply was that they must take the risk rather than be bound by such an obnoxious law. He went ahead with the conference.

And to his credit, the sculptor, John Thomas, followed this intention for the statue: as the Daily News put it ‘The left hand [of the statue] is stretched forth as though Mr. Sturge was in the act of addressing an assembly’. However, we get few other clues, from Thomas, as to the historical context for Sturge as an ‘open air preacher’ or as a ‘voice in the streets’. That context was provided by James, in his references to ‘publicans’, ‘magistrates’, and ‘police’. Clearly, the reference to Sturge’s ‘not fear[ing the] jealousy of publicans’, is less a historical reference to any time Sturge stood outside a pub telling people not to go in, than a practical reference to the statue’s standing on top of an outdoor fountain, seemingly inviting people to drink, instead of alcohol, water. By
contrast, while a drinking fountain might well itself push back against publicans, it is history, not sculpture, that shows how Sturge pushed back against magistrates and against police. Critical reflection on the history of the Gap in official British memory of Anti-Slavery shows Sturge saw that Robert Peel’s Police weren’t there to keep the peace. On the contrary, in the late 1830s, Peel’s Police were there to oppress the White poor and the Black Apprentices. It is Sturge’s opposition to these two types of police oppression that the statue of Sturge was intended to commemorate.

Now, before we discuss the history of Sturge’s opposition to the police, we need to make precise its contours: Sturge saw this from, and sympathised with, the perspective of that part of the population who greets any criticism of the police, let alone a suggestion that the police should be abolished, with horror. First of all, Sturge reassured us that, ‘When he spoke of the Police, [...] he disclaimed meaning anything personally offensive towards them’. Sturge said ‘He did not mean to reflect upon the men—but it was the system’. Second, Sturge reassured us that

He knew there were so many alarmed at the present state of things that they were ready to give up a portion of their liberty for the sake of what they called security; but that security, [Sturge] recollected, was to be procured by the introduction of an armed police, and the adoption of measures which alienated the feelings of the great mass of the working classes. They might suppress the expression of public opinion for a time, but they must be conscious that, without doing justice to the people, they were treading on a smothered volcano.

By ‘Doing full justice to the people, [Sturge insisted] they would find far greater security than in the most powerful armed police’. ‘No Justice, No Peace’, Sturge, had he had today’s language, would likely have said.

And ‘[I]f he was a Peace man,’ Sturge’s family friend and official biographer authoritatively wrote, it was because ‘[d]uring those stormy political times in Birmingham [...], he often went right into the heart of excited crowds, on the very eve of riot, and sometimes by his calm and friendly counsels succeeded in doing what the authority of the law and the terrors of the police failed to accomplish’. On one famous such occasion, on 11 November 1839, Sturge had tried to break up a fight in Kings Norton. In the process, he got roughed up and his pocket watch was stolen. On 24 November, Sturge received a letter from the Superintendent of Police, saying they had recovered the watch and instructing Sturge that ‘[y]our attendance at the Public Office to-morrow morning, at eleven
o’clock, will be required to identify the property’. However, the very next day, on 25 November, Sturge sent back a curt reply resisting this ‘summons[...] from the police’:

Joseph Sturge is obliged to John Shaw, for sending him the information that a young man is in custody, taken with a watch, supposed to belong to him; but as Joseph Sturge cannot conscientiously accept the aid of the government police for the protection of his person or property, he does not feel at liberty to attend the office to identify the watch.

In front of a public meeting, later that day, Sturge declared that, ‘[f]or himself, he would far rather be sent a penniless exile from his country, than a single human life should be lost in defending either his property or person’. Sturge repeated that ‘[h]e would rather be sent out of the country a poor man, than that any policeman should kill another in defending his property’.

And it was such violence that Sturge knew, from experience, to be the practice of the police. Reporting on events in Birmingham in July 1839, Sturge lamented that

[t]he conduct of the London police[...] whilst they were in Birmingham, would seem to have been the very reverse of what it ought to have been[...] It was their practice, [...] to assail men with blows, who might easily have been apprehended; the innocent suffered only for belonging to the same class as the guilty; and the misdeeds of one man yesterday, were remembered in chastising another to-day.

Sturge went on to describe how, even after the end of a so-called ‘riot’, which the police themselves had provoked, they continued to act provocatively: ‘decent orderly mechanics, whilst walking along the streets on their lawful business, were rudely ordered ‘to move on’; some were violently pushed forward, or received blows to quicken their pace; others were knocked down; and not a few were severely beaten whilst on the ground: even that more especial sanctuary of an Englishman, his own fireside, no longer afforded security; outer doors were forced, and houses entered, without any lawful authority: and all this, it should be borne in mind, long after the riot had been suppressed, and when the Town was in a state of perfect peace and order, if we except, of course, [said Sturge] the violence of the police [...].

So much for Reverend James’s reference to the ‘summonses of the police’; as for James’s mention of the ‘condemnations of the magistrates’, that could refer to one of two historical run-ins that
Sturge had with magistrates. It could relate to his resistance against the town magistrates in Birmingham or to his resistance against the special magistrates in Jamaica. Let’s take each in turn.

It was the Birmingham Magistrates who invited the London Police to Birmingham’s Bull Ring. In their letter of 4 July 1839, they gave their instructions to their invited guests as follows: ‘The object the Magistrates have in view in calling in your aid, is to suppress certain meetings held in the Bull-ring’. According to these instructions, the Metropolitan Police were ‘firmly and decidedly, to disperse the crowd’ and, ‘should the meeting be addressed by one or more persons’, ‘to arrest the speakers’. Indeed, according to Sturge, who reported on these events, two town magistrates, namely ‘the Mayor and Dr. Booth, both […] pointed to the man who was speaking, and ordered him to be seized’.

Describing these ‘nightly meetings in the Bull-ring’, Sturge tells us that ‘[t]hese meetings opened about eight o’clock at night, and were conducted with but little formality; no Chairman was appointed; no resolutions were proposed; and the time was spent partly in reading newspaper extracts, and partly in observations on the passing events of the day’. These were teach-ins and the so-called speakers were teachers. What do you call a society that props up statues but topples teachers? Certainly, these teachers aimed to teach folks who wanted to listen and learn, but they also aimed to teach folks who didn’t want to listen and who didn’t want to learn. And, rather like the 2021 Police, Crime, Sentencing and Court Bill, which aims to criminalise some forms of public protest as ‘public nuisance, the Mayor of Birmingham dismissed these street-side teach-ins as ‘inconvenient assemblies’. Inconvenient to whom? A nuisance to whom? Those who complained about the teach-ins said they blocked roads, scared onlookers, and kept folks awake; but perhaps what was most inconvenient, as Chloe Taylor observes, was that they reduced profits for local shopkeepers.

On the morning of Saturday 6 July 1839, 500 placards went up all around the town of Birmingham. Each placard proclaimed that ‘a wanton, flagrant, and unjust outrage has been made upon the people of Birmingham, by a bloodthirsty and unconstitutional force from London’ and ‘that the people of Birmingham are the best judges of their own right to meet in the Bull Ring or elsewhere’. Sturge fundamentally agreed with the authors of this placard. Sturge took the side of the working man (and it was men) not simply because he believed all men are entitled to vote, but more specifically because he witnessed disenfranchised working class people protesting, holding teach-ins—political educational protest—about their campaign for the vote, and getting violently suppressed for such protest by the British state, acting through the Metropolitan Police. If Sturge
was a street preacher, he was out there teaching and inciting working-class people to protest: to protest the police.

Turn, now, to the special magistrates in Jamaica. According to his biographer, Alex Tyrrell, Joseph Sturge’s domestic anti-police campaign ‘was a direct transference of his anti-slavery experience of pressure group politics and [...] it was influenced by what he had seen his missionary friends in Jamaica doing for rights of the black population’. Tyrrell is partly correct, but it is clear that Sturge learned his anti-police activism less from the White missionaries than from the Black Apprentices. In fact, Sturge learned his anti-police activism from young people, children, racialised as black protesting against police regulations and vagrancy laws in Jamaica. What if we were all as visionary as these Jamaican children?

From mid-April to mid-August 1837, one teenage British Negro Apprentice got the trip of a lifetime. Journeying from Jamaica, via New York, and touring Britain, he got the opportunity to tell his story of what had happened, to him, to his family, to his friends and, crucially, to his co-workers, especially those workers who were gendered as women, during the faux ‘post’- slavery period that it pleased the British State to call ‘Apprenticeshi’. His name was James Williams. Joseph Sturge had made Williams’s acquaintance and purchased Williams’s freedom, during his anti-apprenticeship fact-finding mission, in Jamaica, between January and April 1837. According to the Governor of Jamaica, Sir Lionel Smith, British Negro Apprentices saw Sturge as ‘a great ‘Buckra’ [meaning, white man] come to terminate their Apprenticeship’. According to William Lloyd, who accompanied Sturge to Jamaica, British Negro Apprentices ‘were so delighted with JOSEPH STURGE, as to wish to retain something to remind them of him; for this purpose they fixed upon his ‘broad brim’; and resolved to wear exactly the same pattern, under the title of the Sturge Hat’. This was, notes Alex Tyrrell, ‘a gesture that must have been seen as defiance of their masters.’

It was with such ‘violent, disaffected people of Color’, according to Lionel Smith, that Sturge in Jamaica, spent his time. Smith criticised Sturge for taking the side of what he called ‘Partizan Magistrates’. Now, the people employed by the British State to execute the policy of Apprenticeship were so-called ‘special stipendiary magistrates’. And it was with the aid of a whistle-blowing special magistrate, Dr Archibald Leighton Palmer, who acted as amanuensis, that Sturge helped Williams tell his story to mainland Britain. This brought upon Sturge the ‘condemnations of the magistrates’ who were unwilling similarly to break rank and expose the fraud that was British Negro Apprenticeship. In this way, James Williams’s story of British
misogynoir, and of Black women resisting British police, caused a scandal and forced ‘Full Free’. That’s how we got free.

Notice that none of this history is taught to us by John Thomas’s statue. The statue simplifies, indeed sanitises, Sturge—and also the Black Apprentices Sturge not only represented, but collaborated with, and, crucially, learned from. Monuments misrepresent. Not merely because they are made long after the death of the person immortalised in stone and crucially with little to no reference to the perspective of the person immortalised. But also because the sculptor fails to live up to, or, perhaps even to understand, the aims and objectives of the commissioner. John Thomas chose to depict us as belittling infants, whereas the truth was that Joseph Sturge collaborated with a self-confident teenager. John Thomas clothed Sturge in a traditional Quaker lapel-less coat, but, in doing so, failed to place upon Sturge’s head his radical broad-brimmed hat. And John Thomas uses White Women as Fig Leaves to hide a White Man who is more radical than the British State can handle. Indeed, in doing so, he erases the Black Women, eerily absent as mothers of these children, from whose resistance to police Joseph Sturge learned his anti-police lessons. In the parliamentary debate to mark Black History Month 2020, Kemi Badenoch MP, told the House of Commons that

[t]oo often, those who campaign against racial inequality import wholesale a narrative and assumptions that have nothing to do with this country’s history and have no place on these islands. Our police force is not their police force. Since its establishment by Robert Peel, our police force has operated on the principle of policing by consent.

Yet, with all due respect to Badenoch, Peel’s Police, right from the moment it was first established, was not consented to, by the British public. What the Minister for Inequality forgot to say was that, since its establishment by Robert Peel, the British Police have done policing not by consent, but by counter-insurgency, and that, since its establishment by Robert Peel, the British police has been resisted by British anti-police activists, insurgents, both on the plantations of British Jamaica and here, at home, in Birmingham’s Bull Ring, in Britain.

We are led, by the plaques, to believe that, for the statue of Sturge, the opposite of ‘Peace’ is War. And we are misled. Let’s focus in on that word Badenoch repeated so often to describe the police. The police is a ‘force’. War is a people’s use of force against outsiders and, as the ‘policing research pioneer’, David Bayley, argues, ‘[p]olicing represents a people’s use of force against itself, and this is somehow more shameful and embarrassing than using force against outsiders’. Perhaps it is this
shame, or this embarrassment, that made the plaque-writers omit any mention whatsoever of ‘Police’. The police are, by definition, ‘executive agents of force’ and ‘the use of physical force,’ Bayley tells us, ‘is the key distinguishing feature of the police’. As Sturge, in his own words, put it, ‘the establishment of an armed body of Police ha[s] tendency to destroy life’. Force is not Peace. From the perspective of this statue, Britain’s #BLM Statue, the opposite of Peace is not War; the opposite of Peace is Police.