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Last week I introduced you to Dr Katterfelto, Prussian philosopher, travelling scientist, magician, illusionist and showman, who trundled his circus of wizardry up and down the roads of England and Scotland in the late 18th Century.

Had Dr Katterfelto entered some Georgian equivalent of Britain's Got Talent he might have gone far. His knack for self-publicity and gimmickry - hot-air balloons, indoor fireworks, telescopes, optical illusions, levitating cats, automata, solar microscopes - made his shows unique.

In most of the places he visited Katterfelto stayed for just a few days, calculating when his box tricks would have satisfied all the local curiosity. Only in the largest towns did he tarry longer, a month in Manchester and almost two months in Liverpool. Yet when the showman arrived in Birmingham in early April 1792 it was for a stay of one whole year.

Birmingham was not the only venue in the West Midlands at which Dr Katterfelto performed; he entertained the folk of Wolverhampton, Willenhall, Bilston, Walsall, Dudley and Stourbridge too. But Katterfelto's exotic mix of natural science, chemistry and engineering captured the imagination of the Birmingham public like no other, and he took up semi-permanent residence at the Shakespeare Rooms at 32 New Street.

Suitably installed at the Shakespeare Rooms, Katterfelto showed that he was just as adept at money-making as he was at demonstrating science. He displayed the amazing properties of phosphorous, and then sold the stuff to the audience to light up their own homes. He sold them patent medicines as well, and when his "famous black cat" had kittens, he held a benefit night for them.

But behind all the fun, there was a serious scientific message to Katterfelto's work. As he declared in Swinney's Chronicle:

He acts by demonstrative rules,
From learnings's most authentic schools;
From rules original and certain,
Sanctioned by Ferguson and Martin;
By Priestley and the sons of knowledge
In every learned British college...

In normal circumstances Katterfelto's espousal of science would not have been an issue, but these were not normal circumstances. Over in France the French Revolution was raging, and Britain was on the verge of war. Joseph Priestley himself had been hounded out of Birmingham by an angry mob in July 1791 and his laboratory and library destroyed.

What was the connection? Well, modern science declared itself to be founded on reason; the French revolutionaries too said that their new constitution was based on human reason, and no longer on a monarch who ruled by divine right. Therefore - in

the eyes of some - democracy, revolution and scientific enquiry were all part of the same set of beliefs. And they had no business being in England.

Dr Katterfelto, therefore, was treading a fine line, particularly as a foreigner at a time when the English were going off foreigners. Too much banging on about Priestley and he could be facing the same backlash.

Which is exactly what happened. On the night of April 23 1792 - always a sensitive day in the calendar - a mob broke into the Prussian doctor's lecture room in New Street, threatened him and his wife, and trashed much of Katterfelto's "philosophical apparatus".

Katterfelto's first instinct must have been to follow in Priestley's footsteps and get the hell out of Birmingham fast. His second was to face down his persecutors. He announced in the Chronicle that he would publish the names of the "rioters and ruffians", who had invaded his lecture, identifying them as "well known for earlier riots in the town". No doubt that included the Priestley Riots. And he dashed off the poem, quoted above, which reaffirmed his affiliation to natural science.

Then there were third thoughts. We cannot say what triggered them. Perhaps there was a quiet word in his ear, or threats of further violence. On reflection, then, Katterfelto would not name his assailants after all, and perhaps he would slant his message a little. By the end of May, Dr Katterfelto was no longer proclaiming himself a radical philosopher of science, but a card-carrying loyalist. The British Constitution, he announced, was superior to any new-fangled version on the Continent.

To the newly reformed doctor, Birmingham's Priestleyite radicals acted 'as if there was no God in Heaven, and most of them must be such that can neither write, nor have any belief in the Bible or in Parliament.' It was as astonishing a transformation as any Katterfelto performed on stage.

And once the Prussians came in on Britain's side in the war against France, Katterfelto's position was secure. The Birmingham mob quite liked a foreigner who said how marvellous their king and country were.

And so the great Dr Katterfelto left Birmingham in April 1793, not in a hearse or a hurry, but in triumph. Next stop was Shrewsbury, then Oswestry and Ellesmere, and so the tour continued