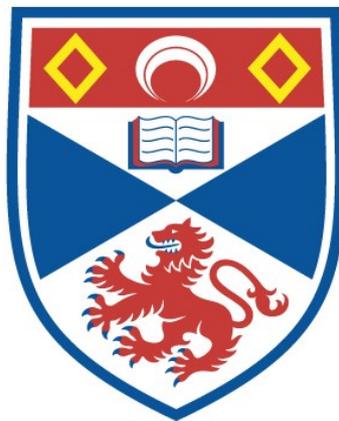


RADICAL IDEAS OF POLITICAL PRACTICE IN 1780s AND 1790s BRITAIN

Amy Westwell

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews



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Radical Ideas of Political Practice in 1780s and 1790s Britain

Amy Westwell



University of
St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

at the University of St Andrews

August 2020

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Abstract

This thesis examines ideas about political tactics in 1780s and 1790s Britain. Edmund Burke characterised radicals in the aftermath of the French Revolution as speculative thinkers with no understanding of political action. This rhetorical strategy obscured the ideas of reformers who were frustrated with the rationalist bent of their movement and who, inspired by Scottish philosophy and events in Ireland, tried to work out what was to be done.

James Mackintosh and Samuel Parr responded to Burke by arguing that theory could apply to practice, while David Williams outlined how political theory could direct reformers to the means to harness the general will and enact it through the sovereign. Interest in arming the people led David Steuart Erskine, Robert Watson, and John Cartwright to invoke the ideas of Andrew Fletcher. This interest in a militia was not purely theoretical; in Ireland from 1778 the Volunteers used a combination of arms and sumptuary rules to win legislative and trading rights. Francis Dobbs, Joseph Pollock and Henry Flood examined this movement to learn about political tactics. Lord George Gordon advocated for Francis Dobbs in the House of Commons and was imprisoned for his attempts to derail the Anglo-French Commercial Treaty, an issue that once again brought together Irish politics and discussions of commerce and luxury. In the 1790s, United Irishmen linked their understanding of the anti-luxury practice of the Volunteers with knowledge of the constitution they had learned from John Millar at Glasgow University. Meanwhile, Lord Buchan was using an unlikely tactic, the practice of history, to stir the Scots to pay attention to their Buchananite heritage. The tactical thought of British radicals in the 1790s was rarely concerned with discussions of the rights of man, but instead referred to ideas of arms, kings, commerce, and history.

Radical Ideas of Political Practice in 1780s and 1790s Britain

Amy Westwell

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Abbreviations

AUL	Aberdeen University Special Collections
BL	British Library
EUL	Edinburgh University Special Collections
GUL	Glasgow University Special Collections
NA	National Archives, Kew
NAS	National Archives of Scotland
NLI	National Library of Ireland
NLS	National Library of Scotland
NMS	National Museums Scotland Archive
NRS	National Records of Scotland

Introduction

Intellectuals have a bad reputation for having their heads in the clouds, and radical intellectuals even more so. It is not unreasonable to presume that the more fundamental a change being advocated, the less practical wisdom is involved. The relationship of radicals to political practice tends to be cast as either utopian, imagining the perfect society without any temporal or geographical context, or instrumentalist, conceiving of the good society and working out a set of practical arrangements to arrive there that bear no relationship to the end. There are few moments when radicals have been at the centre of thought about practical politics, but the French Revolution numbers among them. David Armitage draws on Keith Baker's account of the Revolution to demonstrate the now familiar trope that in 1789 'revolution as an occurrence gave way to revolution as an act.'¹ British radicals, however, have been presented as relatively immune from the French epistemological shift that rendered revolution something to be advanced rather than observed.² Orthodoxy has it that they continued to peddle abstract theories about categories of rights, while those who really wanted to act simply went to France. The intellectual history of British radicals in the 1790s tends to be concerned with questions of what kind of society they wanted to realise, and how modern, democratic, republican, or French these political desires were. Rather than asking the question of practical politics, 'what did they think should be done?' we ask, 'what did they want?'

It was a doubt about the prevalence of this utopian imagination among British radicals that drove me to ask what reformers in Britain in the 1790s thought about political practice. British thinkers have, with fair cause, often been presented as unusually speculative, moderate, or sceptical. I wondered whether in this period at the end of the eighteenth century, British radicals really were abstract thinkers who lacked interest in practical political judgement.

¹ David Armitage, *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas* (New York, 2017), pp. 147-148.

² See for instance the persuasive argument made by J.G.A. Pocock in 'Edmund Burke and the Redefinition of Enthusiasm: The Context as Counter-Revolution' in François Furet and Mona Ozouf (eds.), *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture, Vol. 3* (Oxford, 1989), p. 34.

Commentary from the 1790s provides one clear answer. Edmund Burke called the reformers ‘speculators’ and claimed that they had no idea how to relate theory to practice. From this critique a new and enduring defence of theory was born. In the early nineteenth century we find Dugald Stewart retrospectively justifying Adam Smith’s political economy as pure speculation which posed no danger to institutions and did not promote political enthusiasm.³ In other words, theory was not necessarily French, so long as it was purely speculative. Burke had engaged in an impressive self-fulfilling prophecy. Following his attack, some reformers proudly declared that their theory *was* abstract and that they were idealists, determined to force the world to adhere to their concepts. Still more took the escape route Burke’s critique offered, saying that their ideas were *purely* speculative and had no relation to political practice. They argued that abstract ideas were not dangerous since they had no effect on the masses, and that it was possible to practice political moderation while holding utopian ideas. As Ethan Shagan argues, the idea of moderation shifted in the eighteenth century with Mandeville’s suggestion that private vice would engender ‘public benefits’.⁴ Emma Rothschild completes this argument by positing that this private or economic freedom became reliant on restrictions on political liberty.⁵ As the rules of political moderation were being forged alongside a new political economy, Burke’s ingenious move was to characterise political moderation as a sensible relationship between theory and practice, rather than as the avoidance of extremes of a political spectrum. Burke’s casting of his opponents as speculative proponents of natural rights has to this day successfully obscured 1780s and 1790s discussions that recognised the complexity of the relationship between theory and practice. These are the discussions I will unearth.

Some of my exploration is based on Richard Bourke’s framing of Burke’s thought, which considers the relationship between political prudence, metaphysical ideas, and historical knowledge in the late eighteenth century.⁶ Bourke has clarified considerably Burke’s stance on the value of precedent,

³ See discussion in Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), pp. 58-59.

⁴ Ethan Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation: Violence, Religion and the Politics of Restraint in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 334.

⁵ Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments*, pp. 59-60.

⁶ See Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton, 2015), pp. 2-8.

showing that for Burke consulting antiquity was justified ‘in terms of public utility’ rather than due to the particular authority of precedent.⁷ Burke was not crudely anti-theory, Bourke argues, but instead tried to find the right relationship between theory and practice.⁸ Nevertheless, Burke’s moves in the *Reflections* led to a decade in which he was considered to be virulently anti-speculation. I have tried to balance the nuances of Burke’s views with the polarising debate that followed his expression of them.

The most vulnerable targets of Burke’s criticism were the members of the circle around William Godwin. I want to avoid typecasting Godwin and his ilk as ‘enlightenment rationalists’, as Mark Philp warns against doing, since Godwin’s approach was more nuanced than the term suggests, and more rooted in an understanding of society and the past.⁹ However, Philp’s description of Godwin’s concerns about the practice of associating, and his contentedness to rely on ideas of truth, as well as the increased entrenchment of this position as the 1790s progressed, demonstrate why Godwin is a useful foil in this thesis, representing the extreme of speculation.¹⁰ Philp recognises that Godwin’s position ‘threatened to have nothing practical to say to any who looked for positive change in the state’.¹¹ For the figures I am concerned with, Godwin’s position was not only useless but counter-productive.

There were much more complex theories of political practice in the 1790s than the rhetorical extremes represented by Burke and Godwin. These ideas were informed by the vicissitudes of political events, from the Gordon Riots to the Irish Volunteer movement, the Regency Crisis to the Whig Secession. The craftier political thinkers in these two decades looked not to the progress of reason but instead to the military and financial potential of popular associations, the uses of kings and the pertinence of history. They shunned much of the natural rights and ancient constitution discussion that decorated the radical movement, declaring it to be at best impractical, at worst paralysing. I have tried to take

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 426, 445, 453.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 505-506, 732; Richard Bourke ‘Theory and Practice: The Revolution in Political Judgement’ in Richard Bourke and Raymond Geuss (eds.), *Political Judgement: Essays for John Dunn* (Cambridge, 2019), p. 93.

⁹ Mark Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 222-223.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

into consideration the differentiation Mark Philp makes between the ‘practical, tactical struggle for reform and the terms which [the reformers] used to justify, elaborate and reflect upon their activities and objectives’.¹² Philp understands radicalism as ‘a developing political practice whose principles and ideological commitments were as much forged in the struggle as they were fetched from the arsenal and brought to it.’¹³ He links this relationship to the complexity of rhetoric and language.¹⁴ Jon Mee has shown how this operated at the level of print, which solidified rhetoric and reason into a political tactic in itself.¹⁵ I have for the most part avoided discussing public education, rhetoric and persuasion as political tactics since the educational and (to a lesser extent) propagandistic side of reform tended to be promoted by the Godwinian march-of-reason phalanx of the French Revolution debate, who rarely discussed political practice in its own right.¹⁶ This thesis primarily concerns those who harboured suspicion of the role of persuasion and pure reason in politics.

Philp argues that rhetoric ‘is a way of experimenting with commitment and identity’, which provokes responses that lead the political actor down routes of action that test these commitments.¹⁷ I am suspicious of Philp’s separation between abstract or intellectual commitments and practice or political action, a conceptual separation that itself was part of Burke’s rhetorical strategy.¹⁸ Chris Brown gives a more complex picture of the relationship between intellect and action with regard to the abolitionist movement in Britain in the period. ‘It can be easy to forget’, Brown argues,

that professed values do not always determine the choices we make, that sometimes we decide against what we believe to be right, that we often accept questionable practices because they seem necessary to the world we know or because they enjoy the sanction of age, however troubling they may seem on careful reflection.¹⁹

¹² Mark Philp, ‘The Fragmented Ideology of Reform’ in Mark Philp (ed.), *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 70.

¹³ Philp, *Reforming Ideas*, p. 14.

¹⁴ Philp, ‘Fragmented Ideology’, p. 70.

¹⁵ Jon Mee, *Print, Publicity, and Popular Radicalism in the 1790s: The Laurel of Liberty* (Cambridge, 2016), pp. 36, 86, 90.

¹⁶ The premises of this idea of reform are discussed in George Klosko, *Jacobins and Utopians: The Political Theory of Fundamental Moral Reform* (Notre Dame, 2003).

¹⁷ Philp, ‘Fragmented Ideology’, p. 76.

¹⁸ See for example Philp, *Reforming Ideas*, p. 229.

¹⁹ Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, 2006), p. 2.

Brown follows David Davis in noting that ‘climates of opinion do not give virgin birth to social movements’ and shows how Thomas Clarkson explicitly avoided questions of the relation between values and choices by falling back on a version of perfectibilism similar to that with which Godwin might easily be associated, treating antislavery as a ‘transcendental force’ that did not require a theory of practical politics.²⁰ I am not attempting to track political motivation, as Brown does for the abolitionist movement, in that I am not attempting to get at the ‘real intention’ behind political action.²¹ Nor am I interested in determining the efficacy of reformers in the 1780s and 1790s based on whether they ‘offered alternatives’.²² But I share Brown’s suspicion of the idea that public opinion is itself a driving force in politics. There is much that cannot be understood about the 1790s if it is viewed through the lens of the intellectual culture of Godwinian or proto-utilitarian rationalism.

The question of whether reformers in the 1790s looked to ‘republican’ or ‘civic humanist’ ideas such as those described by Pocock in *The Machiavellian Moment* has become a touchstone of scholarship on the 1790s.²³ I hope to add to this understanding, since many ‘republican’ concepts of people, property, and arms are integral to the arguments about political practice advanced by the reformers I consider. In Scotland and Ireland in particular, discussions of tactics tended to delineate an attachment to the ancient constitution from more ‘republican’ considerations of the ongoing role of virtue and arms in maintaining the existing constitution. Lord Buchan and William Drennan both dismissed the Glorious Revolution as unimportant to considerations of political freedom, preferring to base their politics on ideas of Roman virtue. However, categorising thinkers either in terms of their republicanism or in terms of their adherence to a particular theory of rights is a fraught practice. Gregory Claeys describes the natural rights question as having been spurred by the American Revolution, which forced a

²⁰ David Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Oxford, 1999), p. 215; Brown *Moral Capital*, p. 3.

²¹ For a range of responses to this question see Philp, *Reforming Ideas*, Chapter Three. The search for the relationship between expressed political ideologies and real intentions or real political will has often been framed as a response to Lewis Namier’s sceptical stance. A summary can be found in the introduction to H.T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York, 1977).

²² Brown, *Moral Capital*, p. 231.

²³ For a description of this debate see Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought* (London, 1989), p. 9; for a typology of the different strands of thought that might be called ‘republican’ in this period see Gregory Claeys and Christine Lattek, ‘Radicalism, Republicanism, and Revolution’ in Gareth Stedman Jones and Gregory Claeys (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth Century Thought* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 203.

consideration of ‘precisely what rights this constitution permitted, how far they were ‘natural’ or bound to precedent, and how far they were owed to all classes’²⁴ In practice, however, radicals seem to have used the language of natural rights or constitutional precedent depending on their evaluation of the circumstances in which they were deploying their argument. It can be hard to determine what individuals thinkers ‘truly believed’, especially after Paine’s popularity made the natural rights discourse more vogueish.²⁵ Iain Hampsher-Monk identifies a similar problem with the language of civic humanism, namely that ‘the mere use of catchphrases is scarcely enough to locate in individual within an intellectual tradition.’²⁶ Philp mentions that one possible explanation for the lack of a cohesive ‘republican’ philosophy among radicals in this period, despite the existence of republican language and symbols, is that

the language ceased to have normativity for those it addressed, and possibly those who deployed it, in that it no longer engaged people’s sense of how it was that they should conduct themselves in relation to politics and the state. A further consequence was that elements of the tradition became split off and developed semiautonomous lives, free from the normative implications and conclusion of the original theory.²⁷

I agree with this assessment. By exploring the space of normativity itself, the goal of this thesis is to provide some insight into ideas about the practice of politics in the 1790s and to challenge the idea promoted by H.T. Dickinson and others that reformers engaged in ‘an intellectual extension of Revolution principles, the rational optimism of the Enlightenment and the traditional belief in English liberties.’²⁸ In particular, an intellectual history of political tactics in this period makes E.P. Thompson’s thesis that old traditions acted as restraints upon reformers seem less viable. Thompson believed that if they were to make any political headway it was necessary for reformers to ‘disengage from the constitution debate altogether’ to avoid getting ‘caught up in the trivia of piecemeal constitutional renovation’ and instead argue from ‘reason, conscience, self-interest’, and ‘self-evident’

²⁴ Claeys, *Thomas Paine*, p. 40.

²⁵ Claeys outlines the natural rights versus precedent account in *Thomas Paine*, p. 16.

²⁶ Iain Hampsher-Monk in ‘Civic Humanism and Parliamentary Reform: The Case of the Society of the Friends of the People’, *Journal of British Studies*, Spring 1979, 18:2, p. 76.

²⁷ Philp, *Reforming Ideas*, pp. 129-152.

²⁸ Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*, p. 97.

truths.²⁹ I argue that the triumph of reason came with its own trivia and sanctified conventions, and the Paineite agenda involved closing off a number of routes of political action without necessarily providing ‘plebeian’ corollaries.³⁰

As Dickinson argued, the reform movement was fragmented both in ideology and tactics.³¹ Philp thinks that the period of the British response to the French Revolution ‘produced highly individual personal and intellectual responses, rather than a pattern of simple conformity to a creed.’³² According to him, the narrowing of the sphere of action from May 1793 as Pitt’s ‘terror’ matured forced radicals to consider ever more dangerous and unforgiving courses of action.³³ One of the purposes of examining theories of political action or political tactics is to question some of this fragmentation, both by tying seemingly disparate theory together through a common idea of political practice, and through identifying networks of correspondence and influence that are harder to spot through a lens of speculative ideology. Across the channel, the sans-culottes were described by Mercier not in terms of their abstract political ambitions, but as those who ‘desired a great or speedy reform’.³⁴ By losing the Paineite category of natural rights and considering instead radicals’ consideration of political modes, I want to present a cast of reformers who displayed characteristics that are not explored often enough in radicals: realism, cynicism and pragmatism.

Most considerations of British radicals’ response to the French Revolution consider the ‘opening up’ of political action to a broader class of participants.³⁵ I have avoided going down this path. Those who were genuinely at the edge of a working-class radicalism, like Thomas Hardy, tended to be too canny to openly express their views on political action. That George Gordon got away with rabble-rousing

²⁹ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 2013), p. 96.

³⁰ Georgina Green has also challenged Thompson’s derision for the ‘constitutionalist discourse’, arguing that the ‘right to resistance’ served as point of intersection between natural rights and constitutionalist rights. While I support this sentiment, I avoid categorising discourses into different ‘rights’ paradigms. Georgina Green, *The Majesty of the People: Popular Sovereignty and the Role of the Writer in the 1790s* (Oxford, 2014), p. 38.

³¹ H.T. Dickinson, ‘Popular Loyalty in Britain in the 1790s’ in Eckhart Hellmuth (ed.), *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1990), p. 503.

³² Philp, ‘Fragmented Ideology’ p. 54.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 62, 72.

³⁴ Michael Sonenscher, *Sans-Culottes: An Eighteenth Century Emblem in the French Revolution* (Princeton, 2008), p. 17.

³⁵ On which see Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People* (Oxford, 2013), p. 284.

for so long is testament to his own position; his secretary Robert Watson, who did not enjoy this status, was damaged by his open radicalism and obscurity to the point of self-destruction, despite having educated himself. The finer points of political action were debated in secret in clubs and societies in Britain and Ireland, some of which may have been genuinely plebeian. There is only partial evidence of this intellectual process though some of it has been brilliantly explored by John Barrell.³⁶ The real political activity of this period has of course been expertly studied.³⁷ The theories of political action remain to be exhumed.

Outline

In the first chapter I lay out a number of paradigms through which to approach considerations of the relationship between theory and practice in the 1790s. Adam Smith's exploration and eventual condemnation of political systematising was taken up by Edmund Burke, who used it to attack schemers like William Godwin. Godwin's critics said that his theories could not be applied to reality and that considerations of first principles and human nature were useless when it came to political thought. These critics believed that the right kind of political thinker was one who was able to deliberate on political action, and who had power to steer the state and so was able to make judgements on means and ends in politics. In this vein, a strain of philosophy which had emerged from a Scottish eighteenth-century fascination with Xenophon promoted the idea that politics was the art of ordering institutions. In the 1790s, Xenophonian political thought was used to crush democratic ideas.

In the meantime, reformers became more insistent on the value of pure reason and abstract rights theory as they became more worried about being charged with responsibility for mobbism. This tendency became particularly pronounced when radicals began to be prosecuted for treason and libel. Thomas Muir, one of the Scottish 'martyrs', who faced exile and death for his radicalism, protested in his trial that the literature he was distributing was purely speculative. While this was an appropriate

³⁶ John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793-1796* (Oxford, 2000).

³⁷ On the radical side of political action an excellent study of the later period is Roger Wells, *Insurrection: The British Experience 1795-1803* (Gloucester, 1983), on the more moderate side a detailed study can be found in John Cannon, *Parliamentary Reform, 1640-1832* (Cambridge, 1972).

argument for court, radical protestations of this kind have led some historians to attribute an overly speculative bent to 1790s radicals. The excerpt that Muir had been distributing, from Volney's *Ruins of Empire*, contained ideas that were central to the accounts of practical politics given by some of the figures I explore, namely that kings should be made directly answerable to the people, and that a concept of the general will was fundamental to undertaking popular political action.

Given that radicals were wary of openly discussing political prudence as it related to their home turf, I look at some reactions to a more distant event, the 1791 insurrection in Haiti. With the Haitian example, British reformers were more willing to discuss the meaning of individual resistance to direct oppression, and what role concepts like the 'rights of man' had to play in rousing people to political action. Britons attributed to the Haitian rebels a basic form of resistance, arising from direct experience of corporeal tyranny. The concepts of resistance in play when it came to considering the situation in Britain were more complex. The Rev. David Williamson gave an account after the French Revolution of the way that popular action and resistance operated. This involved overturning the idea of 'Great Legislators', who tended to be systematisers of the kind described by Smith. Williamson said that it was duty, interest, and revealed politics that led people to act politically through forms of resistance to encroachment on their power. These ideas of resistance give some background to 1790s discussions of association, militias, and the relationship between the people and the king. To broaden the idea of associating beyond the London Corresponding Society and the Society for Constitutional Information, I explore John Brand's thoughts on the history of associations. Brand did not believe there was anything novel about the 1790s approach to this practice and he thought that the Foxites were opening the door to violent passions of the people rather than tracking a venerable resistance theory.

My broader theoretical framework for considering practical wisdom is based on a tripartite classification of knowledge effected by Aristotle, in which political knowledge is designated as *phronesis*. These distinctions between different kinds of knowledge and between ideas of what was true and what was good were at issue in the late eighteenth century. James Beattie, Samuel Parr, James Mackintosh,

William Thomson, and James Buchanan all tried to avoid simplification of these concepts, whereas Hume and his allies tried to collapse some of these categories together. I argue that this simplification also takes place in much modern philosophy. The 'modern' debate of most pertinence is that between Georges Sorel and Walter Benjamin, who considered in the early 20th century how the question of violence played into our understanding of means and ends in politics. Crucially for our consideration of the eighteenth century, they linked their discussion to ideas of force and fraud, states of exception, and financial tactics.

Having laid out some of these theoretical paradigms, in the first chapter I look at some of the direct responses to Edmund Burke's charge that radicals had not established a good relationship between theory and practice. Burke caused much consternation by insisting that old edifices of politics should be repaired instead of torn down. Lord Buchan found this a particularly miserable prospect, but like many of his fellow reformers he reluctantly conceded this point to Burke. The Rev. David Williams was bolder. He agreed with Burke that reason and argument had no authority in political thought whereas ancient custom did. He interpreted custom in the aftermath of the Gordon Riots as recommending that Britain restore her militia. Williams' interest in custom was part of an excitement about political theory that was not based on abstraction but instead had a close relationship to practice: he wanted to understand the active operations of particular political systems. This was similar to Montesquieu's project, though unlike Montesquieu Williams disliked the idea of a tripartite constitution; he was purely interested in establishing a unitary sovereign power. Williams criticised the Association Movement of the early 1780s on the basis that its actors had an unreasonable belief in the efficacy of a basic principal of associating. He thought that Ireland had the same problem with its Volunteer movement, though he was more forgiving of the Irish since they had acted quickly in a moment when fortune presented herself, a reasonable political impulse. To him, association movements were embarrassing and primitive attempts at effecting what should be a large-scale and valorous political project to harness the general will of the people and allow it to control the nation.

Williams believed that this could only practically be done by creating a close relationship between the people and the king.

In the second chapter I also consider one of the most direct responses to Burke's critique of the radicals, written by the Rev. Samuel Parr, an ardent Foxite. Parr said that Burke was wrong that theory was inappropriate for politics and observed that he had mixed up concepts of truth, politics, and morality. Paine's theory was not a good test case, Parr argued, since it was bad theory, so could not be applied to politics. Parr was in some ways the opposite of Williams, since he was an ardent Foxite, whereas Williams was suspicious of both parties. This became clear during the Regency Crisis, when Parr wanted an alliance between the Prince of Wales and Fox's men, and Williams advised the Prince to trust neither party and instead to become the voice of the people in order to express the general will. During the Regency crisis, Pitt argued from a position of abstract right, while Parr, Fox and James Mackintosh complained that the correct mode of argument should proceed from precedent or expediency or involve examining the constitution in the manner of Williams. Mackintosh, Parr's favourite opponent of Burke's, agreed with Parr that good theory *could* be applied to politics, and that the problem with Paineite theory was not that it was metaphysical but that it was false. Mackintosh was also an opponent, with Parr, of highly speculative radicalism like that of Godwin, and Burke approved of his attacks on the Godwin set.

Regardless of these responses to Burke, his advice to avoid destroying the old constitution was intensely depressing for radicals who could see no practical way forward. Many tried to forge a path using the unimaginative but, until 1793, relatively safe, practice of associating and convening, and this is what I explore in the third chapter. One of Samuel Parr's pupils, Joseph Gerrald, was the most well-known proponent of the convention tactic, which he believed would help people understand the real power they had in the state, namely their productive power. Gerrald was arrested at the convention he had proposed, in Edinburgh, alongside Maurice Margarot and three others. These Scottish martyrs used arguments at their trials designed to appeal to the right and utility of conventions like their own in Scots law and Scottish history. Margarot argued that the right to petition necessarily conferred a

right to convene, since ‘the general will cannot be gathered as you gather taxes from door to door’. Margarot also relied on Kames’ argument that constitutions were fluid constructions susceptible to conscious improvement. His lines of argument make sense when considered in light of some of the functions of the Edinburgh Convention and the Scottish Friends of the People. A committee had been researching the precedents for Scottish representation, and convention members like Norman Macleod and Lord Daer had been pointing out to their English counterparts some sharp distinctions between political organising in Scotland and in England. Scots generally preferred not to look to the ancient constitution but instead, in the manner of the United Irishmen, and like David Williams and James Mackintosh, to look to what they called the ‘active spirit’ of the constitution. They also wanted to avoid getting caught up in the semantic and legal pedantry that they thought was holding English reformers back.

The situation in England was also changing very quickly, so that ancient constitution arguments were fast becoming irrelevant. With the Convention Bill looming, a Bill that would shortly render reform activities illegal, English radicals turned to talking about states of resistance and the glorious revolution. This led naturally to discussions of arming the people, and the theorist taken up by radicals was Andrew Fletcher. Fletcher was promoted by the Scots Lord Buchan and Robert Watson on the basis that he understood the link between a popular militia and the ability to force kings to enact the general will. In England, the main proponent of Fletcher’s arguments was John Cartwright, who had regarded the militia tactic as the perfect one ever since he had witnessed the success of the Irish Volunteer movement. Cartwright believed that arming the people and reforming the parliament were inseparable; conveniently it was also necessary to establish militias because of the war with France, just as the Irish militia had been established in reaction to war with America. John Jebb was also enthusiastic about the Irish Volunteer movement, and both he and Cartwright corresponded with Francis Dobbs. Christopher Wyvill was less moved, since he believed that the convention tactics being pursued in Ireland were not sufficiently developed. The third chapter concerns the practical politics of the Volunteer movement and its influence on United Irishmen.

The Volunteer movement engaged not only in militarised convention tactics but also in financial ones. Volunteers made non-consumption and non-importation agreements, which were some of the most innovative explorations of political practice we encounter in these two decades. Irish political thinkers recognised how exceptional their situation was and they tried to steer the Volunteer movement in a manner that would prevent its demise after the grant of a reform. They were largely unsuccessful, but when political interest in Ireland was renewed in the 1790s, most of the key political players drew on their direct experience of the Volunteer movement. There had been concerns at the time about the efficacy of Volunteer tactics. Henry Flood worried that the movement conflated morality and politics and urged the Volunteers to remember that ‘the political body has no heart’. For this reason, abstract assertions of right would always be ineffective political tools. Flood thought that reformers needed to focus on targeting mercantile tyranny, since this was the main oppression that Ireland suffered, and he recommended consumption covenants. Joseph Pollock, a friend of Francis Dobbs, argued in a similar vein to Flood, though he was even less hopeful about the potential of associations, and thought that little could be achieved without independence. Both were cautiously excited, though, about the anti-luxury virtue promoted by the mixture of militias and popular sumptuary rules.

The Volunteer movement forms the backdrop to some United Irishmen considerations of practical politics which I also consider in the second chapter. The other part of the story for the 1790s Irish radicals is their Scottish education, and the influence of John Millar. William Drennan argued in the 1790s that the constitution was so corrupt as to be inapplicable to considerations of practice: the whole people needed to act as a body and radical leaders should style themselves on Roman populist lines. This was very similar to an argument that Lord Buchan was making in Scotland; both based their arguments on a severe scepticism as to whether the English constitution could be saved or was even worth saving. William Steel Dickson learned from Millar at Glasgow University that the ancient constitution was a Whig fiction and that there were several viable forms of government. Joseph Pollock had also been educated at Glasgow and became a firm adherent of Millar’s criticism of Whiggish reliance on the original principles or form of the constitution. He hated the Paineite bent to

the Irish reform movement in the 1790s and pleaded with radicals to return to the financial tactics of the Volunteers, which he thought were stronger in ‘real strength of measures’ than mere proclamations of the rights of man. Consciously emulating Andrew Fletcher in his unashamed treachery, Thomas Addis Emmet, who had been at Edinburgh University with James Mackintosh, arranged for the publication of an interview between the Irish Lords and three leading United Irishmen. This interview concerned the tactics of the movement, military and financial, and it shows where some of the ideas about political practice from both the Volunteer movement and from the Scottish circles ended up.

The fourth chapter considers one of the most ardent proponents of the cause of the Irish Volunteers in the House of Commons: Lord George Gordon. Gordon liked the arguments of Francis Dobbs and tried to use them in 1780 to persuade the House of Commons and the King of the need for immediate legislative reform in Ireland. Gordon was tried for treason for instigating the Gordon Riots, which had been caused by the presentation of a petition by the Protestant Association to the House of Commons protesting the admission of Catholics to the military. The rioting that took place had been suspiciously strategic, attacking both penal and financial institutions in London. Gordon was acquitted thanks to the work of his lawyer Thomas Erskine, Lord Buchan’s brother. But the establishment pinned charges on him years later during the final negotiations around the Commercial Treaty with France, accusing him of libel against Marie Antoinette. He had been publicising the horrors of the French police and the Bastille at the point when public assent to the Commercial Treaty was most important, among various other incendiary activities designed to associate these new links with France to Pittite pursuit of arbitrary rule. At the same time, the Commercial Treaty was coming under fire for the fact that it would involve importing not only arbitrary principles but luxury commodities. This at a time when many Irish politicians were still stinging from their treatment in the trade disputes earlier in the decade and had clear memories of the anti-luxury stance of the Volunteer movement. Gordon was imprisoned for the disruption he caused and described his ideas about political tactics to the Abbé Gregoire, with whom he corresponded. He believed that the Commercial Treaty encouraged war, and

that the only way to encourage peace was to avoid public debt and luxury. He also advised Gregoire on how to control the King, something which he had tried to do all his life.

In the final chapter, I return to Lord Buchan to consider some of the longer-term implications of his thought. I explore the disagreements between Buchan and Wyvill on the Whig policy of secession, and the ways that Buchan thought the 'oligarchy' in Britain could be overcome. Ultimately Wyvill caved to Buchan's arguments, and supported secession against his former judgement. Buchan had a strategy for encouraging Scottish resistance to oligarchy, which involved using history to give Scots objects of emulation, show them the true nature of man, create depictions of their political past and re-introduce them to the theories of the Scottish master of political philosophy and practice, George Buchanan. Buchan thought that Buchanan's ideas about liberty had spread all over Europe, but that the Glorious Revolution had stunted the growth of the practice of muzzling the king in Scotland, and had replaced the 'doctrine of the unity' with an unpleasant trinitarian constitution. He was determined to rout out this radical past though, through his Society for the Antiquaries of Scotland, which met some resistance from William Robertson and his set at Edinburgh University.

These theories of using the general will to control kings, of deploying financial tactics, and of recovering political practice through a particular use of history, were all propagated by Robert Watson. Watson was a disciple of Fletcher, Buchanan, Buchan and Lord George Gordon, a member of the London Corresponding Society and of the Protestant Association. He was both an antiquary and an activist. A study of his ideas seems an appropriate way to end this account of political theory and political practice.

Radicals in the 1780s and 1790s were not all duped by the fashion for rationalism. Many knew that the important question was about might rather than right, and they tried to convince others of the necessity to think about action rather than about political morality. Without power, it was a mere academic exercise to think about how the state should be organised. The Scots and the Irish knew this more than most, and they suffered less than the English from reliance on a prescriptive constitutional ideology which tended to close down routes of political action. The ways of bringing the body of the

people into action that reformers discussed are in many cases more dissonant to modern ears than the clean and familiar practice of 'associating' which brings to mind political parties or trade unions. They involved creating or harnessing a general will through militarised public virtue, sumptuary politics, and the promotion of popular political prudence, rather than of the doctrine of the rights of man.

Chapter I: A History of Means

In his 1759 *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith worried that legislators who had a ‘spirit of system’ might end up being poor statesmen, since they would ‘value the means more than the end’.¹ But Smith concluded that it was not necessarily a problem to act from the desire for systematic perfection rather than that of promoting public happiness. This discourse of system, because it was aesthetically pleasurable, was more likely to animate men to ‘public spirit’ than a moral interest.² In the 1790 edition of the text Smith expressed a significantly moderated view.³ While ‘some general, and even systematical, idea of the perfection of policy and law’ may be necessary for the statesman, this approach could easily go awry.⁴ The ‘man of system’ would try to impose his idea of the perfect society onto unwilling social material.⁵ Such a legislator would not be content with merely moderating abusive power and privilege according to what society could stand. He would instead enact great violence to establish what according to his own arrogant judgement was the commonwealth that met a supreme standard of right.⁶ Smith said that the most alarming man of this sort would be a sovereign prince who in his systematising would perceive the greatest flaws in a nation to be the restrictions upon his own will.⁷ But, as Smith may have foreseen, the class of political speculators who ended up being accused of lacking the wisdom of Solon, as Donald Winch termed Smith’s brand of political prudence, were not the sovereigns but the people.⁸ Radicals and reformers were condemned as men who would, in pursuit of utopian speculations made real, sow schemes of violent destruction that would bring

¹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Edinburgh, printed for A. Millar [etc.], 1759), p. 352; Jonathan Sheehan and Dror Wahrman have shown how the idea of gradual societal change through the principle of ‘self-organisation’ in 18th century Scotland acted as a challenge to the systematising of legislators, and how Scottish philosophy mirrored Turgot’s dislike of Lyncurgian legislating. Jonathan Sheehan and Dror Wahrman, *Invisible Hands: Self-Organisation and the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 2015), pp. 241, 252.

² Smith, *TMS* (1759), p. 354.

³ See Anna Plassart, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 56 for the view that Smith was engaging in a ‘critique of the radical apologists of the revolution’. For an alternative view on the strength and intended targets of Smith’s editing see Emma Rothschild, ‘Adam Smith and Conservative Economics’, *The Economic History Review*, 45: 1 (February 1992), pp. 74-96, especially pp. 77-78.

⁴ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments, Vol 2* (Edinburgh, Printed for A. Strahan [etc.], 6th ed., 1790), p. 111.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Donald Winch. *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750-1834* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 90-124.

Britain to its knees. The development of the Smithian critique of systematisers was spearheaded by Edmund Burke who, claims Richard Bourke, ‘accurately understood the devastating consequences that would follow from any attempt to “deduce” reforms from the premise of moral revolution instead of trying to infer improvements with the aid of historical prudence.’⁹

In interpreting this discussion of the relation between theory and practice that took place in the aftermath of the French Revolution, Richard Bourke cautions against accepting the nonconformist Richard Price’s charge that Edmund Burke supported ‘the most retrograde forms of superstition’ because of his dismissal of the political ambitions of radicals.¹⁰ Bourke argues that scholarship ‘has taken at face value the exaggerated position assumed by Burke,’ a position which should instead be understood as a ‘strategic response.’¹¹ Burke was not against the ‘influence of “theory” on political organisation’, argues Bourke; instead he wanted to demonstrate that the radicals’ idea of political practice was dangerous, deceitful, and deluded.¹² They had learned their politics from ‘philosophical masters for whom ways and means in politics were the merest distraction from their goals [...]. The diffusion of these doctrines not only had bred contempt for the idea of ethical restraint in Burke’s judgement, but also had fostered a culture of intellectual conceit.’¹³

The anti-Jacobin charge of political naivety was extremely common in the 1790s. William Godwin left himself particularly vulnerable to it. He called for the ascendancy of truth while opposing both practical strategies for reform and political opportunism. In his 1793 *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* he wrote that ‘the contest between truth and falsehood is of itself too unequal, for the former to stand in need of support from any political ally.’¹⁴ His critics complained that ‘he finds that there are many, very many, cases of predicaments to which his laws, simple and sublime, do not descend. While he

⁹ Richard Bourke ‘Theory and Practice: The Revolution in Political Judgement’ in Richard Bourke and Raymond Geuss (eds.), *Political Judgement: Essays for John Dunn* (Cambridge, 2019), p. 75.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 97. For a further exploration of Burke’s ideas of conceitedness see Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton, 2015), p. 719. For the argument that natural reason abstracted from the context of practice ‘was liable to become intoxicated by its self-regarding subtlety’ see the same, p. 79.

¹⁴ William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, Vol. 2* (London, printed for G.G.J. [etc.], 1793), p. 496.

carries his head above the clouds, he is obliged to walk on the ground.’¹⁵ Burke’s arguments in the *Reflections* were re-stated throughout the decade. In 1792 the Irish pamphleteer Jerome Alley criticised the radicals by saying that

most have founded their reasoning rather on theory than experience, on speculation than on fact: and, accordingly, profound analysis, which gratifies the fancy, has been substituted for direct appeals, which ‘come home’ to the understanding; first principles, of subtle minuteness and dangerous application, have exhausted the attention, which should have been wholly devoted to existing circumstances, and to practical wisdom; and the natural rights of man have become the subjects of enquiry and the objects of argument, when it was more necessary to investigate the nature of the constitution and government under which we live, to exhibit them in their genuine excellence to the public eye, and to vindicate them from the artful calumnies, and plausible accusations, of designing sophists.¹⁶

Arthur Young prefaced his 1793 *The Example of France; A Warning to Britain* with the Soame Jenyns quote that ‘in politics all principles that are speculatively right, are practically wrong’ and went on to declare that experience should be the guide for political reasoning, since he had ‘a constitutional abhorrence of theory, of all trust in abstract reasoning’.¹⁷ Joseph Ritson, who supported the French Revolution, wrote of the radicals that ‘their constant cant is, the force and energy of mind, to which all opposition is to be ineffectual’, but that none of them were in fact willing to stake their lives or reputation on abstract conviction alone.¹⁸

When it became clear that Britain would go to war with France, it was the urgent prerogative of those who saw an overriding need for stability to establish that political action was not for everyone. Charges against reformers hinged on specific conception of means and ends in politics. ‘Jacobins’ were advised that they proposed perfect systems that could never be realised; that they had no concept of how political means could achieve a political end; that their political means were extreme and violent and therefore unsuited to real practice. The enforcement of a new relationship between means and ends

¹⁵ ‘Art. 3: Godwin’s Inquiry concerning Political Justice’ *The English Review*, 28 (October 1796), p. 314.

¹⁶ Jerome Alley, *Observations on the Government and Constitution of Great Britain* (Dublin, printed by William Sleater, 1792), pp. v-vi.

¹⁷ Arthur Young, *The Example of France a Warning to Britain* (London, 3rd ed. printed for W. Richardson, 1793) pp. title page, 4, 106.

¹⁸ Joseph Ritson, *The Letters of Joseph Ritson, Vol. 2* (London, William Pickering, 1833), p. 69.

favoured those with existing power for they alone could hold means and ends in a manageably predictable balance.

Many radicals, like Godwin, publicly conceded that they neither had nor desired any plan for achieving their descriptions of the good society. They said that they simply expected such a society to arise through the progress of reason and the tendency away from ideas of hereditary right. Godwin insisted that he wanted to have ‘no business with factions or intrigue; but simply to promulgate the truth, and to wait the tranquil progress of conviction.’¹⁹ Others wrote more explicitly about the necessary steps required to achieve political reform. Jeremy Bentham’s ‘Essay on Political Tactics’ was initially written for the benefit of the 1789 meeting of the States General in France and was published later in 1791. Bentham laid out the rules he thought novel political assemblies should follow where there was an absence of precedent, and was delighted to find that those rules that appeared most perfect in theory turned out to be those practiced by the British legislature. ‘Never was the accord more perfect’, he enthused, ‘between reason and experience’.²⁰ The word he used to describe his exploration of means for reform, ‘tactics’, was a military term (deriving from the Greek *taktike techne*, the entire art of putting a military in order). Bentham proposed an institutional science which would direct the French legislative assembly on how to order parliamentary institutions.

When Bentham turned to tactics and *techne* to determine how to act politically he was using a language of legitimate political action that had become fashionable in the eighteenth century. The idea of the political reformer as a clever legislator who should master the art of ordering a state had been promoted by Scots who took the writings of Xenophon as their starting point.²¹ Doohwan Ahn has shown that after James VI and I published *Basilikon Doron* in 1599, Xenophon’s writings on the ideal patriot king became an important part of the Jacobite canon.²² For Ahn, Xenophon’s economics and

¹⁹ Godwin, *Enquiry*, p. 881.

²⁰ Jeremy Bentham, *Essay on Political Tactics* (London, printed for T. Payne, 1791), p. iv.

²¹ A discussion of Xenophon’s attempt to ‘systematise historical prudence’ can be found in Bourke, ‘Theory and Practice’, pp. 81-82.

²² Doohwan Ahn ‘Xenophon and the Greek Tradition in British Political Thought’ in James Moore et al. (eds.), *Reinventing History: The Enlightenment Origins of Ancient History* (London, 2009).

politics played into a mercantilist-Tory philosophy which naturally faded after 1745 with the decline of Jacobitism and the rise of Whig economic theories. But some Jacobites took great care to adapt Xenophon's ideas to the political economic thought of the eighteenth century. The Chevalier Ramsay passed his interest in Xenophon to the Foulis brothers who, assisted by Ramsay to access various French translations, published a substantial number of editions of Xenophon from their Glasgow press after 1745.²³ The Foulis Press also published Fénelon, whose *Telemachus* was based on Xenophon's *Cyrus* and whose work was promoted by Ramsay. The Foulis' principal support in Glasgow was also their most published author, the Scottish-Irish philosopher Francis Hutcheson, who was appointed in 1729 to the Chair of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University where he taught Adam Smith at the end of the 1730s.

Hutcheson established the study of 'Oeconomicks' in Scotland by following Xenophon's *Oikonomikos* in placing the family unit and, relatedly, the morality of the workforce, as the basis for the study of political economy.²⁴ The productive powers and legislative concerns of the state could be deduced from these principles of the household; state management and estate management were not dissimilar. Xenophon also offered novel starting points for considering the art of governance. Hume used Xenophon as the foundation of his writings on ancient history, and Adam Smith read the *Anabasis* before making his own incursions into the theory of the division of labour.²⁵ The Jacobite James Steuart used Xenophon's *Discourse upon Improving the Revenue of the State of Athens* to inform his writings

²³ The Foulis Press published around 16 volumes of Xenophon's work. Phillip Gaskell's *Bibliography of the Foulis Press* (Winchester, 1986) identifies Xenophon as one of the Foulis brothers' most published authors, but it seems there are five or six Xenophon texts that Gaskell overlooked, making Xenophon the Foulis Press' most published Greek author, and fifth most published author.

²⁴ Francis Hutcheson, *A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (Glasgow, printed by Robert Foulis, 1747), p. 255. Moses Finley gestures towards Hutcheson's use of Xenophon, but Finley believes that 'there was no road from the 'æconomy' of Francis Hutcheson to the *Wealth of Nations* of Adam Smith published twenty-four years later' (*The Ancient Economy* (Berkeley, 1973), p. 20). This underplays the domination of the economics of household, morality and property in Scottish political economy following Hutcheson. For a commentary on the extended use of *oikos* in Xenophon see Sarah Pomeroy, *Xenophon: Oeconomicus, A Social and Historical Commentary* (Oxford, 1995), commentary on p. 112.

²⁵ Vernard Foley has explored the influence of ancient thought on Smith's political economy, and he conjectures that Smith was studying Xenophon's political economy as early as 1763. Foley claims that Smith must have been reading the *Cyropaedia*, but it seems more likely Smith was referring to the *Anabasis*, which he calls the *Expedition*, true to the Foulis edition he would have read. This is also consistent with Smith's use of the text in his *Lectures on Rhetoric* since much of the *Anabasis* is concerned with the affections of the soldiers. Vernard Foley, 'The Division of Labour in Plato and Smith', *History of Political Economy*, 6: 2 (Summer 1974), p. 221.

on the incentive to labour in a modern state. Stuart wrote that the only modification required to update Xenophon's ideas on how the state should create the incentive to labour was that people were now controlled through state manipulation of their desires rather than through the policing of slaves.²⁶ Dugald Stewart, lecturing in the early nineteenth-century, was enthusiastic about this idea that where people had once been slaves they were now slaves to desire, and thought with Stuart that the same theories of political economy and statesmanship might apply to either kind of slavery.²⁷ Eighteenth-century political economists found in Xenophon a practice of politics which allowed for an alliance of the statesman and the philosopher forged in the neutral territory of political economy. It seemed that Alexander Pope's adage, 'For forms of Government let fools contest, Whate'er is best administered is best', could become a comfortable doctrine in a context where the practice of politics involved ordering the economy of a state.

When Bentham engaged in legislative ordering rather than economic ordering he was straying into territory that seemed rude and dangerous to many eighteenth-century political administrators, as we saw in the distinction Emma Rothschild draws between economic freedom and political liberty, but he still enjoyed the distance and abstraction that *techné* offered, since he could direct foreign representative assemblies from the comfort of his own home rather than from the front line. As the eighteenth-century atmosphere of enlightened openness solidified into an aristocracy of exclusive expertise, new interpretations of Xenophon's art of statecraft were used to crush visions of popular state control in the 1790s. In 1793 a French émigré edition of the *Constitution of the Athenians* (then generally attributed to Xenophon) was published, followed in 1794 by two English translations and commentaries by the anti-democrat James Morris and by Henry James Pye, the famously bad poet laureate and writer of anti-Jacobin novels.²⁸ Morris argued that a significant amount of power needed

²⁶ James Stuart, *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy, Vol. I* (London, printed for A. Millar [etc.], 1767), p. 462.

²⁷ Dugald Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy Vol. I* (Edinburgh, Thomas Constable, 1855), pp. 36-37.

²⁸ Though there is now consensus that this work cannot be attributed to Xenophon, at the time, while there was some doubt over the authenticity of the text, most considered this doubt to be groundless. See 'Constitution des Atheniens; Constitution of the Athenians; Xenophon's Defence' *The Critical Review*, Vol. 14, May 1795, pp. 95-98 and 'Art. 28. Constitution of the Athenians', *The Monthly Review*, Vol. 14, June 1794, p. 222.

to be given to the governor if they were to attain order for millions of heterogenous subjects.²⁹ Pye argued that Xenophon believed that the state must provide for the lower orders, 'but to guide that state, is beyond their capacity; professors in all arts must be qualified by education; and is the art of civil polity alone so easy, that every man is born a legislator?'³⁰ If all could partake in governance then everyone would be a sovereign, a clear absurdity.³¹ Political activity was suitable only for those with both power and education, and was the art of governance over inferiors, so could not be pursued by those who were governed.³² Critics doubted (then as now) the sincerity of *The Constitution of Athens* and some complained that there was a world of difference between the democracy of Athens and the modern concept of representative democracy.³³ Pye rejoindered that representative democracy was only a theory and had never taken place in practice, especially in large states.³⁴ The premise of the need for expert governance by wise statesmen made ancient democracy a failed experiment and representative democracy an irrelevant dream. If politics was the art of putting institutions in order, it was now difficult to see a way for those who had no existing legislative power to practice it.

Mobs and Mutiny

So far we have outlined two ways of thinking about radical political practice in the 1790s. One is Godwin's blind trust in the progress of reason, a position that provided a favourite amusement for anti-Jacobins, and which Barbara Taylor has attributed to 'virtually all political thinkers' of the time.³⁵ The other is Bentham's tactics of ordering institutions, a practice which relied on being a legislator or having the ear of one. The decade from the beginning of the French Revolution was a hostile environment in which to pursue either style of reform in Britain. Godwin's set was decried as the 'new school' and subjected to ridicule, and Godwin resigned himself to a kind of popular obscurity. For

²⁹ James Morris, *Constitution of the Athenians* (London, J. Owen, 1794), p. 33.

³⁰ Henry James Pye, *Xenophon's Defence of the Athenian Democracy* (London, G. Nicol, 1794), p. 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ For an example of the former see 'Constitution des Atheniens; Constitution of the Athenians; Xenophon's Defence' *The Critical Review*, pp. 95-98 and for the latter see 'Art. X The Constitution of the Athenians', *The Analytical Review*, Vol. 19, 1794, pp. 493-494.

³⁴ Pye, *Xenophon's Defence*, p. 62.

³⁵ Taylor bases this argument on Burke's indictment of the 'philosophical politicians.' Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 54.

those who thought like Bentham, the world became less mouldable. The qualities required of states for intellectuals to have a prospect of shaping them – stability and openness to reform - were no longer characteristics of European governments. So how did those involved in the real political action of the 1790s – the societies and mass meetings, associations, and conventions, attempts at insurrection, the stockpiling of arms – describe their own actions and political prudence?

In April 1795, Hester Piozzi wrote to Hester Elphinstone about a riotous mob which she had encountered in Wickwar in Wales.³⁶ Three hundred people armed with bludgeons had gathered in the town to threaten the magistrates. The leader of the mob was a correspondent of the lecturer and poet John Thelwall and proclaimed that ‘you have worn boots and we have worn wooden shoes long enough now – try how you like the exchange.’ Piozzi asked some of the rioters what they were doing, what kind of political action this was. ‘We come o’Mobbing’, they replied, unhelpfully, and ‘these honest Men advised us to come along with them.’ There were women among the crowd carrying long knives, but instead of threatening any violence towards the onlookers, one of the women attempted to cut off the tail of a beautiful horse. Piozzi found the demonstration difficult to understand. What capacity was being demonstrated?

E.P. Thompson was confident that ‘behind every such form of popular direct action some legitimising notion of right is to be found’.³⁷ But the relationship between an ‘action’ and a ‘legitimising notion’ is not a constant in history, and in the late eighteenth century, as we have already seen, this relationship was in turmoil. Many reformers were unconcerned with Godwin’s slow march of reason or Bentham’s deliberations on the legislative assembly of a nation he did not belong to. Instead they considered the questions of political action that Piozzi was keen to understand. How could threats against property be used to gain power for the propertyless? What qualities should lead you to follow a political leader?

³⁶ Hester Piozzi to Hester Elphinstone, 3 April 1795, in Robert McNamee et al. (eds.), *Electronic Enlightenment Scholarly Edition of Correspondence* (Oxford, 2017).

³⁷ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 2013), p. 73.

What was being demonstrated at a demonstration, and how could iconoclasm and play on symbols advance the radical cause? Was going o'Mobbing a reasonable way to spend an afternoon?

Two years later in spring 1797, the British naval fleet at Spithead staged a mutiny. The mutineers, who comprised a quarter of the entire British navy, had been petitioning for better conditions and pay, and declared that they would not obey orders to set sail.³⁸ They elected delegates from each ship who sat in council and corresponded with the government. The mutiny ended after six weeks with minimal violence, the demands having been met. But at the Nore a second mutiny was underway. These mutineers were not content with the concessions that had been made and they issued further demands. Their mutiny would fail after a month, and 29 of the leaders were hanged.

The Spithead mutineers had initially been unsure as to how to approach politics, in the most banal sense. In discussing their initial petition, a letter from one mutinous ship to another claimed that the petition drafters had misunderstood the whole business:

You intreat his Lordship to intercede the Board of the Admiralty for augmentation of pay. But that is not under their jurisdiction to do; it is a national affair, and must be addressed to the hon. House of Commons. It is from them alone that we can expect redress. They are the purse bearers of the nation.³⁹

The original writers insisted in their reply that there was a tactical reason for going to the Admiralty first, as it would demonstrate that they had gone through all the proper channels.⁴⁰ They were proven wrong. The Admiralty had no interest in their request, and the House of Commons were unaware of the problem until after mutiny had broken out.⁴¹ Throughout the course of the mutiny the seamen considered themselves to be receiving a practical education in the operation of politics and in how to wield their own power. The men on the *Queen Charlotte* wrote a circular saying, 'we have come to an understanding of parliament', and the *Ramilles* seamen wrote to the crew of the *Glory*,

They know we are no politicians, but at the same time our late proceedings have convinced them that we are not entirely bereft of rationality. We all know that without

³⁸ Anthony Brown, 'The Nore Mutiny – Sedition or Ships' Biscuits? A Reappraisal' *The Mariner's Mirror*, 92:1, February 2006, p. 60.

³⁹ Letter from *The London* in Conrad Gill, *Naval Mutinies of 1797* (Manchester, 1913), p. 13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

an Act ratified by Lords and Commons, the promises of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty are of no avail. Why, then, delay the passing of such an Act, and endeavour to amuse us with needless procrastinations and evasive subterfuges?

P.S. – We are well assured that the Seamen’s Bill is hove out, particularly meeting the disapprobation of Lord Spencer, etc. We have this from good authority. If you receive this letter and approve of it, let a pair of white trousers be hung from the sprit-sail yard arm as a signal of approbation.⁴²

This enthusiasm was indicative of the novelty of the ‘floating parliament’, as the mutineers styled themselves, rather than of burgeoning political wisdom in the radical movement as a whole. In a contemporary print by Isaac Cruikshank, John Thelwall (of whom one of Piozzi’s mob-leaders was apparently an adherent) is depicted alongside the mutineers, but he is a hopeless intellectual, saying ‘Tell him we intend to be Masters, I’ll read him a Lecture’.⁴³ Thelwall, one of the most popular and committed writers and propagandists of the reform movement in the 1790s, could never quite stomach the idea of popular political action. His *Pedestrian Excursion* which he was undertaking at the time of the mutiny was an ill-fated mission through the North of England looking for popular consciousness of ‘political œconomy’, under a belief that the diffusion of such an understanding among the people would lead to their being able to influence the economic forces that had thrust them into the cold world of manufactories. Thelwall was generally disappointed, but on one occasion met a man who looked intelligent and read newspapers. Unfortunately, this man only wanted to talk about the Nore mutiny and about war and parties. ‘In short,’ wrote Thelwall, ‘he was too full of liquor and temporary politics, to furnish any information on the subject of political œconomy.’⁴⁴ Before Thelwall’s eyes the self-confirming Xenophonian understanding of popular politics was revealed. The people were not fit to legislate and so they were not fit for politics.

Volney and *Les Ruines*

Despite the apparent political impotence of members of the radical intelligentsia, the 1790s is infamous for the legal prosecutions which charged them with endangering the state. In Thomas Muir’s 1793 trial for sedition, one of the charges against him was that he had promoted and distributed a

⁴² ‘Circular from the *Queen Charlotte*’ and ‘Letter from *The Ramillies*’ in *Ibid.* pp. 55-56.

⁴³ Isaac Cruikshank, *The Delegates in Council* (London, Samuel William Fores, 1797).

⁴⁴ John Thelwall, ‘A Pedestrian Excursion’, *The Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 8, September 1799, p. 619.

piece of writing called ‘A Dialogue between the Governors and the Governed’ in Glasgow, Kirkintilloch, Milton and Lennoxton. This dialogue was part of Constantin François de Volney’s *Les Ruines* which had been translated into English in 1792. Part of the ‘Dialogue’ was reproduced in the indictment to demonstrate that it met the criteria of being a ‘wicked and seditious publication’ and was intended to ‘produce a spirit of insurrection among the people, and to stir them up to acts of outrage and opposition to the established government’.⁴⁵

The Dialogue is a conversation between ‘the people’ of an unspecified nation, who are in the throes of revolution, and their governors. Muir was not alone in enthusiastically circulating this extract. Roughly the same section was printed by John Williams in 1794 as a gratuitous footnote to a poem, by Thomas Spence in his journal *Pig’s Meat* in 1795, by Daniel Isaac Eaton in *The Philanthropist*, and by the London Corresponding Society in 1798 under the title of ‘The Torch: or A Light to enlighten the Nations of Europe in their way towards Peace and Happiness’.⁴⁶ Muir protested in court that the work could not be considered felonious or seditious, because ‘It is purely abstracted. It is entirely speculative. To no particular nation, much less to England, does it allude; if to any, it must be to France, under the ancient system.’⁴⁷ If it were otherwise, he argued, the work of Harrington, Locke and Hume would have to be similarly proscribed.⁴⁸

The debate in court then was as follows. Was the *Ruins*, as Muir insisted, received in Britain as a work of pure speculation?⁴⁹ Or was the text and its printing and propagation linked somehow to political action? The passage described the course of a revolution. It begins with ‘a prodigious movement, such as when, in the bosom of a vast city, a violent sedition breaking out in all its parts, one sees an innumerable people agitated and rushing like torrents into the streets and public places’.⁵⁰ The people

⁴⁵ *The Trial of Thomas Muir, 2nd edition*, (Edinburgh, Alexander Scott, 1793), p. 3.

⁴⁶ John Williams, *A Cabinet of Miscellanies*, (London, H.D. Symonds, 1794) pp. 20-22; ‘Extract from *Les Ruines*’, *Pig’s Meat*, Vol. 1, 3rd edition, p. 69; ‘The New Age’, *The Philanthropist*, No. 42, January 18th 1796, p. 1; Constantin-François Volney, *The Torch, or, a Light to Enlighten the Nations of Europe in their Way Towards Peace and Happiness* (London, 1798).

⁴⁷ ‘Trial of Thomas Muir’ p. 70.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 54, 65.

⁴⁹ A reconsideration of *Les Ruines* which downplays the stadial progressivism sometimes attributed to the text can be found in Minchul Kim, ‘Volney and the French Revolution’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 79:2, April 2018.

⁵⁰ Volney *The Torch*, p. 2.

complain that they lead miserable lives since they labour for scant return. Some call for a standard to be erected and for those who ‘by useful labours, support and nourish society’ to stand there.⁵¹ This activity distinguishes the labourers, artisans and tradesmen from priests, courtiers, financiers, nobles, officers: the ‘civil, military, or religious agents of government.’⁵² The revelation of this division in the nation makes the productive classes feel ‘indignation and rage’ and the unproductive feel ‘fear and dismay.’⁵³ Some of the unproductive class join the people and agree to labour, while others maintain they are of a ‘different race’, and try to persuade the people to obey the king.⁵⁴ The people protest that the king cannot act against them and nor can the law, since ‘the law is the general *will*; a new order’.⁵⁵ They argue that ‘the Kingly office originates in the people, who elect one of themselves to execute it for the *general good*. Kings, therefore, are essentially indivisible from their nations.’⁵⁶ When the army is used against the people, the people successfully persuade the soldiers that they are ‘brothers’ and the soldiers ground their arms.⁵⁷ The final line of defence for the unproductive class is the ecclesiastical class, but the people remain unconvinced by arguments about godly hierarchy.⁵⁸ Muir’s adversaries argued that this section was a roadmap to revolution, intended to convince the people that they had strength in numbers and that as the majority in the nation they could enact revolutionary change at will. The work was favoured by the practical activist. Thomas Spence used the text as part of his populist anti-Paineite strategy, and an 1803 trial of a United Irishman, John McIntosh, a carpenter, found him to have in his possession a parcel of gunpowder, some saltpetre, ‘about fifty fresh cast musquet balls [and] a volume of Volney’s *Ruins of Empires*’.⁵⁹ The London Corresponding Society’s 1798 introduction to the excerpt emphasised that it ‘shews the omnipotent powers of a nation, when it unites to overthrow Tyranny.’⁶⁰

⁵¹ *Ibid.*,

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ ‘Trial of Thomas Muir’, p. 8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ ‘Trials for High Treason in Ireland’ in William Cobbett, *Annual Register, Vol. IV* (London, 1803), p. 1969.

⁶⁰ Volney, *The Torch*, p. 1.

The work can also be placed in a more speculative tradition, in line with Muir's protests at his trial. The original publisher was Joseph Johnson and its translator was James Marshall, who were both close to Godwin.⁶¹ Volney thought that the translation was poor and the edition expensive and he made sure that a new translation was published in 1802.⁶² E.P. Thompson noted in *The Making of the English Working Class* that the *Ruins* reached a similar degree of popularity among artisans in the early nineteenth century as the *Rights of Man* achieved in the late eighteenth century, since it was published in cheap pocketbook form after the Napoleonic Wars.⁶³ On this basis, Helen Braithwaite argues that the *Ruins* was a speculative work in its first decade, mostly noted for its commentary on religion; its radicalism and practical implications were realised only after the 1802 Jefferson and Barlow translation. But this account accords too much influence to Godwin and Johnson's circle. In Thompson's last book, on William Blake, he carefully disowned his former view. Where he had reluctantly ceded in the *Making of the English Working Class* that Paine's ill-formed radicalism must, due to the extent of its circulation, have had more popular effect in the 1790s than Volney's revolutionary strategy, in *Witness Against the Beast* Thompson argued that 'Volney's *Ruins* belonged decisively, not to an academic, but to a revolutionary tradition: he pressed always his arguments to conclusions both republican and hostile to State Religion.'⁶⁴ The interests of the original publisher and translator did not after all determine the reception of Volney, because the revolution dialogue 'was circulating as a fly-sheet perhaps as early as December 1792', soon after the first English translation, and 'by the mid-1790s every advanced member of the London Corresponding Society could have bought a tiny cheap edition to carry around in his pocket'.⁶⁵ It would be a false move then to use Volney's deistic rationalism and Girondist sympathies to place him too firmly in the category of perfectibilist thinkers associated with the New School. Since Godwin hated the work in any case, claiming that it was simplistic, he might not object to our rescuing Volney from the hygienic speculative radicals around Johnson, just as Blake,

⁶¹ Helen Braithwaite, *Romanticism, Publishing and Dissent: Joseph Johnson and the Cause of Liberty* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 150.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 108.

⁶⁴ E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 199.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

who was fascinated by Volney, has been rescued before him.⁶⁶ Of course, it is not particularly interesting to categorise Volney's text as purely speculative or purely practical. In the treason and libel trials we would expect the prosecution to emphasise the practical purchase of theory and the defence to point to its abstraction; both iterations are rather impoverished considerations of practical politics. In the pamphlet war a similar dynamic was established. Burke accused radicals of trying to apply abstract speculation to real politics, and radicals realised that rather than defending their practical wisdom they could turn this accusation into a defence. It was rare that reformers were forced to engage openly in discussions of political prudence.

Insurrection in the French Colonies

The 1791 insurrection in Haiti provoked reflections on political means that were far bolder than responses to events closer to home and give some impression of how the French Revolution tied into British discussions of practical wisdom. Information about the French reaction provoked Percival Stockdale to argue that the insurrection might be justified. Stockdale wrote that the condition of the slaves, created by the planters, bred violence. As Plutarch had observed, 'Man is as destitute of mercy as any wild beast, when the rapacity, and tyranny of his nature, are under no controul.'⁶⁷ Slaves were treated so poorly in transportation that if the world mortality rate mirrored the slave mortality rate the human race would quickly reach extinction. It made little sense, then, to deplore the tactics of the insurrectionists, since they were acting from a categorical imperative.⁶⁸ If Europeans were bought as slaves, Stockdale asked,

should we not approve their conduct, or their violence (call it what you please), should we not crown it with eulogium, if they exterminated their tyrants with fire, and sword? Should they deliberately inflict the most exquisite tortures on those tyrants, would they not be excusable, in the moral judgement of those who properly value (if it is possible properly to value) those inestimable blessings, personal, rational, and religious liberty?⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Ana M. Acosta, *Reading Genesis in the Long Eighteenth Century: From Milton to Mary Shelley* (London, 2006), p. 159.

⁶⁷ Percival Stockdale, *A Letter from Percival Stockdale to Granville Sharp* (Durham, L. Pennington, 1791), title page

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. vi.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-19.

In the slaves' 'just, though desperate assertions of the inalienable privileges of the human race', they enacted far less barbarity than their masters.⁷⁰ When a 'being endowed with reason' was made entirely subject to the will of another, the killing of his oppressor was justified by self-preservation, 'for his life was reduced to a lingering and tormenting death'.⁷¹ The philosophical basis for this could be found in 'natural, and revealed religion' and in the 'fixed, and eternal moral œconomy of the Deity'.⁷² In acting against the Deity the planters must expect some retaliation ('even in *this* world') – 'The cries, therefore, of the Africans, against their tyrants, is the *Voice* – their revenge, is the *Act* – of NATURE, and of GOD.'⁷³ To prove that he was not merely speculating as an uninformed observer on the actions of the slaves, Stockdale appended a poem written by an escaped slave which he felt articulated this point:

Oh! may the Negroes, with an iron rod,
 avenge the cause of nature, and of god!
 May they, in happy combination, rise,
 torture their doom, or liberty their prize;
 rush, with resistless fury, on their foes;
 by one great effort expiate Afric's woes.

The next year Thomas Clarkson wrote an official response to the Haitian insurrection on behalf of the London Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. At this time Clarkson was the most crucial link between the French *Amis des Noirs*, headed by Jacques Pierre Brissot, and the abolition movement in Britain. Clarkson was kept well-informed about the situation, and was forwarded correspondence between Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Abbé Gregoire.⁷⁴ The *Amis des Noirs* and to a lesser extent the British abolitionists had come under attack for provoking the Haitian insurrection, so Clarkson started by trying to quash these rumours. It was well known, he said, that there were multiple bloody insurrections of slaves in ancient Greece and Rome, when no societies for the Abolition of the Slave Trade could be held responsible for the uprisings.⁷⁵ None of the various slave insurrections in the

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁷⁴ St John's College Library, Cambridge, GB 275 Clarkson, Folder 6, 159.

⁷⁵ Thomas Clarkson, *The True State of the Case, Respecting the Insurrection at St. Domingo* (Ipswich, J. Bush, 1792), p. 2.

West Indies had required external encouragement.⁷⁶ There must therefore be other reasons for the violence. The first was the slave trade, which introduced every year a new population of those who had been ‘fraudulently and forcibly deprived of the Rights of Men.’⁷⁷ The evidence of planters was to the effect that that insurrections were instigated by ‘imported Africans’ rather than by creoles or by island-born slaves.⁷⁸ This deprivation of liberty was for Clarkson adequate explanation for the uprising.⁷⁹

But there was a further cause Clarkson wanted to explore, though he knew that in straying into this territory he was putting the *Amis des Noirs* under pressure. This was the French Revolution, or more specifically the ‘Declaration of the Bill of Rights’. When these rights were declared in Haiti the People of Colour ‘felt forcibly the justice of these principles’ and set out to demand equal rights with the rest of the colony, sending representatives to the National Assembly who eventually attained legal recognition.⁸⁰ St Domingo had been thrown into confusion since some of the planters supported the principles of the revolution and some preferred the old regime.⁸¹ The recognition by the National Assembly of the rights of the People of Colour had created a further division, so that the masters of the slaves were split three ways -

What then did the negroes do at this interesting moment? Seeing their Lords and Masters not able to agree among themselves, but at dagger drawn with one another, they determined to take advantage of the divisions among them, and to assert their violated rights by force of arms.⁸²

The revolution in France had not directly caused the insurrection, but it had created a situation where the experience of the deprivation of liberty, the fuel of a doctrine of rights and a moment of weakness among the oppressors came together.⁸³ Clarkson still insisted that it was deprivation of liberty that led people to insurrection, and denied that the French Revolution’s *particular* expression of rights had had

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5. ‘People of Colour’ in this context refers to free people of colour living in Haiti.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

much to do with insurrectionary tactics. But others on both sides of the debate over the legitimacy of the insurrection said that France had brought this upon herself by proclaiming universal rights while ignoring the slaves. An anonymous pamphlet appended to Jean Philippe Garran de Coulon's observations on the uprising hazarded:

If those dreadful disorders are chargeable to the National Assembly, it is because they did *not* interfere: - because they left the black labourers in the islands at the mercy of their masters; and, after having declared that all mankind were born equal, sanctioned a degree that gave the lie to the first principles of their constitution.⁸⁴

The actions of the slaves were 'to be lamented' and should not 'excite our wonder', but they could certainly be understood through considerations of oppression and abuse.⁸⁵ Resistance, was 'always justifiable where force is the substitute of right: nor is the commission of a civil crime possible in a state of slavery.'⁸⁶

Planters claimed that the *Amis des Noirs* should take responsibility for the insurrection, because since the French Revolution 'all means have seemed to them good, so they might tend to its accomplishment – The open attack, the deep and studied innuendo, the basest and most despicable calumnies, have been practiced to forward their design.'⁸⁷ The society was accused of propagating the Declaration of the Rights of Man in the colonies, and of proselytising that 'the freedom of the Negroes is proclaimed by the Declaration of Rights.'⁸⁸ Jean Philippe Garran de Coulon did make the comparison, comparing the Haitian uprising to the Massacres of La Glacière in Avignon and the Liege Revolution: the people 'were oppressed, and they wished to become free'.⁸⁹ Just as the prisoners in the Grand Chatelet and the Bicetre prison had broken free after the Bastille was taken, the 'uncivilised' slaves, 'who were nearer to a state of nature' had heard the 'cries of liberty which resounded on every side.'⁹⁰ Liberty beget liberty.

⁸⁴ Anon., *Inquiry into the Causes of the Insurrection of the Negroes in the Island of St. Domingo, To Which are Added, Observations of M. Garran-Coulon on the Same Subject* (London, Joseph Johnson, 1792), p. 4.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Abolitionist tactics in Britain fell far from the Haitian example, and their gradualist strategy of petitioning and parliamentary debate was a world away from insurrection. When forced to confront the possibility that declarations of right produced political violence their response was to emphasise that under conditions of deprivation violence was a brute fact rather than a moral response, and that in a similar vein the domino effect of declarations and enactments of right in France did not have to be considered in a normative framework. These events were just the way of the world, they argued, and the notion that individuals or societies were secret operators accorded them far too much agency. The march of reason had its corollary (rather than its effect) in the timeless natural resistance to deprivation of liberty. The attribution of insurrection to a ‘fixed and eternal moral œconomy’ was, then, another way of avoiding the question of political prudence and of separating speculation, theory, and expressions of right from the responsibility of informing political practice. But while the concept of resistance was used by some to afford them a distance from political responsibility, in other hands it formed the basis of thinking about what could be done.

The Citizen as Legislator

In 1792, in a town in Cumbria, the Rev. David Williamson, a homesick Scottish Presbyterian, wondered how citizens could enact political justice without the levers of legislation in their hands. Williamson was born in Fife, attended Edinburgh University, and trained in the secessionist tradition, after which he was requested by two Presbyterian congregations, Montrose and Whitehaven, Cumbria.⁹¹ To his dismay the Church sent him to England. Williamson supported the French Revolution and the Society of the Friends of the People, and he wrote that he had a spark within him that rebelled against the advocates of tyranny.⁹² If he had the means, he said, he would lash the memories of the dead and the bodies of the living. ‘I would not act from hatred’, he insisted, ‘but from the love of mankind. I would be governed by the very same principles which makes society execute

⁹¹ David Williamson, *Reflections on the Four Principal Religions* (London, John Richardson, 1824), pp. vi-viii. The political background to the secessionist movement and its links to the covenanting tradition are discussed in Colin Kidd, ‘Conditional Britons: The Scots Covenanting Tradition and the Eighteenth-Century British State’, *The English Historical Review*, Nov. 2002, 117: 174.

⁹² David Williamson, *Lectures on Civil and Religious Liberty* (London, J. Johnson, 1792), p. 229.

offenders against its laws; not because it takes pleasure in the punishment, but because it wishes to prevent the repetition of crimes'.⁹³ Williamson's antinomian tendencies engendered his inversion of the idea of the revealed body politic – not only could a man work out how to organise the State by observing the map God had given him - his own body - but he could work out how to live his own life through analogy with the state, governing his body with his mind, blurring the boundaries between moralising and legislating.

Williamson advanced his argument that the common man could act politically by subverting an eighteenth-century denotation of Moses as one of the 'great legislators'. Joel Barlow, the republican American patriot and French Revolutionary, summarised this tradition in 1787, writing that 'the most distinguished characters in history, who have been considered as legislators among barbarous nations, are Moses, Lycurgus, Solon, Numa, Mahomet and Peter of Russia.'⁹⁴ The practice of referring to Moses as a great legislator may have arisen with Niccolò Machiavelli, who in Chapter Six of *The Prince* pointed out that Moses, Cyrus, Romulus and Theseus were examples of those who had achieved power through great ability.⁹⁵ For Machiavelli the ability in question was the ability to adapt their laws and systems of enforcement to the character of those who were to be governed. Of course this characterisation appealed to Montesquieu, whose *L'Esprit de Lois* (1748) compared legislators' systems with the conditions under which they were designed to operate.⁹⁶ Machiavelli had been hesitant to place Moses among the secular legislators and Montesquieu tended to endorse Moses' wisdom only in the realm of religious law, but Jean-Jacques Rousseau named Moses among other legislators without comment in his 1762 *Social Contract* (alongside Lycurgus, Mohammed and Calvin) and his 1772 *Considerations of the Government of Poland* (alongside Lycurgus and Numa).⁹⁷ A fragment of Rousseau's writing makes his position even clearer - Moses proclaims that 'J'ai vécu seul sur la terre, au sein d'un

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Joel Barlow, *The Vision of Columbus: A Poem in Nine Books* (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1787), p. 78 Barlow dismissed Solon and Numa, who he said were probably merely wise politicians as they had not actually founded anything.

⁹⁵ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 19-21.

⁹⁶ Montesquieu also discussed great legislators in his *Dissertation sur la Politique des Romains dans la Religion* (1716).

⁹⁷ Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 29.

peuple nombreux j'étois seul. Lycurgue, Solon, Numa sont mes frères. Je viens rejoindre ma famille. Je viens goûter enfin la douceur de converser avec mes semblables, de parler et d'être entendu.⁹⁸

Rousseau's insistence that Moses was a secular legislator arose from his dislike of William Warburton's *Divine Legation of Moses*. Warburton had insisted that civil society depended on religion to provide a promise of reward and punishment in a future state and that all great legislators like Lycurgus, Romulus, and Numa had used religion to this end.⁹⁹ Aristotle observed that tyrants, as well as lawgivers, benefited from pretended religion, and Machiavelli made a similar point in *The Prince*.¹⁰⁰ This distinguished canon allowed Warburton to poke fun at Hobbes, 'who, for the sake of the magistrate, was for eradicating religion.'¹⁰¹ This was more than Rousseau could bear, since

Of all Christian Authors the philosopher Hobbes is the only one who clearly saw the evil and the remedy, who dared to propose reuniting the two heads of the eagle, and to return everything to political unity, without which no State or Government will ever be well constituted. But he must have seen that the domineering spirit of Christianity was inconsistent with his system, and that the interest of the Priest would always be stronger than that of the State. It is not so much what is horrible and false as what is just and true in his politics that has made it odious.¹⁰²

Rousseau's view was that Moses had been a great legislator because he made no distinction between God and law.¹⁰³ For Warburton, what made Moses different from all other legislators was that he had offered no doctrine of a future state of rewards and punishments; the subsequent survival of his society must mean that his society had been supported by extraordinary providence, and that his law had divine origin. This shattered the notion promoted by the Socinians that the truth of Christianity was independent of the Jewish dispensation. For Rousseau it unnecessarily undermined the idea of the unity of religion and the state.

⁹⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, '[Sur la diaspora du peuple juif]' in *Oeuvres Complètes Vol. 5* (Geneva, 2012) pp. 676-677 [I have lived alone on the earth, among a numerous people I was alone. Lycurgus, Solon and Numa are my brothers. I am coming to re-join my family. I am finally coming to taste the sweetness of talking with those who are like me, of speaking and being heard.]

⁹⁹ William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses*, (London, A. Millar, 1765), pp. 157-159.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 160-161.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

¹⁰² Jean-Jacques Rousseau *The Social Contract* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 146.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

Warburton and Rousseau both used Moses to reflect upon the way that an exceptional legislator could interact with and form the state, whether from divine inspiration or secular genius. Our secessionist minister David Williamson saw the prophet's role quite differently. For Williamson, Moses' political role was not as a legislator but as a teacher of the practice of politics to the generations that followed him. Before his death, he had taught his people how their obedience would result in the prosperity and grandeur of their commonwealth.¹⁰⁴ But the Jews had lost sight of their origins and lost the rites that Moses had given them to preserve their religion. Parents were meant to have informed their children that they had been an oppressed people, and that God had taken up their cause, avenged their injuries, and that he had 'by a succession of heavy judgements, broke[n] the strength of the most powerful monarchy in the world.'¹⁰⁵ God had, 'by one fatal stroke, in which human policy and might had no share, destroyed the king himself, the flower of his nobility, of his court, and of his army.'¹⁰⁶ This founding story that had been meant to sustain the Jewish commonwealth in continued resistance to tyrants and oligarchs had been lost through lack of a sustained tradition of popular political education. But the principles of moral government and resistance to tyrants, could still be found in everyone's hearts:

As some scattered remains are still to be found in the breast of fallen man, of the noble principles originally woven into his frame, they would, on particular occasions, be called forth to vindicate, the equity of moral government. When the maxims of eternal justice were placed before men, they could not fail to recognise the archetype, of which they still retained the faint impression.¹⁰⁷

The intuitions that Williamson thought could be accessed here were more developed than the corporeal resistance to restriction of liberty we encountered earlier with regard to considerations of Haiti. This was more than an instinctive reaction to a relationship of domination. It was an understanding of politics that man had 'woven into his frame'. Where for Warburton religion functioned as an excellent tool for the tyrant, Williamson argued that religion provided a roadmap for

¹⁰⁴ Williamson, *Lectures*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

resistance while giving ‘force to the soul, which human motives can never equal.’¹⁰⁸ Therefore, tyrants were constantly jealous of religion, and restricted religious freedoms, a strategy that would always be counterproductive, since it supplemented the ‘fortitude of men’ with the ‘resolution of martyrs.’¹⁰⁹

The idea of resistance to tyrants infused much radical discussion in the eighteenth century, and it took on many guises since it was elucidated more often through historical description than through analytic distinction. For those who took the Glorious Revolution as their model, their historiographical archenemy was David Hume, who had written in his *History* that:

In the particular exertions of power, the question ought never to be forgotten, *What is best?* But in the general distribution of power among the several members of a constitution, there can seldom be admitted any other question, than *What is established?* Few examples occur of princes, who have willingly resigned their power: None of those who have, without struggle and reluctance, allowed it to be extorted from them. If any other rule than established practice be followed, factions and dissensions must multiply without end: And though many constitutions, and none more than the British, have been improved even by violent innovations, the praise, bestowed on those patriots, to whom the nation has been indebted for its privileges, ought to be given with some reserve, and surely without the least rancour against those who adhered to the ancient constitution.¹¹⁰

By describing the friends of tyranny as ‘those who adhered to the ancient constitution’, Hume was goading those who wished to find constitutional principles of action to guard against tyranny.¹¹¹

Williamson accused Hume of making ‘scholastic’ arguments about whether people could be excused for supporting tyranny because they misinterpreted the meaning of terms like ‘the supreme magistrate’ as indicating the right rather than the might of the ruling power.¹¹² Williamson said that Hume was being facetious since the principles of tyranny and resistance were not to be found in words but were divine or Mosaic impressions on men’s souls. The practice of resistance relied on a self-correcting popular balance of right, power, and prudence. In England, the people had the power to easily overturn the government, but prudence dictated that they would not do so while the government afforded them protection. If a government was absolute, the power of the people and their right of

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹¹⁰ David Hume, *The History of England, Vol. V* (London, A. Millar, 1773), p. 479.

¹¹¹ See also *Ibid.*, p. 497 for Hume’s description of the passive obedience integral to the pre-’88 constitution, a dig at ancient constitution-reliant resistance theorists.

¹¹² Williamson, *Lectures*, pp. 31-32.

resistance amounted to ‘the very same thing’.¹¹³ Both duty and interest would compel the people to attack the government.

Both Hume and Jonathan Swift’s arguments challenging the right of resistance were regurgitated repeatedly during the 1790s. Where Hume had attacked resistance on the basis that it was not a categorical political principle, Swift had attacked it on the basis that its proponents deliberately exaggerated the *extent* of tyranny. Swift downplayed the grievances of the Covenanters, saying that ‘it seems that the Presbyterians in the latter years of king Charles the Second, upon accounts of certain plots, (allowed by the Bishop Burnet to be genuine) had been, for a short time, forbid to hold their conventicles’.¹¹⁴ The equivalent argument in the 1790s was made by Burke. Where Swift had presented the Whigs’ ‘revolution-principle’ as ‘a principle perpetually disposing men to Revolutions’, Burke argued that the Revolution Society was a society for revolutions.¹¹⁵ Williamson believed that this kind of scholastic word-play, with which he also charged Paine, was so cheap that its peddlers would not remain famous in posterity.¹¹⁶

Burke wrote that the lesson of the seventeenth century was that general theories concerning the ‘rights of men’ were ineffective ways to secure right.¹¹⁷ The parliamentarians who had prepared the Petition of Right in 1628 had been entirely aware of the possibility of asserting such a universal right,

but, for reasons worthy of their practical wisdom, which superseded their theoretic science, they preferred this positive, recorded, *hereditary* title to all which can be dear to the man and the citizen, to that vague speculative right, which exposed their sure inheritance to be scrambled for and torn to pieces by every wild litigious spirit.¹¹⁸

Many radicals thinking about resistance agreed with Burke that political action should not be born from intellectualism. It is clear from Williamson that there were other routes to resistance beyond natural right, and it would have been an unusual position in any case to argue that reason could

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

¹¹⁴ Jonathan Swift, *The Presbyterians’ Plea of Merit* (Dublin, G. Faulkner, 4th ed. 1733), p. 10.

¹¹⁵ Jonathan Swift, *The Examiner* (London, John Morphew, 2011) No. 40; April 26th to May 3rd, p. 2; Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London, J. Dodsley, 1790), p. 31.

¹¹⁶ Williamson, *Lectures*, p. 238.

¹¹⁷ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 46.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

motivate the will sufficiently to lead people into a state of dangerous resistance. Burke's insistence on an extremist-intellectual, moderate-practical divide was a clever argumentative move, but if taken too seriously leads us to lose sight of the political thought of reformers who were similarly wary of speculation but saw routes to resistance that relied neither on abstract right nor corporeal imperative.

Traditions of Association

To explore what resistance meant and to establish the kind of force they might require to effect it, reformers associated. In the 1790s, every town sprouted Whig Clubs, alongside corresponding societies, clubs to rejoice in the proceedings of the French Revolution, and aristocratic clubs with their eclectic offshoots. Some affected to be purely intellectual endeavours while others, like the United Irishmen, United Scotsmen, and the London Corresponding Society, openly displayed their activist bent. Associations might seem to be a familiar and forward-looking form of political action, but in the eyes of the Rev. John Brand the practice of associating revealed that reformers were engaged in a tradition of practical politics that had a long heritage. While the associations of the previous decade, such as Christopher Wyvill's Yorkshiremen, might have appeared toothless, Brand thought that a true understanding of this political practice showed just how dangerous it really was. In his *Historical Essay on the Principles of Political Associations in a State* (1796), Brand sought simultaneously to vindicate the network of loyalist associations established in 1792 and to condemn Charles James Fox's Whig Club. Brand was an adherent to the cause of 'Political Arithmetick' and so sought to classify and categorise species of association. He did not believe that, through this approach, radicals were making pertinent discoveries about practical politics. But he did think they were playing with fire.

Brand's objection to the radical associations hinged on their universalism, whether real or pretended. If the object of an association was to 'unite the action of the associators into one mode', a 'General Association of the People' like the one Charles James Fox wanted to create must have the intention of bringing 'a whole people into action, including the populace.'¹¹⁹ Brand argued that the Whigs desired

¹¹⁹ John Brand, *An Historical Essay on the Principles of Political Associations in a State* (London, Longman, 1796), p. 2.

to bring the whole populace under the control of a small ‘head’, comprising Fox, Mackintosh, and a few others.¹²⁰ This style of association was unacceptable to Brand, since ‘no single power in a State should operate without a counterpoise to check it’, and the ‘General Association’ could clearly have no such counterpoise.¹²¹ Ideally a nation would be nudged along by opposing forces and end up on roughly the right track, but a general association would cause the nation to drift unchangingly in a set direction. It was obvious to Brand that creating an association was about combining the associators for immediate action. Popular associations occurred when ‘the populace become, or are invited to become, contracting parties’; Brand believed that no association could retain control of its political action under these circumstances.¹²² Of course, E.P. Thompson thought that this phenomenon of associations having ‘unlimited’ membership was what set the 1790s apart as being a decade of tactical and conceptual innovation.¹²³

The typical popular association for Brand was a religious one. It was irrelevant which religion – Brand argued that the Catholic League in France established a precedent for the Covenanters.¹²⁴ The Guises had been emulated more recently by Lord George Gordon’s Protestant Association, which relied on raking the embers of seventeenth-century republicanism to promote the principles of levelling and the persecution of Catholics.¹²⁵ The recent Gordon Riots in 1780 allowed Brand to refute arguments that radicals in the 1790s were engaging with the principles of resistance from a more enlightened viewpoint than their seventeenth-century predecessors. Brand mocked the idea that ‘nothing but real grievances will drive the populace into insurrection and violence’, since ‘the humane indulgence extended to a respectable but persecuted sect in 1780, was no grievance which the populace felt anything from’.¹²⁶ The populace had simply acted on a heady mix of abstract principles and re-excited prejudices.¹²⁷

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹²³ Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 24.

¹²⁴ Brand, *An Historical Essay*, p. 31.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

Brand believed that associations based on the principle of the rights of man had an even longer historical lineage. Like Williamson, Brand identified the Jews as those who had first been taught ‘the sacred duties of insurrection’; the cause of their treacherous habits was the doctrine of ‘liberty in the abstract’, taught by Judas the Galilean and Zadok the Pharisee.¹²⁸ The eventual destruction of the Jewish nation was proof enough of the dangers of stirring such passions for abstract liberty, a case strengthened by the fact that the nobility and the propertied classes had been slaughtered. The tradition of insurrection provoked by commitment to abstract right had then been nursed in France by radical peasants, beginning with the insurrections of the Bagaudae from the late third century to the fifth century.¹²⁹ For his knowledge of the Bagaudae, Brand was indebted to Edward Gibbon, who had attributed the rebellions to a lack of protection afforded to the people, who responded by seeking security in a tyrannical overlord before tiring of being dominated in this way. Gibbon wrote that peasants had ‘asserted the natural rights of men’ with ‘savage cruelty’, persecuting the Gallic nobles, and establishing a ‘wild scene of anarchy’.¹³⁰ For Gibbon, this movement appeared to be similar to the insurrection of the Jacquerie in 1358 and the corresponding English peasant rebellions.¹³¹ Brand pointed out that the Jacquerie had excused their persecution of the gentry by accusing them of abandoning John II at the Battle of Poitiers, and that ‘from this precedent, perhaps, has arisen the constant subsequent practice of those who are endeavouring to convert a Monarchy into a republic, to mask their first measures under great professions of zeal for the honour, happiness, and dignity of the Prince.’¹³² The other similarity between the Jacqueries and the Jacobins was of course the name. For Brand there was nothing modern about Jacobinism.¹³³

The radical associations of the peasants in France had been neatly copied by the English peasants during their revolt of 1381. Hume described the principles of John Ball as

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37. Brand followed Flavius Josephus in arguing that these two had founded the ‘fourth sect’ of Judaism.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹³⁰ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 2 (London, W. Strahan, 1781), p. 430.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 429.

¹³² Brand, *An Historical Essay*, p. 43.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

the principles of the first origin of mankind from one common stock, their equal right to liberty and to all the goods of nature, the tyranny of artificial distinctions, and the abuses which had arisen from the degradation of the more considerable part of the species, and the aggrandizement of a few insolent rulers.¹³⁴

For Brand this was the type of levelling principle typical of this category of insurrections, and it always resulted in violence against the nobility. Just like the English peasants in the fourteenth century, 1790s radicals had copied levelling principles from the French and had used similar means to diffuse constitutional information. The only difference between the 1790s radicals and their predecessors was the slight advantage afforded them through the development of the press. Brand disagreed with Hume's argument that fourteenth-century unrest in Britain was due to a greater prevalence of personal slavery than elsewhere in Europe. He also thought that the argument that the fourteenth-century radicals differed from the eighteenth-century ones due to their lack of enlightenment was specious, since in feudal society the lack of printing was counterbalanced by the access to the upper class by vassals and retainers, allowing a swift propagation of new ideas throughout society.¹³⁵ John Ball's principles could easily be compared with those laid out by Joel Barlow in his *Advice to the Privileged Orders*, since

Mr Ball, in his Homilies on the Rights of Man, preached on 'their equal title to all the goods of nature;' and Mr. Barlow, that 'every man is born with an imprescriptible claim to a portion of the elements, which portion is termed his birthright'. We see both of them lay down the same doctrine in the same guarded manner; half holding forth to the populace, and half keeping back, an expectation of an equal division of lands. This Century had not the honour of first discovering this fine principle of tribunial morality, in the classical records, or of the invention of it.¹³⁶

There was therefore a high risk of insurrection from 1790s radicals, whose principles of political action had a long, dry, and unvaried history.

Some reformers objected to these comparisons, since they claimed that their associations were 'limited'. Charles Fox's association, for instance, had the clear objective of the repeal of two Acts of Parliament, and the subscribers, or associators, were 'to pursue no other point'.¹³⁷ But this was no

¹³⁴ David Hume, *The History of England, Vol. 3* (London, T. Cadell, 1796), p. 7.

¹³⁵ Brand, *An Historical Essay*, p. 51.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

comfort at all to Brand. Reformers were notoriously inconsistent with their principles when it suited them: immediately after the Brissotins had declared that they abhorred republicanism they had rushed to oppose the King at the Tuileries.¹³⁸ An association might call itself ‘limited’ by confining its objects *in theory* to a number of speculative points. But the introduction of the people effectively removed limitations, as popular action could not be controlled by the association.¹³⁹ The Whigs were frequently accused of having unwittingly opened the door to the violent passions of the people. John Stewart, famous for his perambulations across various continents in his attempt to imitate the Peripatetics, wrote in his *Tocsin of Britannia* (1794) that the Whigs ‘serve unintentionally as the edge of the wedge, or point of the arrow, to the general class of revolutionists; who, if left to themselves, would be blunted in power by their desperate circumstances and immoral characters.’¹⁴⁰ This was not the time for sharp theory, said Stewart, since it was instead necessary to ‘discover that delicate and precise line of conduct which is to guide political prudence.’¹⁴¹

Brand argued that little had changed between the seventeenth century and the eighteenth. The people had the same passions, drives and unruliness, and in both cases were convinced by political operators that they were over-taxed and that their rights were in jeopardy. Both were brought into action by leaders who talked in abstractions and who would eventually find themselves incapable of stemming the flood of popular arousal they had unleashed. But the eighteenth-century situation was more dangerous, because the mode of action of the seventeenth-century multitude was now

reduced into a science; and they are cantoned over the whole country, the chiefs of a hostile State within a State, formed into the exactest discipline, under an active Directory, which knows how to distribute its force, and apply its operations to every point of attack and defence where they shall become necessary. They are an army

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹³⁹ The situations in which resistance was permissible were extremely limited. Brand asked the reader to imagine a situation in which the gain of a specific reform was probable, the advantage of such a reform very great, the chance of the attempt at alteration proceeding to anarchy small. In this situation, said Brand, we must consider that the situation of anarchy – arbitrary power of all over one – is an infinite evil, and though the chance of it occurring would be finite, the quantity of evil would outweigh the finite good achieved by the reform. The evil of Tyranny was of course another infinite evil, but this was of the lower order of infinity, whereas anarchy fell into the second order of infinite evil. Effectively, tyranny meant you were apprehensive of the unlimited will of one person, whereas anarchy gave you thousands of tyrants. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁴⁰ John Stewart, *The Tocsin of Britannia* (London, J. Owen, 1794), p. 1.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

actuated by a single will and a single intelligence, which has discovered a new and profound system of tactics.¹⁴²

For obvious reasons, reformers rarely directly discussed their relationship to violence. But some discussed the kind of force or power they might hold, and how they might use it, and some had a self-awareness of their own traditions of practical politics. As Brand said, and as many reformers refused to acknowledge, the practice of associating was only a first step. The more difficult task was to determine how to act in an association.

What Kind of Wisdom is Political Wisdom?

The leaders of radical popular associations in the 1790s were in an awkward position. They denied the intent to use violence, while citing violent precedents for the notion of resistance and while clearly trying to bring the whole of the people into association. As Brand asked, what other kind of political action could such a body undertake? There were a very limited number of acceptable answers to this question. In the 1780s, reform associations had affected to use mass petitioning to effect political change. Christopher Wyvill's Yorkshiremen had been effusive in describing their ambitions for the practice of associating, saying in a 1781 address that 'when new dangers arise to public liberty, new modes of defence, adapted to resist the attack, are not only justifiable, but absolutely necessary for its preservation.'¹⁴³ They had tirelessly promoted the practice of creating representative assemblies of the people, and claimed that they were acting with 'true political prudence' by intervening when they did, and by maintaining moderation in their political aims.¹⁴⁴ The whole project had been extraordinarily unsuccessful. In 1789, reformers watched a revolution over the channel. Some hoped for emulation; most looked back and forth between Gallic scenes of action and the tactical inertia that their own factions had fallen into, struggling to see how to rescue the movement.

For zealous Paineites, seeing and proselytising the right political ends would sort everything else out.

For others this was a vast oversimplification. Rather than relying on abstractions, it was possible to

¹⁴² Brand, *An Historical Essay*, p. 76.

¹⁴³ 'Paper 3, 'The Address of the Committee of Association for the Country of York, to the Electors of the Counties, Cities, and Boroughs, within the Kingdom of Great-Britain' in *Political Papers, Vol I* (York, W Blanchard, 1794), p. 306.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

seek revealed political action, traditions of practical wisdom, or experimental political prudence. Williamson had found in Moses a source of revealed resistance theory; others looked to the possibilities of arming the people, employing financial tactics, or manipulating the king. To make headway with these theories, it was necessary to steer clear of the obstacles thrown up by those who thought political wisdom was a kind of knowledge only fit for legislators, or only fit for speculators.

Aristotle had written in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that political action was to do with *phronesis* - practical wisdom. This kind of political wisdom was not a science (*episteme*) because its first principles were variable, and was not an art (*techne*) because it was not to do with making and was not a productive capacity.¹⁴⁵ To practise politics was not to create an artifice. *Phronesis* was instead knowledge of action which provided the capacity to act well. The mental activity characteristic of practical wisdom was deliberation, which concerned only things that could be brought about by our own efforts.¹⁴⁶ Godwin could not deliberate about the best society, and Bentham could not deliberate about the best form of constitution for the French. A *phronimos* would be guided by knowledge of good action, not knowledge of good ends.

This relationship between knowledge and action was a matter of some interest in the eighteenth century, as we have already seen with the discourse in Scotland around Xenophon. It seemed to some that the relationship changed depending on whether the question was concerned with truth, morality or politics: knowledge would be applied differently and a different species of virtue would be required depending on whether the actor was playing the role of a doctor, a member of the community, or a legislator. Hume, on the other hand, had written that the ancients ‘made no material distinction among the different species of mental endowments and defects, but treated all alike under the appellation of virtues and vices, and made them indiscriminately the object of their moral reasonings.’¹⁴⁷ The poet and philosopher James Beattie, professor of moral philosophy at Marischal College, mocked Hume’s

¹⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 105-108.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-44.

¹⁴⁷ David Hume, ‘An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals’, *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects, Vol. 2* (Dublin: J. Williams, 1779), p. 371.

interpretation, saying that there were plentiful examples of the ancients drawing a distinction between knowledge and action:

‘Man’s virtue and vice,’ says Marcus Aurelius, ‘consists not in those affections in which we are passive, but in action. To a stone thrown upward it is no evil to fall, nor good to have mounted.’ And in another place, ‘The vain-glorious man placeth his good in the action of another; the sensual in his own passive feelings, the wise man in his own action.’ ‘The contemplative life,’ says Plutarch, ‘when it fails to produce the active, is unprofitable.’ ‘To acquire knowledge,’ says Lucian, ‘is of no use, if we do not also frame our lives according to something better.’¹⁴⁸

Hume did not understand Aristotle for quite a simple reason, said Beattie. He had only read the chapter titles of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Aristotle’s tripartite classification helps us to understand what forms radical political knowledge could take other than Godwinian rational ones. In the 18th century, Kant was exploring a similar path in his 1785 *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals*, which followed the form of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to frame an argument about duty. The moral worth of an action is not determined by the expected effect of that action, he said, since effects could be brought about by all manner of causes, and so a focus on effects would obscure the sublimity of the will of the rational being.¹⁴⁹ For actions that were good merely as a means to ends, Kant called the imperative to carry out the action ‘hypothetical’, whereas those imperatives which were good by reason he called ‘categorical’.¹⁵⁰ If one was practicing a science and desirous of some end, the imperative was merely one of ‘skill’.¹⁵¹

Aristotle and Kant are often held to be making arguments about politics and morality that privilege ends over means, and are considered to be describing ‘means’ that are *an end in themselves*.¹⁵² In these accounts of Aristotle and Kant, Aristotle is a teleological thinker, and Kant is constantly indebted to some higher good. But Aristotle’s account of political action, seen in relation to those of Plato and

¹⁴⁸ James Beattie, *Essays on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* (Edinburgh, William Creech, 1776), p. 279.

¹⁴⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 7-13.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁵² For instance Raymond Geuss claims that the problem of the means-ends dichotomy can be traced to an ‘Aristotelian’ line of thought that life is like ‘the exercise of a craft with a determinate end’. Geuss cites the *Nicomachean Ethics* to try to demonstrate that Aristotle is fixated on a distinction between instrumental actions performed as ends in themselves and autotelic actions performed for the sake of an external end. Raymond Geuss, ‘Marxism and the Ethos of the Twentieth Century’, *A World Without Why* (Princeton, 2014), p. 63. See also Beatrice Hanssen, *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory* (London, 2000), p. 18 for a dismissal of Aristotle and Kant as ‘instrumentalist’.

Xenophon, makes more sense when considered in terms of the triad of science, art, and practical wisdom, or of *techne, episteme and phronesis*, than when considered in terms of ‘means and ends’.¹⁵³ Similarly, Kant’s depiction of the Kingdom of Ends does more to destroy the distinction between means and ends than to denigrate means. The Kingdom of Ends serves not as a motivator for action, nor as a way to determine what action counts as good action, but as something that will follow from pursuing good, or rational, action. Kant’s study of means and ends is similarly complicated in his development of the concept of ‘purposiveness without an end’ with regard to morality and aesthetics in the *Third Critique*.¹⁵⁴

The idea of *phronesis* is therefore related to concepts of non-instrumentalist action. This history has been partially elucidated by Eugene Garver who gives an impressive account of Machiavelli’s considerations of practical wisdom. For Machiavelli, Garver writes, ‘the problem of good practical conduct, as opposed especially to good artistic performance and good theoretical understanding, is to see how constancy of character can be consistent with the adaptability to circumstances it sometimes seems to require.’¹⁵⁵ This problem takes many forms – how can a *phronimos* control the people without weakening them? How is success not to be bought too dearly by destroying the consistency of the self through adaptability? How can a leader determine success of action when causation can only be determined retrospectively? How is it possible to teach prudence when the very nature of the virtue changes as circumstances shift?¹⁵⁶ Aristotle was frustrated in his own time with the refusal to pursue these questions, accusing Plato of substituting intellectual virtue and theoretical knowledge for the state of character required for practical wisdom. He said that the sophists had made prudence mere cleverness.¹⁵⁷ Garver argues that Machiavelli answered these questions by recognising the similarity

¹⁵³ A related criticism of modern readings of Aristotle can be found in James Gordon Finlayson “‘Bare Life’ and Politics in Agamben’s Reading of Aristotle”, *The Review of Politics*, 72: 1, 2010 which concerns Foucauldian and Arendtian (mis)interpretations of Aristotle that are replicated in Giorgio Agamben’s work. Finlayson’s critique might be extended to Agamben’s analysis of means and ends in Aristotle in ‘Notes on Gesture’, *Means without End* (Minneapolis, 2000) but Finlayson does not take into account Agamben’s more careful handling of Aristotle’s metaphysics in for example ‘The Power of Thought’ trans. Kalpana Seshardi, *Critical Inquiry*, 40: 2, 2014.

¹⁵⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer, eds. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge, 2000), p. 111.

¹⁵⁵ Eugene Garver, *Machiavelli and the History of Prudence* (Madison, 1987), p. 7.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

between rhetoric and prudence, which both require an emphasis on particularity.¹⁵⁸ For Machiavelli, prudence could be taught not by example or by rule, but by teaching the relationship between rule and case, along the lines of Algernon Sidney's ambition to 'make many Cyruses'.¹⁵⁹ It is this idea of non-instrumentalist action or practical wisdom that I seek to explore in the 1780s and 1790s.

Raymond Geuss is pessimistic as to the prospect of developing an understanding of non-instrumentalist means. Remarking on Alasdair MacIntyre's observation that Marx appeals to a realm of human action called 'praxis' that is neither instrumental, nor related to production, Geuss expresses intrigue but ultimately frustration with Marx's lack of 'satisfactory explanation'.¹⁶⁰ In *Outside Ethics*, Geuss says that the philosophical question 'What ought I to do?' is a question which was irrelevant to the pre-Socratic Greeks and has only become relevant because distinctions and relationships were established between being and becoming, *sein* and *sollen*.¹⁶¹ Geuss politicises this idea in *Philosophy and Real Politics*, where he undermines the view that politics is a science, and says that instead 'politics is more like the exercise of a craft or art, than like traditional conceptions of what happens when a theory is applied'.¹⁶² As we have seen, there is a third option which is closer to the missing 'praxis', but Geuss is wary of straying too close to 'virtue' which he sees as autotelic, so he reverts to the category of action concerned with 'making' to avoid the murky *zweck an sich selbst*, the action that is an end in itself.¹⁶³ Since for Geuss Aristotle is a proponent of instrumentalist action, he struggles to find any alternative tradition.

Giorgio Agamben has played a more constructive role in establishing a political theory of means. In his essay 'Notes on Gesture' (1992) he gestures to a third type of action, which is neither production (making) nor praxis (which has an end within itself). This type of action is pure mediality, where nothing is produced or acted, but instead something is 'endured or supported'.¹⁶⁴ 'Politics is the sphere

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁶⁰ Geuss, 'Marxism and the Ethos of the Twentieth Century', p. 60.

¹⁶¹ Raymond Geuss, *Outside Ethics* (Princeton, 2005), p. 59.

¹⁶² Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, 2008), p. 15.

¹⁶³ Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, pp. 119-120.

¹⁶⁴ Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture', p. 57.

of pure means', says Agamben, 'that is, of the absolute and complete gesturality of human beings.'¹⁶⁵

And again, in 'Notes on Politics' (1992):

A finality without means (the good and the beautiful as ends in themselves), in fact is just as alienating as a mediality that makes sense only with respect to an end. What is in question in political experience is not a higher end but being-into-language itself as pure mediality, being-into-a-mean as an irreducible condition of human beings. *Politics is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the act of making a means visible as such.* Politics is the sphere neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated to an end; rather, it is the sphere of a pure mediality without end intended as the field of human action and of human thought.¹⁶⁶

This informs Agamben's idea of the State of Exception, which allows the state to appear to be honouring a social contract of mutual safety, while instead pursuing means that are violent. In circumstances of constant exception, means *cannot* function as routes to ends since the relationship between rule and case cannot be properly determined. Garver notes that this idea is also expressed by Machiavelli.¹⁶⁷ Neither does it make sense to understand political action in a context of instability as representing an end in itself. Ideas of exception and instability were central to 1790s discourse about means and ends in politics. 'Existing circumstances', as the doctrine was known, allowed the state to use violence and coercion against reformers, forcing a reconsideration of the relationship between means and ends on the part of those who were driven to act in exceptional times.

Changing Ideas of Political Practice in the 1790s

States of exception in the late eighteenth century changed the way that people thought about means and ends in politics. At the same time, ideas about means shifted according to reformers' interpretations of the new commercial state: the power of the people was no longer held to lie solely in their capacity for physical force. Instead, radical strategists saw that the people had the potential to shake finance until the state capitulated to their demands. During the 1797 naval mutiny, one of the seamen noticed that they had stumbled unwittingly into a position of real strength – they were at once disrupting commerce and demonstrating the capacity for violence. He asked his friends, 'is there not

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁶⁶ Giorgio Agamben, 'Notes on Politics' in *Means without End*, p. 6.

¹⁶⁷ Garver, *Machiavelli and the History of Prudence*, p. 28.

many among you here as fit to be our sovereign as George Rex? He has power and we have the force of gunpowder.’¹⁶⁸ Another naval man said to his superior ‘You know, Sir, we have the keys of the nation in our hands, and if every demand of ours were granted we would not give them up.’¹⁶⁹

Despite this, for E.P. Thompson the period after the French Revolution was a time of loss for radicals. The development of an eighteenth-century ‘moral economy’ into the romanticism and radicalism of the nineteenth century had the potential to counter ‘acquisitive man’ but failed miserably.¹⁷⁰ ‘Resistance theory’ had no potential at all in Thompson’s eyes:

The stance of the common Englishmen was not so much democratic, in any positive sense, as anti-absolutist. He felt himself to be an individualist, with few affirmative rights, but protected by the laws against the instruction of arbitrary power. More obscurely, he felt that the Glorious Revolution afforded a constitution precedent for the right to riot in resistance to oppression. And this indeed was the central paradox of the eighteenth century, in both intellectual and practical terms: constitutionalism was the ‘illusion of the epoch’. Political theory, of traditionalists and reformers alike, was transfixed by the Whiggish limits established by the 1688 settlement, by Locke or by Blackstone.¹⁷¹

After the 1790s there was some shift from tactics based on resistance theory toward those based on labour power. But the supposedly enlightened shift to non-violent strategies can just as easily be understood as a capitulation by radicals upon realising their fragility - an attempt to tackle economy as the weakest part of the state, rather than an attempt to use labour power as the most potent weapon of the people. The Scottish science of political economy had rendered this field a safer place for experimentation and a part of life that was governed by unalterable laws of necessity. The move away from eighteenth-century notions of political practice was less empowering than a Marxist account might claim.

This relationship between commerce and violence was explored carefully by radical strategists in the 1780s and 1790s. One framework for interpreting this relationship, which helps to avoid some modern preconceptions about the two, can be found in the great 20th century radical debate on means: the

¹⁶⁸ Address to the Crew of *The Sandwich* in Gill, *Naval Mutinies of 1797*, p. 322.

¹⁶⁹ Charles Cunningham, *A Narrative of the Occurrences that took place during the Mutiny at the Nore* (Chatham, 1829), p. 99.

¹⁷⁰ Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 915.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 183-185.

debate between Georges Sorel, who wrote *On Violence* in 1908, and Walter Benjamin, who wrote his *Critique of Violence* in 1921. Sorel lambasted the ‘optimist’, who takes ‘no account of the great difficulties presented by his projects; these projects seem to him to possess a force of their own’.¹⁷² If such an optimist found themselves in power, they would lead their country to disaster. Sorel said that the pessimist should recognise that social change could only occur through some kind of catastrophe, and that such a catastrophe remained a possibility because of the power of radical myths of deliverance.¹⁷³ The only way to get people to participate in revolutionary action was to have them imagine themselves engaged in a decisive struggle, rather than to have them imagine an end and to be moved by the desire for an outcome.¹⁷⁴ ‘When we act’, said Sorel, ‘we are creating a completely artificial world placed ahead of the present world and composed of movements which depend entirely on us. In this way our freedom becomes perfectly intelligible.’¹⁷⁵

To act was to be free, rather than being a mode of seeking freedom, and myths could not be invalidated since they were not scientific statements but deliberations at one with the convictions of a group. In political action like riots and strikes, people would discover an intuition of what they were doing which was impossible to describe in language. Programmes for the future were reactionary, said Sorel, and radicals needed to work because their work was important and sublime, not for some instrumental end.¹⁷⁶ Sorel tried to describe a situation in which means and ends were continuous. The will to action fostered in workers for the purposes of the general strike was one and the same as the morality that they would exhibit when they had seized the productive forces. Sorel framed his descriptive project in terms of *anti-utopianism*.

Violence appeared to Sorel to be the type of action around which all class-based political struggle pivoted. The demonstration, much as it might have been stripped of its symbolic meaning, was a demonstration of capacity to violence. The response of the capitalist class to violence was not

¹⁷² Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 10.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

oppositional violence. In fact, they were terrified of utilising the potential of the police against the rioter. Their method was instead to adopt conciliatory approaches to settling disputes, and to insist that violence was a concept irrelevant to their age.¹⁷⁷ Violence, once commonplace as a system for ordering popular society, had been gradually replaced by cunning, or fraud. Fraud was regarded as ‘infinitely less serious than brutality’ and was now the accepted principle of operation for finance.¹⁷⁸

For Sorel it was imperative that working people effected a return to violence, since only this strategy would re-establish the class struggle on its proper footing. Sorel arrived at violence as the primary means of political struggle through considering the opposite strategy: conciliation and diplomacy. In thinking in this way, Sorel was utilising an ancient distinction made by Cicero, who said in *De Officiis* that the two practices most likely to undermine justice were force and fraud.¹⁷⁹ Cicero’s force-fraud distinction was made famous by Machiavelli’s subversion of it. Machiavelli said that force and fraud were necessary parts of politics, if regrettably so, thus gaining himself a place in the ‘realist’ canon.¹⁸⁰ For Machiavelli, fraud, or cunning, seemed the better strategy for a prince, and Sorel (predictably) staked a claim on the other concept, decrying fraud as bourgeois politics. Thus, in one of Sorel’s many criticisms of the English trade union movement, he said,

In the opinion of many well-informed people, the transition from violence to cunning which shows itself in contemporary strikes in England cannot be too much admired. The great object of the trade unions is to obtain a recognition of the right to employ threats disguised in diplomatic formulas: their desire is that their delegates, when doing the round of the workshops, should not be interfered with.¹⁸¹

It is this distinction and allocation of means, of force and fraud, that Walter Benjamin challenged in his response to and elaboration on Sorel’s work, the *Critique of Violence*, a point which remains somewhat obscured in scholarship on the two works. Benjamin said that a typical industrial strike was a form of extortion which *could* properly be called violence.¹⁸² This was because the omission of work

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 187. This framing is still prevalent, ie. Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York, 2011), or Max Roser, ‘War and Peace’, *Our World in Data* (2016).

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹⁷⁹ See discussion in Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Vol. 2* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 125.

¹⁸⁰ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 60.

¹⁸¹ Sorel, *On Violence*, p. 211.

¹⁸² Walter Benjamin, ‘Critique of Violence’ in Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (eds.) *Selected Writings, Volume 1* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), p. 239.

'takes place in the context of a conscious readiness to resume the suspended action under certain circumstances that either have nothing whatever to do with this action or only superficially modify it.'¹⁸³ The lack of connection between means and ends meant that the means could properly be described as 'force'.¹⁸⁴ Benjamin collapsed the force-fraud distinction – the law only prohibited fraud because of the necessary potential violence contained within the act of fraud. Violence is a pivotal concept when considering radical political means. Violence heralds the collapse of instrumentality in politics because it is impossible to deduce the desired ends of those practicing violence by looking solely at their means (we cannot deduce what the women trying to cut off the horse's tails 'wanted'). For Benjamin, practicing force *or* fraud was practicing a politics of 'pure means', because no violence could be contained properly within the state's *modus operandi* of positive law. This choice, of whether force and fraud should be distinguished in the manner of Sorel, or collapsed into a broad concept of violence in the manner of Benjamin, was an important one for reformers in the 1780s and 1790s. Did tactics focussed on commerce and luxury have less weight behind them than threats of armed resistance? Did all potential routes fall outside the limits of positive law and what did this mean about approaches that should be pursued in Ireland and Scotland? There was no shortage of approaches to these questions. Where some reformers wandered into the world of abstract ideas, others took stock of their particular circumstances, looked to the relationship between rule and case, considered their power and where to strike, and wondered what principles should regulate their actions. In the absence of categorical guidelines of political prudence, and in a situation of increasing exception, reformers in the 1790s mustered practical virtue and political wisdom to determine what was to be done.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Chapter II: Edmund Burke and the Debate on Theory and Practice

Despite the religious enthusiasm of Scotland's Presbyterians, Glasgow Cathedral remained standing in the sixteenth century. The presbytery showed a benevolent interest in the building and were unwilling to let it 'fall down and decay', so that despite the now almost customary damage caused by 'taking away of the leid, sclait, and wther grayth thairof', Glasgow's was the only mainland medieval cathedral to survive Scotland's reformation.¹ According to popular anecdote, the building was saved by a canny gardener, who in 1567 addressed the mob who were about to pull it down. "Ye gowks", he exclaimed, "can ye no make it a house for serving God in your own way – it would cost you muckle to build ane like it?"²

The original raconteur of this story was David Steuart Erskine, Earl of Buchan, who in 1792 was grappling with the question of whether edifices of state should be torn down and rebuilt or improved through renovation. His telling of the story lacked the comedy-Scotticisms added by nineteenth-century wits. 'My friends', said the gardener, 'cannot you make it a house for serving God in your own way, for it would cost you a great deal of money to build such another?'³ Buchan was engaged in writing a biography of Andrew Fletcher, the Scottish rebel statesman, 1688 veteran, and opponent of the Act of Union, and was using this medium to attempt an answer to a proposition that Edmund Burke had made in 1790 in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Burke had said that

it is with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society, or of building it up again, without having models and patterns of approved utility before his eyes.⁴

¹ Scottish Burgh Record Society, *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Glasgow, 1573-1* (Glasgow, 1876), p. 20.

² Alexander Hislop, *The Book of Scottish Anecdote: Humorous, Social, Legendary, and Historical* (Edinburgh, 1874), p. 559.

³ David Steuart Erskine, Earl of Buchan, *Essays on the Lives and Writings of Fletcher of Saltoun and the Poet Thomson* (London, J. Debrett, 1792), p. 41.

⁴ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London, J. Dodsley, 1790), p. 90.

Burke's vision of gradual and prudent improvement based on experience made Buchan uneasy. Buchan wished that the Glorious Revolution had erected 'an entire new fabric of constitution', instead of patching and buttressing the existing edifice, and he thought that America and France had been lucky to have the opportunity to erect a constitution 'from the first foundations of jurisprudence.'⁵ The situation in Britain was like inheriting a 'crazy old family mansion', complained Buchan; most people would rather be given the task of building a new house.⁶ Buchan had been of the same opinion eleven years earlier, in 1781, when he wrote to William Gray, secretary of the Yorkshire Association, saying that all their problems arose from the 1688 settlement, and that annual parliaments, borough reform and reform of House of Commons representation would not 'cure the disease in question'.⁷ In 1791, Buchan wrote to Alexander Fraser that the dissemination of political ideas among the people would have less effect in Britain than it had had in France, since the French, having no existing popular representation, 'had the choice of their plan and situation'.⁸ A month later he wrote again complaining that 'I fear there must be rough work before anything can be done to saddle the people with whom I am most immediately connected in principle. Some people think it might have been as well for Britain if Charles II had lived and gained his point, so that we might have had clear foundations to build upon; and I am not much disposed to deny the proposition.'⁹ But in his 1792 text on Fletcher, Buchan reluctantly concluded that it was probably better not to pull down the old mansion: the constitution of England, Scotland and Ireland could be improved. How to go about such political and constitutional improvement was a question that Buchan and his friends spent much of their lives considering, for erecting a constitution on a foundation of sound political theory, as the Americans had been able to do, was a much clearer task than modifying an existing state of affairs. Radicals in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century had to heed Machiavelli's warning that the most difficult

⁵ Buchan, *Essays on Fletcher*, pp. 38, 40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁷ 'Lord Buchan to William Gray' April 20th 1781, 'Paper VI' in Christopher Wyvill *Political Papers, Vol. 1*, p. 326.

⁸ Lord Buchan to Lord Saltoun, September 16th 1791, AUL MS 3004/461.

⁹ Lord Buchan to Lord Saltoun, October 31st, 1791, AUL MS 3004/461.

and dangerous project of all was to introduce a new set of laws, but many considered themselves virtuous enough to take on the challenge.

Burke's charges in 1790 that radical plans for reform stemmed from destructive 'metaphysical abstraction' were well-placed blows. If radicals were seriously talking about a right of resistance to tyrannical power, Burke said, it was impossible to form any kind of theoretical guide to action, since 'the speculative line of demarcation, where obedience ought to end, and resistance must begin, is faint, obscure, and not easily definable.'¹⁰ If on the other hand they were making a claim about abstract rights, they could not hope to draw practical conclusions about how and whether they should be pursued in practice if these conclusions had been obtained through pure philosophy, since society was far too complex a mechanism to respond well to 'professors of metaphysics', 'artificers' and 'fabricators of governments' grafting their principles onto real political material.¹¹ Political actors who thought in this way would necessarily become bad statesmen: they would find that there were few situations in which their principles seemed to apply, so would become uninterested in vital public affairs.¹² In preparing themselves for extreme and exceptional situations requiring violence and unusual politics they would necessarily reduce their moral capacities and their capacity to love mankind.¹³ 'This sort of people', said Burke, 'are so taken up with their theories about the rights of man, that they have totally forgot his nature.'¹⁴

David Williams and Samuel Parr

This debate about the correct relationship between theory and practice in politics was not particular to the context of the French Revolution. In 1780, the Gordon Riots had shaken confidence in the predictability and stability of the British political system, provoking the Rev. David Williams to write a response that criticised not the rioters, but the government. Williams had spent twenty years as a Presbyterian minister and a teacher, and had become known for his experiments in devising a new

¹⁰ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 43.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 89, 91, 99.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

universal liturgy, for which he had been praised by Voltaire.¹⁵ He hated the ‘intolerant complexion’ of the Scottish Presbyterians and English Methodists who had been at the heart of the 1780 riots, and he condemned Gordon and the rioters.¹⁶ But his biggest concern was with the way that the government had pursued increased toleration of Catholicism without paying proper attention to the clear signs of discontent among the people. Those in charge had been blind to the power of religious enthusiasm, and had been entirely unaware that the rioters acted from political as well as religious motives until the perpetrators ‘declared in the public streets, their intention of paying off the National Debt, and being revenged on the Dutch by totally destroying the Bank of England.’¹⁷ The Gordon riots had exposed the inadequacy of Britain’s civil government, Williams argued. It was clear that citizens did not have physical security, and that the constitution had no foundation in an upright magistracy. Williams’ solution was framed in terms that would become extremely familiar in the years following Burke’s *Reflections*. ‘It is a maxim of established authority’, wrote Williams,

that governments, to be perpetuated, should be frequently brought back to their first principles. They are not to be reformed and changed on speculative plans, for the people are governed more by the authority of ancient customs, than by argument or reason. My business therefore shall be, to examine a venerable building, whose principal pillars remain, though perhaps concealed by ivy, or mouldered by time; and whose minuter parts can be delineated only by a reference to those which form and support the whole.¹⁸

Williams argued that the early institutions of the British constitution had provided for the safety of individuals through a division of the whole country into counties, hundreds, and tithings, with each tithing operating its own part of the national militia.¹⁹ He thought that following the Gordon Riots there was a particular desire to restore this part of the constitution. Indeed, people had already been spontaneously forming such associations in London in response to the rioting, and just needed further direction.²⁰

¹⁵ Damian Walford Davies, ‘Williams, David (1738–1816), political and religious theorist and founder of the Literary Fund.’ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2009).

¹⁶ David Williams, *A Plan of Association, on Constitutional Principles* (London, G. Kearsly, 1780), p. 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Two years later, Williams published his *Letters on Political Liberty*, in which he claimed to be the first writer to treat politics as a science.²¹ The art or practice of government might be best understood by the governors, he argued, but the principles of government and the merging of this science with the art was a subject for ‘the employment of the sublimest understandings, using experience and facts as the materials of deliberate contemplation.’²² Williams argued that political systems could be examined in the same manner as a machine.²³ ‘Every witling,’ said Williams, ‘from Solon to the declamatory retainer of an English faction, pretends to distinguish between theory and practice. It has ever been the expedient of knaves and blockheads. If in geometry, all clear and accurate demonstrations are reducible to practice, why not in politics?’²⁴ Legislators and magistrates believed in the inapplicability of theory because they were too involved in the daily business of politics to understand more than their own constitutional limitations; no one familiar with ‘real science’ would make the claim that ‘what is true in theory is false in practice’.²⁵ In Williams, then, we find a distinction between ‘theory’ and the more abstract ‘speculation’.

Williams was critical of the attempts at reform made by the Association Movement in Britain, since these associations were not established on ‘clear and scientific data’.²⁶ He said their advocates had been misled by the success of the recent association movements in America and Ireland into believing that the tactic of association was in some way founded on ‘universal and infallible principles.’²⁷ Irish and American reformers might be excused for the imperfections of their political movements on the basis that they were acting in critical moments during which timing was more important than perfection of form; in such times the whole of the populace were roused to political action at once by the folly of the administration.²⁸ But for those in England, it was important not to mix expedients with

²¹ David Williams, *Letters on Political Liberty* (London, T. Evans, 1782), p.2.

²² *Ibid.*, p.2.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

principles.²⁹ Since the Glorious Revolution, civil liberties had improved, but political liberties had been ‘almost annihilated’.³⁰ This made the constitution ‘among the most awkward and unmanageable fabrics which have been produced by human talents.’³¹ Arranging the multitude to function politically was a difficult pursuit even despite this, since while small groups are capable of forming judgements, larger associations are capable only of forming general passions, and ‘very numerous multitudes’ lack even ‘general feeling’.³² This was what Williams’ was trying to do: find a way to arrange and divide the nation so that a general will could be expressed, and judgements could be made on that basis. He ended up being less sympathetic to the Irish cause than the American one, since he only condoned such imperfect measures when they met with success.³³ Williams went to Ireland in the summer of 1782, and urged the Volunteers not to petition parliament to reform itself, a tactic he hated since it was the appropriate action only in situations where a part of the community were demanding something.³⁴ When the whole community wanted a reform ‘its words are fundamental laws, annihilating all inferior authorities’.³⁵ He thought he had persuaded one man in Ireland to ‘speak the language of a constituent’ rather than a petitioner, and this man agreed to move a resolution to this effect at the meeting of the delegates of Leinster, but he did not end up taking it forward.³⁶

Williams was in favour of innovation, but not innovation arising from abstractions of political right like those that Burke attacked. His ‘science’ of politics involved understanding the form and operation of political systems and seeking to innovate according to this understanding. This approach owed a lot to Montesquieu’s influence; Williams’ *Lectures on Political Principles*, published in 1789, presented his view of the correct application of *L’Esprit des Lois*.³⁷ He diverged sharply from Montesquieu however

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p. 52. Madame Roland witnessed David Williams’ visit to the National Assembly and said he was ‘uneasy at the disorder of the debates, afflicted at the influence exercised by the galleries’. Marie-Jean Roland, *An Appeal to Impartial Posterity, Part 2* (London, J. Johnson, 1995), p. 42.

³³ David Williams, *Letters on Political Liberty, and the Principles of the English and Irish Projects of Reform* (London, J. Ridgway, 3rd ed., 1789), p. 115.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

³⁷ David Williams, *Lectures on Political Principles* (London, John Bell, 1789).

when it came to the idea of ‘checks and balances’, since Williams liked the Rousseauian unitary idea of a general will, and deplored the ‘mystery of the three powers’ (though he rejected the idea of a social contract).³⁸

Williams was keen to disabuse people of the notion that radicals were concerned with abstract or speculative plans for reform. In his 1791 edition of the *Lessons to a Young Prince, by an Old Statesman*, Williams responded to Burke’s claim that the French Revolution involved destroying ancient institutions in favour of an abstract principle of democracy. On the contrary, wrote Williams, the practice of the French National Assembly was not

applying a machine, denominated either Monarchic, Aristocratic, or Democratic, to govern the community for the advantage of individuals, orders, or professions – [but rather] to organize the community itself; to form it into an actual body; to diffuse a lively and poignant sensibility over its surface; to connect the extremities with the seat of reflection and thought; and to introduce that general sympathy, which ever prevents a well-constructed body from injuring any of its parts.³⁹

There were plenty of examples, argued Williams, of ancient usage of such ideas of democracy, and to apply them was to act according to custom, not destroy it.⁴⁰ Williams admitted that he did not necessarily accord merit to actions based on the probability of their execution, but instead had ‘wishes’ which he might undertake at an opportune moment ‘when the circumstances of time and power seem more favourable.’⁴¹ However he shunned purely speculative political thinking which led him to differ from the Girondists ‘on modes of proceeding, not ultimate objects’.⁴² ‘They had always in view’, Williams wrote in his memoirs, ‘a perfect political constitution, which is an ideal object. Perfection, in all human pursuits, is like an asymptote in mathematics, ever approximating a curve, but never touching it’.⁴³ Williams objected to the charge that he was building castles in the sky on the basis that

³⁸ David Williams, *Lessons to a Young Prince* (London, Second Edition H.D. Simmons, 1791), pp. 67-68.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁴² David Williams, *Incidents in My Own Life which have been Thought of Some Importance*, Peter France (ed.) (Sussex, 1980), p. 35.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

he had a clear view of how to link theory and practice. All he wanted, he said, was to find a way to organise the people so that they could express a general will.⁴⁴

Even if Burke was being disingenuous about the real practice of radicals, his move of casting them all as impractical speculators was canny, and his critique was immensely popular. His ideas had the advantage of broad applicability. In 1791 the *Monthly Review* ran an article about Calonne's *De l'État de la France* which insisted that 'all ideas of perfect equality in men seem visionary: to entertain them, is theoretical; to expect to realise them, is enthusiastic.'⁴⁵ Only the state of nature provided an example of equality, they said, so proponents of drastic reform were effectively advocating backwardness.⁴⁶ As for the future, the reviewers wrote that the state of society and the state of equality are 'lines, which, though like the curve and its asymptote, they may continually approximate, can never meet.'⁴⁷ This framing caught on at the *Monthly Review*. In an article on a letter on 'les Moyens qui ont operé la Revolution de France', the reviewers wrote that 'this letter contains a very pretty theory for revolutions: but there is a wide difference between theory and practice. Many an ingenious model may captivate the eye of the ignorant, while the experienced artist sees very clearly that the mechanism must fail, when tried on a large scale, and attempted to be used in actual life.'⁴⁸ Burke's message was also replicated beyond the intelligentsia. On 26th May 1792, a local loyalist committee drew up an address stating that they supported the full 'exertions of government to suppress all speculative and impracticable theories which threaten the peace of the country.'⁴⁹

Burke re-stated his case in 1791 in an *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*. 'It is not worth our while to discuss, like sophisters', he wrote, seemingly referring to James Mackintosh's *Vindiciae Gallicae*,

whether, in no case, some evil, for the sake of some benefit is to be tolerated. Nothing universal can be rationally affirmed on any moral, or any political subject. Pure metaphysical abstraction does not belong to these matters. The lines of morality are not like the ideal lines of mathematics. They are broad and deep as well as long. They

⁴⁴ David Williams, *Preparatory Studies for Political Reformers* (London, Baldwin, 1810), p. 3.

⁴⁵ 'Art. XV. De L' État de la France, etc. par M. de Calonne' *The Monthly Review*, Vol. 4, February 1791, p. 210.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* For more examples of an identification of reform with backwardness see Jennifer Mori, *Britain in the Age of the French Revolution* (London, 2014), pp. 48-49.

⁴⁷ 'Art. XV', *The Monthly Review*, p. 216.

⁴⁸ 'Art. 17, Lettre d'un François à un Anglois' *The Monthly Review*, Vol. 7, January 1792, p. 78.

⁴⁹ 'May 26', *The Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure*, Vol. 40, May 1792, p. 397.

admit of exceptions; they demand modifications. These exceptions and modifications are not made by the process of logic, but by the rules of prudence. Prudence is not only the first in rank of the virtue political and moral, but she is the director, the regulator, the standard of them all.⁵⁰

Like Williams, many of Burke's opponents accepted his assessment of the importance of precedent and custom and the folly of applying abstractions to the real world, but still found his claims about theory and politics alarming. Samuel Parr, who was sympathetic to the French Revolution and an admirer of Charles James Fox, protested in 1794 that he had exhibited the kind of political prudence in his life that Burke would surely approve of.⁵¹ In 1771 he had refused to support his friend John Jebb's anti-subscription petition because he believed the political strategy to be too hasty, and he knew of a 'more temperate scheme' he could support instead.⁵² In 1782 he had carefully moderated his once-radical opinions on the Test Act, and in 1790 he had opposed its repeal.⁵³ Indeed, Parr contended that he had always 'resisted the vicious refinements of theory, and condemned all immoderate ardour for *sudden and sweeping innovations*'.⁵⁴

Qualify, say I, and improve; and, if there be real occasion, restrain; but *destroy not*. Anticipate danger by *well-timed and well-proportioned* regulation; but provoke it not by superfluous and precarious experiment. Drive not away with a frown even the visionary reformer, pay the tribute of a hearing to the speculative recluse, but *act not*, till your plan of action has received its last and best stamp of merit from the approbation of men, whom practice in public affairs has not made callous to the public weal.⁵⁵

But while Parr thought that Burke's *Reflections* was a masterpiece, he could not condone Burke's arguments against reform in general and their implications for the French Revolution. Parr said that sometimes it was necessary to pursue reform in unconventional ways. Many of the French

⁵⁰ Edmund Burke, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (London, J. Dodsley, 1791), p. 19.

⁵¹ There was a low bar in his family; his father had sunk almost all the family's money into Charles Edward Stewart's '45 campaign. William Field, *Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Opinions of the Rev. Samuel Parr*, Vol. 1 (London, Henry Colburn, 1828), p. 5.

⁵² Samuel Parr, *A Sequel to the Printed Paper Lately Circulated in Warwickshire by the Rev. Charles Curtis* (London, Charles Dilly, 1792), p. 52.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55. Parr further pushed his moderate credentials by praising the jurist Sir Matthew Hales' '*Considerations Touching the Amendment of Alterations of Laws* which had been posthumously published five years earlier. J. G. A. Pocock, situates Hale as the empiricist and traditionalist defender of the common law tradition against Hobbes' rationalist approach to law and politics. According to Pocock, Burke took up this same mantle, but in Parr's eyes Burke was taking things further than Hale. 'Burke and the Ancient Constitution – A Problem in the History of Ideas', *The Historical Journal*, 3:2, 1960, pp. 134-143.

Revolutionaries were virtuous but acting in very difficult political circumstances.⁵⁶ The part of *Reflections* that really worried Parr was the discussion of the relationship of theory to practice, which he criticised at length, in terms that echoed the dispute between Hume and Beattie:

Mr. Burke says, that some modern theories upon the rights of men, ‘though metaphysically true, are morally and politically false.’ But aware as I am [...] with every novice in the art of logic, that ‘fallacies often live in universals,’ I cannot accede to Mr. Burke’s observation. True or false, are the expressions of the metaphysical properties belonging to any proposition upon the rights of men. – Proper or improper, and just or unjust, are the expressions of moral properties. Useful or pernicious, are the expressions of the political properties. In conformity to these distinctions, I should say, that many parts of Mr. Paine’s theory about the rights of men, are false, when traced up into metaphysical abstraction; are unjust, when referred to moral obligation; are pernicious, when measured by political expediency; or, in other words, the theory itself, is false, because it does not correspond to practice, which it professes to regulate.⁵⁷

Paine’s theory was simply bad theory, argued Parr, and that was why it could not be applied well. This did not mean that all theory was inapplicable to practice – that was just a trick that Burke was able to play by referring only to poor theory. Parr wanted to find good theory, applied well, and guided by experience, that could inform practice. He thought that Burke’s strategy was wilfully dishonest in pretending that reformers posed a great danger to the state. Parr himself had been plagued by fears of violence from the ‘Church and King’ mob in the aftermath of the 1791 Birmingham Riots, which had involved attacking the home of Joseph Priestley. He thought his house would be burned down and asked his pupils and servants to pack his books in a wagon, whereupon two people ‘stopt at the gate, let loose the most savage mocking at my distress; swore that they would discover the place of refuge I was seeking after my books; that they would bring them back for destruction; that they would tell the rioters at Birmingham what I was doing’. Parr thought that it was far more reasonable to fear insurrection from these people than from democrats.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Parr, *A Sequel*, pp. 64–65.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 70–71.

⁵⁸ Samuel Parr to James Mackintosh, December 19th 1791, BL Add MS 78763, f. 23.

The Regency Crisis

Like Williams, Parr had been both a clergyman and a teacher, but the similarity ended there. Williams considered Parr to be overly attached to the partisan trappings of British politics.⁵⁹ Their divergence was displayed most clearly during the Regency Crisis in 1788-89, when George III lapsed into madness. The Regency Crisis cast an unpleasant light on the nature of party politics and the insidious office of Prime minister, reflecting badly on both Fox and Pitt, and presenting a view of oligarchy that remained etched in the memories of those writing political critique through the next decade.⁶⁰ The Prince of Wales was friends with Fox, Sheridan, and Burke, who formed the head of the opposition to Pitt's government, and it was widely suspected that should the Prince of Wales become regent he would dismiss Pitt's administration and allow Fox to be Prime Minister. Pitt therefore argued that Parliament should be allowed to choose the regent, and said it was treasonous to claim that the prince had more right than anybody else. Pitt also wanted to use parliament to restrict the powers of the regent. Fox challenged Pitt, arguing that popular control of the king operated through correction after abuse, in which the people, not parliament, rose up against the monarch. Pitt was amused by Fox's stance. He said it was the opposite of what the Whigs should be arguing.

Some reformers focussed on the potential for the Prince of Wales to be a voice of the people. In 1790 one pamphleteer warned the prince that 'you will probably live to see a dreadful struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed; but join not in any case the cause of the oppressors, unless you wish to be involved in their destruction.'⁶¹ William Cunninghame wrote that the throne was necessarily self-creative and independent from the other parts of the constitution, reflecting Fox's position, and he then published another treatise in 1791 claiming that there was no original contract between king and people, only power held in trust that might at any time be recalled.⁶² Williams took this position one step further, and urged the Prince of Wales to trust neither Pitt nor Fox but to steer his own course.

⁵⁹ Williams, *Lessons to a Young Prince*, p. 67.

⁶⁰ For example see Anon., *Secret Influence, or Bute and Pitt Administration Virtually the Same* (London J. Kerby, 1790).

⁶¹ Anon., [Publicola Verax], *A Congratulatory, Political, Admonitory Epistle to the Prince of Wales, on his Intended Marriage* (London, J. Parsons, 1795), p. 35.

⁶² William Cunninghame, *A Short View of the Present Great Question* (London, J. Ridgway, 1788); William Cunninghame, *The Rights of Kings*, (London, James Ridgway, 1791), p. 41.

In *Constitutional Doubts, Humbly Submitted to his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales*, Williams explained to the Prince how Pitt was pretending that the House of Commons represented the people and so was responsible for choosing a regent. In fact his whole scheme was designed to prop up that ‘undefineable, unconstitutional monster, the *Prime Minister* of a free country’.⁶³ Both the king and the people lost out from the current constitutional settlement, said Williams, which favoured a corrupt intermediate power between the two. ‘Discard all these pests of the community’, Williams said,

Bolt the gates of your palaces against them! Suspend the functions of government, rather than suffer them to be at the will, or for the purposes of parties. Call on your people for the first time in your life: - you will find them a rock of adamant, on which you may collect the broken parts of your constitutional power in security and peace.⁶⁴

In 1782, Williams had written that a state required a legislative body, an executive body, and ‘a power reserved by the people to repel encroachments’ or to confine political actors within the limits of their office.⁶⁵ Williams wanted the King to conjure the people into an armed body with a general will. Since the Glorious Revolution, Williams argued, it had been ‘the interested policy of pretended Statesmen’ to convince princes, who were ‘strangers to the people they governed’, that the nation was disaffected, and that majorities must be ‘secured by venality’.⁶⁶ Williams urged the Prince of Wales not to be alarmed at the killing and removal of kings in Europe since the aims of the reform movement were to kill the misuse of power and prerogative, not the physical body of the king.⁶⁷ Williams had found his answer as to how to express the general will. Rousseau had ended up lazily relying on a supreme legislator. The option of representative government was a dead end since power or sovereignty and sovereignty cannot be deputed or represented.⁶⁸ Williams’ solution, which had a number of adherents over the next decade, was to rely on an absolute sovereign, a prince, who was entirely subject to the people.⁶⁹ Williams felt he was following Rousseau in some respects here. Rousseau’s idea of the social contract was too abstract for Williams, but he thought that Rousseau had gained some more practical

⁶³ David Williams, *Constitutional Doubts* (London, J. Ridgeway, 1789), p. 15.

⁶⁴ Williams, *Letters on Political Liberty*, p. 110.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

⁶⁶ Williams, *Constitutional Doubts*, p. 18.

⁶⁷ Williams, *Lessons to a Young Prince*, pp. 20-21.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

wisdom on channelling the general will through his observations of the periodical councils of Geneva, which had the power to confine the magistrates within constitutional bounds.⁷⁰ Rousseau ended up relying on the idea of a great or superhuman legislator, which Williams found disappointing. ‘He who undertakes to form a body politic’, Rousseau had said, ‘ought to perceive himself capable of working a total change in human nature’.⁷¹ Williams rejoindered that ‘Government is the principal instrument of that change; and that the public will, being expressed by a permanent Constitution, would form that public judgement and public reason, by the necessity of reflection on the events it produced: effects would become causes, and errors instructions.’⁷²

Williams wanted the Prince to avoid the influence of the Whigs as this would simply perpetuate the problem of party, venality, and an intermediary between the prince and the people. Parr, on the other hand, wrote in January 1789 to a fellow clergyman, the Rev. Henry Homer, excited about the Prince’s imminent seizure of power. ‘It will be a very able ministry’, Parr wrote, ‘and Pitt in opposition is not worth a rush. There must be a new parliament, in obtaining which, prodigious sums of money must be spent by the Prince and his friends.’⁷³ Homer, Parr’s correspondent, had edited Parr’s 1788 edition of William Bellenden’s *De Statu*, which included a highly partisan Latin preface praising Fox, Burke, and Lord North. Parr had condemned Pitt’s establishment of a Commercial Treaty with France, which he believed was a foolish move that would lead to war.⁷⁴ Pitt was too young to really understand how to govern, Parr condescended, as he did not have mature judgement, only unbounded self-admiration.⁷⁵ Parr was particularly exasperated by Pitt’s deceptive argument that the Prince of Wales had no right to the throne. Pitt had deliberately misinterpreted Fox, said Parr, to claim that the right

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Samuel Parr to Henry Homer, January 1789, in John Johnstone, *The Works of Samuel Parr, LL.D. with Memoirs of his Life and Writings*, Vol 1 (London, Longman, 1828), p. 300.

⁷⁴ Samuel Parr, *A Free Translation of the Preface to Bellendenus; containing Animated Strictures on the Great Political Characters of the Present Time*, (London, 1788), pp. 45-46, 53.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

in question was a legal right which was not in existence.⁷⁶ What Fox had really been talking about was a constitutional right based on past practice and ‘principles of expediency’.⁷⁷

James Mackintosh

Parr, unimpressed by the theories of Thomas Paine, named James Mackintosh, the author of *Vindiciae Gallicae* as his ‘temperate’ alternative. Mackintosh had gone to school near Inverness where, with the encouragement of a Rousseauian usher, he had grown suspicious of the predominant Calvinist idea of predestination, fostering a theological scepticism that played into his political thought.⁷⁸ Mackintosh admitted that he had a tendency when he was young to build ‘castles in the air’, and to think about politics as if he was a supreme leader who could direct the country as he pleased.⁷⁹ But despite this, he insisted that:

my disposition is not sanguine, and my visions have generally regarded things as much unconnected with my ordinary pursuits, and as little to be expected, as the crown of Constantinople or the school of Fortrose. These fancies, indeed, have never amounted to conviction; or in other words they have never influenced my actions.⁸⁰

Mackintosh attended Aberdeen University from 1780 to 1783, where he read Joseph Priestley’s *Institutes*, James Beattie’s *Essay on Truth*, and William Warburton’s *Divine Legation*.⁸¹ Warburton’s text had left a strong impression on Mackintosh and made him interested in the history of opinions, which he variously called ‘the theory of theories’ and the ‘history of speculation’, a subject matter which he considered the most difficult of all the philosophical enquiries because it could not be solved simply by being impartial and knowledgeable.⁸² Aberdeen University was a favourite place of education for English dissenters, and it was there that Mackintosh met his lifelong friend the Rev. Robert Hall, with whom he set up a debating society. His professors included Dr. Dunbar, who upon the dismissal of Lord North rejoiced that ‘the Augean stable is cleansed’, James Beattie, who during this time taught

⁷⁶ Samuel Parr to Rev. Henry Kett, in Johnstone *Works of Samuel Parr*, pp. 329-330.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ James Mackintosh, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir James Mackintosh, Vol. 1* (London, 1835), p. 3.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

the ‘rights of Africans’, and William Ogilvie, who published *An Essay on the Right of Property in Land*.⁸³ Mackintosh said of Ogilvie’s book that it was ‘not the work of a man experienced in the difficult art of realising prospects for the good of mankind.’⁸⁴

Mackintosh thought that his education had left him well placed to straddle the gap between theory and practice. In 1784 he began to study medicine at Edinburgh University, where he became a member of the Speculative Society alongside Thomas Addis Emmet, Charles Hope, and Benjamin Constant.⁸⁵ By 1801, when Mackintosh visited Scotland, Constant was a tribune in France, Charles Hope was the Lord Advocate for Scotland, and Thomas Addis Emmet was a prisoner under his control at Fort George, having participated in the failed United Irishmen rebellion. This kaleidoscope of political actors was perhaps unexpected given that Edinburgh University, according to Mackintosh, was a place where ‘accurate and applicable knowledge were deserted for speculations not susceptible of certainty, nor of any immediate reference to the purposes of life.’⁸⁶ Mackintosh reacted against this tendency in a paper he gave while at Edinburgh, in which he argued from the premises of Burke’s *Inquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* that theories can seem imperfect and still be useful, since our inability to find universal applicability may point to our own ignorance of ‘some necessary *media*’ or to a ‘want of proper application’ rather than the falsehood of the principles behind the theory.⁸⁷

In 1788, Mackintosh arrived in London, and wrote a pamphlet in support of Fox’s position on the Regency Crisis.⁸⁸ He was not so much interested in the arguments from precedent or expediency as the question of ‘mere right’.⁸⁹ Mackintosh argued that one of the foundational principles of the constitution was the division and separation of power between the three parts, something that could

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29. This characterisation supports Anna Plassart’s view that the figures of the Scottish Enlightenment were generally uninterested in the English revolution debate, the philosophers preferring a ‘more abstract philosophical and historical analysis of societal progress.’ In Plassart’s account, Mackintosh is a notable exception. Anna Plassart, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 8.

⁸⁷ Mackintosh, *Memoirs*, p. 31. Burke’s discussion of this can be found in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, *Second Edition* (London, R. and J. Dodsley, 1759), pp. vi – vii. Burke’s treatment of abstract theory and experience in this text is examined in Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, p. 71 et seq.

⁸⁸ James Mackintosh, *Arguments Concerning the Constitutional Right of Parliament to Appoint a Regency* (London, J. Debrett, 1788).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

only be overridden in times of exceptional necessity.⁹⁰ There were other clear principles in the constitution that did not permit parliament to appoint a regent, such as the legislative division between the Irish and English parliaments (the Irish parliament had even offered the Prince the role of regent unreservedly), and the principle of self-preservation inherent in the constitution.⁹¹ ‘When in philosophy or politics’, Mackintosh wrote, ‘a system carried to any extent involves you in absurdity and contradiction, its foundation must be in error and insecurity’.⁹² This was the argument that Fox had made in parliament, and that Pitt had opposed by referring to legal right. Like Williams, and like Parr, Mackintosh was still not referring to abstract right divorced from context, nor to natural right, but instead to a theory of formation and change in political society. Later in his life he wrote up a sketch of the character of Burke’s political principles, where, in the manner of Beattie, he distinguished between metaphysical considerations and political ones, between moral and physical theories of government, and between the science of jurisprudence and the art of legislation.⁹³ Different thinkers had different mixtures of these in their approaches, he said. Machiavelli purported to blend the philosophy of history with ‘maxims of practical policy’ but was in fact a poor practical thinker, whereas Hume was a master of both speculative philosophy and ‘the deliberations of business’.⁹⁴ Burke was not a speculator at all, but was instead a ‘philosopher in action’, whom Mackintosh admired for resisting pernicious generalisations.⁹⁵ But Mackintosh did not think that generalisations were a necessary side effect of all theorising. Instead they were ‘as much the bane of sound political theory as they are of safe practice.’⁹⁶ If Burke had been able to see the Paineite theories he had criticised ‘from a still more elevated position’, argued Mackintosh, ‘he could have discovered that they were as unphilosophical as they were impracticable, and that the error consisted not in their being metaphysical, but in their being false’.⁹⁷ This of course mirrored Parr’s interpretation of Burke.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁹³ Mackintosh, *Memoirs*, p. 72.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

Mackintosh was considered by Parr to be a great champion against what Parr saw as Burke's ham-fisted, anti-theoretical trickery, but he was also considered by both Burke and Parr to be an able opponent of the New School of philosophy, the circle around William Godwin.⁹⁸ Parr wrote to Mackintosh in 1799 saying

I have something to tell you about the simplification of principles, or rather the simpleton-jargon about R-r-r-eason, and let us do the business well. I don't mean us, but you; and, you dog, nobody can do it better, nobody, I say – not Hume, not Adam Smith, not Burke, not Dugald Stuart; and the only exception I can think of is Lord Bacon.⁹⁹

Mackintosh did not disappoint, publishing in 1799 an attack on Godwin and his set who used supposedly philosophical principles to attack everything ancient and customary as 'founded in absurdity'.¹⁰⁰ Mackintosh wrote that philosophy should be used 'for the defence of experience' rather than for its destruction, since 'the frequent hostility of speculation and practice, have been fatal to science and fatal to mankind.'¹⁰¹ The philosophical system proposed by these philosophers was 'dogmatical, boastful, heedless of every thing but its own short-sighted views, and intoxicated with the perpetual and exclusive contemplation of its own system of disorder, and demonstrations of insanity.'¹⁰² Parr followed Mackintosh's pamphlet with his Spital Sermon, preached on 15th April, 1800, where he condemned the doctrine of perfectibility, and made fun of the idea of universal or unlimited philanthropy.¹⁰³ Godwin was wounded by this barrage of attacks, writing to Mackintosh in 1799 berating him for depicting his own doctrines as having 'a frightful catalogue of consequences, pernicious and immoral.'¹⁰⁴ 'Will you give me leave to enquire', demanded Godwin,

who are the speculators whom you designated by the following epithets – superficial and most mischievous sciolists – mooters of fatal controversies – men who, in pursuit of a transient popularity, have exerted their art to disguise the most miserable commonplaces in the shape of paradox – promulgators of absurd and monstrous

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁰³ Samuel Parr, *A Spital Sermon* (London, J. Mawman, 1801). J. Ann Hone interprets this kind of questioning of 'grand visions' as a sign of 'retreat and collapse' in the reform movement at the end of the 1790s. It can equally be interpreted though as a retrospective critique of ideology and tactics – evidence of defeat, but not of a retrograde ideological movement. J. Ann Hone, *For the Cause of Truth: Radicalism in London, 1796-1821* (Oxford, 1982), p. 83.

¹⁰⁴ William Godwin to James Mackintosh, June 27th 1799, BL Add MS 52451 B f. 32.

systems – of abominable and pestilential paradoxes – shallow metaphysicians – sophists swelled with insolent conceit – savage desolators?

If these epithets are meant to apply to Rousseau, Turgot or Condorcet, will you condescend to inform me how it is you have discovered that their motives were less pure and philanthropical, than those of Grotius, Puffendorff, Wolf, Burlamaqui, or Vattel? It would perhaps be presumption in me to suppose that any portion of this invective was designed to light upon myself; but, if it were, I must be permitted to answer that, however weak my speculations may be, I am not conscious of their dishonesty.¹⁰⁵

He published a response to Parr as well, saying:

I know that Dr. Parr and Mr. Mackintosh look with horror upon this doctrine of the progressive nature of man. They cling with all the fervours of affection, to the opinion that the vices, the weaknesses and the follies which have hitherto existed in our species, will continue undiminished as long as the earth shall endure. I do not envy them their feelings. I love to contemplate the yet unexpanded powers and capabilities of our nature, and to believe that they will one day be unfolded to the infinite advantage and happiness of the inhabitants of the globe. Long habit has trained me to bow to the manifestations of truth wherever I recognize them, that, if arguments were presented to me sufficient to establish the uncomfortable doctrine of my antagonists, I would weigh, I would revolve them, and I hope I should not fail to submit to their authority. But, if my own doctrine is an error, and if I am fated to die in it, I cannot afflict myself greatly with the apprehension of a mistake, which cheers my solitude, which I carry with me into crowds, and which adds somewhat to the pleasure and peace of every day of my existence.¹⁰⁶

Godwin was far from the mark though, as this doctrine of perfectibilism made Mackintosh uneasy rather than peaceful, intuitively as well as rationally. ‘We are not to dream away our lives in the contemplation of distant or imaginary perfection,’ he wrote to his friend Robert Hall in 1808, ‘we are to act in an imperfect and corrupt world; and we must only contemplate perfection enough to ennoble our natures, but not to make us dissatisfied and disgusted with these faint approaches to that perfection, which it would be the nature of a brute or a demon to despise.’¹⁰⁷

Not everyone agreed with Parr and Burke on Mackintosh’s merits. Parr’s friend William Thomson thought that Mackintosh was an imprudent writer, writing to Parr that Mackintosh’s scheme was reckless and abstract.¹⁰⁸ Perfection and symmetry, said Thomson, could be sought by architects, who

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ William Godwin, *Thoughts Occasioned by the Perusal of Dr. Parr’s Spital Sermon* (London, Taylor and Wilks, 1801) pp. 48-49.

¹⁰⁷ Mackintosh, *Memoirs*, p. 369. Parr’s and Mackintosh often discussed their depression and its relation to ideas of perfection, ie. Samuel Parr to James Mackintosh, September 11th 1797, BL Add MS 78763, f. 27.

¹⁰⁸ William Thomson, ‘Dr William Thomson to the Rev. Dr. Samuel Parr’ in Parr, *A Sequel*, p. 171.

worked with dead passive matter.¹⁰⁹ It was an inappropriate goal for those who worked with the souls of men.¹¹⁰ In fact, edifice metaphors were probably inappropriate altogether, since

it is almost as difficult for the legislator to form, a priori, and without feeling his way by means of the thread of experience, a happy constitution of government, as it would be absurd for a gardener, or husbandman, to attempt, by a mixture of natural elements, to form an apple or an acorn. As the nature of a feed is best discovered by its development into an herb, shrub, or tree, so the principles of government are best understood when they are contemplated in their action, effect, and full expansion.¹¹¹

By way of example, Thomson highlighted the plight of the North and South Carolina colonies. In Thomson's rendering of the case, these colonies had in 1669 commissioned John Locke to design a political system for them and had floundered within this artifice until they had given up and returned to the British constitutional system.¹¹² Catherine of Russia had been similarly humbled when she realised that if she introduced large-scale reform rather than gradual reform, the peasants would start murdering people.¹¹³ For Thomson, the ideal kind of reform system was like that suggested by the Aberdeen professor William Ogilvie, who wanted to redistribute land by introducing an agrarian law, but to do so in a piecemeal fashion without seizing any property, redistributing slowly as the circumstances allowed.¹¹⁴ This was the same scheme that Mackintosh had decried as impractical. Ogilvie had been extremely enthusiastic about the French Revolution, which he said had made him feel like 'the poet looking on the great movements in the forms of nature' and even as late as 1805 he expected something good to come of it.¹¹⁵ But his own political moment had come too early, and he wrote to Lord Buchan in 1791 regretting that he could not openly publish his opinions since he had become a 'reclusive thinker', and that he was now too infirm to travel.¹¹⁶ Had he been in better health he would have resided in France 'from the beginning of the movement made for the Revolution till now.'¹¹⁷ Ogilvie believed in a strong link between theory and practice, and was horrified that Catherine

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 174-175.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹¹⁵ William Ogilvie to James Mackintosh, 1805, BL Add MS 52451 B, f. 65.

¹¹⁶ William Ogilvie to Lord Buchan, 14th December 1791, copied into 1791 Commonplace Book, GUL 502/74.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

of Russia had turned on the Friends of Liberty by crushing the Polish Revolutionaries.¹¹⁸ He had expected more from a philosophical monarch educated in Montesquieu.¹¹⁹

Thomson, as we might expect given his distrust of Mackintosh and Parr, was contemptuous of the Foxite opposition. He had risen from humble origins through the benevolence of Lord Kinnoull, whom he had served as a librarian. In 1783 he wrote an elaborate satire on Fox's stupidity and epicureanism. In the tale, the Man in the Moon came down to earth to visit Fox and to teach him some lessons, by persuading Fox to climb onto the wart on his nose and go for a journey into outer space.¹²⁰ The man in the moon defended the analogy between the relation of moral good to moral evil, and that between knowledge and error, or truth and falsehood.

The same speculum, Charles, which represents in so vivid a manner the difference between moral good and evil, exhibits also the opposition that subsists between knowledge and error, truth and falsehood. Clarke, Woolaston, Price, with others of your countrymen, who maintain that moral distinctions are perceived, not by means of any principle analogous to sense, but by the active energy of the intellect, are for once right in their speculations. The Scotch doctors, Messrs. Reid, Beattie, and Oswald, who erect an instinctive feeling into an universal judge of truth, open a door not only to the greatest absurdities in metaphysics, but also to fanaticism, and every enthusiastic conceit in all the branches of morality and religion.¹²¹

Thomson was also at odds with Mackintosh, Parr, Williams, and Beattie, then, when it came to the relationship between what was true and what was right.

Burke's biographer, Robert Bisset, was delighted with Thomson's cautions about Mackintosh's method. 'Knowledge, science, and genius, prompted by philanthropy', he wrote with self-satisfied hindsight in 1800,

do not always discover the most effectual means for the attainment of their ends. The perfection of reason consists in giving every object a consideration proportioned to its relative importance. This philosopher, turning his mind chiefly to possibility of happiness, rather overlooks capability of attainment [...] Arguing from untried theory, instead of experience, it is not surprising that the conclusions of this great man have been entirely contradicted by the event.¹²²

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ William Thomson, *The Man in the Moon* (London, J. Murray, 1783), p. 14.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* pp. 139-140.

¹²² Robert Bisset, *The Life of Edmund Burke, Vol. 2* (London, George Cawthorn, 1800), pp. 534-535.

Charles James Fox's biographer, Robert Adair, of course took the opposite view. Burke had caused the destruction of the Whigs, the body that acted to preserve the balance between Crown and People. 'This balance is not a mere theory, or vain metaphysical abstraction', argued Adair, since in theory the Crown should be able to override the will of the whole community, but in practice the power of the Crown was restricted by those who wished to resist tyranny.¹²³ In the drive to destroy speculative politics, Burke had in fact sacrificed the Whigs, the party that had preserved his favourite constitution in practice, to bolster an entirely abstract argument that the security of the constitution 'consists in the nice and exact distribution of the powers of its several branches.'¹²⁴ Burke and Mackintosh reconciled in 1796, with Mackintosh saying that he subscribed to Burke's principles, and Burke replying that 'it was the shew of virtue and the semblance of public happiness that could alone mislead a mind like yours; and it is a better knowledge of their substance which alone has put you again in the way that leads the most securely and most certainly to your end.'¹²⁵

Of course, there were many who met Burke's criteria of imprudent radicalism, and they were not only confined to Paineites and the Godwin circle. The anti-Burgher minister Archibald Bruce wrote in 1794 that: 'A revolution or reform introduced by a study of theory, and conducted by certain principles generally understood and assented to, not only by the public actors, but the body of the people at large, must have greatly the advantage of that which is accidental, arising from the incidents of the moment.'¹²⁶ Bruce asserted that the suppressing of theoretical writing proposed by the Seditious Writings Act was akin to the suppression of Buchanan's *De Juri Regni* and other classic resistance texts of the Scottish Calvinist canon.¹²⁷ In any case, Bruce said flatly, truly speculative opinions did not have such a great effect on people as Burke's followers supposed.¹²⁸ But Bruce was in the minority. As the

¹²³ Robert Adair, *The Letter of the Honourable Charles James Fox to the Electors of Westminster, With Application of its Principles to Subsequent Events* (London, Ridgeway [etc.], 1802), p. 41.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Mackintosh to Burke, 1796; Burke to Mackintosh, 1796, BL Add MS 52451 B, ff. 28-30.

¹²⁶ Archibald Bruce, *Reflections on Freedom of Writing* (Edinburgh, 1794), p. 46. For a description of Bruce's enthusiasm for the Whig-Presbyterian historiographical tradition see Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689 – 1830* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 200.

¹²⁷ Bruce, *Reflections*, pp. 44-45.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

French Revolution developed, the ranks of those who would stand by their theory at all costs thinned considerably. Many of the circle around Joseph Johnson and William Godwin stuck to their beliefs but denied that these beliefs should be acted upon. To act was to rush the course of history. It turned out that the mode of reason was not a march but a crawl.

As for Buchan, he was still pondering his theories of architectural restoration. His father had died when he was relatively young, leaving him an ill-managed estate in Uphall. Buchan had nursed it back to agricultural health and sold it, in order to purchase yet another crumbling edifice, the medieval ruin of Dryburgh Abbey. This he made some effort to restore, a project he explained to Christopher Wyvill in 1797. His goal, he said, was ‘to build for myself and for my family, and for the children of peace, and order, and benevolence, an ark into which with me they may ascend, and float upon the waters of a political deluge, which is at hand.’¹²⁹

Arks and Steering Them

Without the comforts of perfectibilism to cling to, cynicism and depression often awaited even the most committed practical reformer, which is why the Earl of Buchan tried to build an ark by restoring Dryburgh Abbey, an elaborate procrastination from repairing a constitution. Buchan’s confidant in this business, Christopher Wyvill, had long been witness to the slow trudge of reform politics, having been heavily involved in the reform movement since 1779. When it was not acting as the popular extra-parliamentary arm of the Rockingham opposition, this movement operated through associations of freeholders, such as Wyvill’s Yorkshiremen and his system of delegates. John Cartwright and John Jebb were both involved in trying to extend and complicate this association system in a form of convention politics that would be emulated extensively in the 1790s. With Thomas Brand Hollis, these two reformers would set up the Society for Constitutional Information.

We have taken a step back from the French Revolution and considered the Regency Crisis and the debate on theory and practice it engendered. To get inside the practical mindset of 1790s reformers

¹²⁹ Lord Buchan to Christopher Wyvill, May 29th 1797, ‘Letter 3’ in Christopher Wyvill, *Political Papers, Vol. VI* (York, L. Lund, 1794-1802), p. 285.

we will consider tactics of association and convention from 1779. Holding a convention did not in itself create a particularly clear course of action. Some claimed that conventions were about building popular structures to undertake some further kind of political action, which had yet to be established. Sometimes, to the frustration of anti-speculators, reformers involved in associations and conventions conveniently forgot that there was meant to be some further purpose in associating. But some of the players in the Association Movement were keen to use the practice of associating to work out the spread of tactics available to them. It is those thinkers we will now consider.

Chapter III: Associating, Convening and Arming

The 1793 Edinburgh Convention

In 1793, Joseph Gerrald published *A Convention the Only Means of Saving us from Ruin*. Gerrald wanted to gather people from across Britain in a single meeting to deliberate on their demands for reform. Reformers had been organising themselves in associations like the London Corresponding Society and the Scottish Friends of the People, as well as in multiple iterations of Constitutional Societies, Revolution Societies, and renegade Whig Clubs. But associating had not set in motion any particular course of action. It did not help the position of the reformers that these associations were not recognised as being representative of the people, and instead looked more like groups for people with a cause, campaign groups providing a philanthropic outlet for benevolent spirits.¹ Gerrald wanted to call a big meeting of representatives from different regions in order to transform the loose movement into a representative body, or at least to transform its public image. He argued that the practices of association and convention were ancient British ones present at the origin of the Ancient Constitution, citing David Williams' *Letters on Political Liberty* in support of his stance.²

Gerrald believed that a convention was the correct approach because he thought that the foundation of man's engagement in society and politics was to do with labour and skill rather than property. People had been trying to effect reform based on understandings of the qualifications of property for a long time, but once people understood that labour was at the root of everything, they would be much better equipped to solve political questions since 'their rustic but penetrating understandings will deride the sophistry of those *financial* reasonings, which they will consider only as a cover to fraud, and the great pillar of corruption.'³

It is not, it is not, be it recollected, the sabre that is wrought at the manufactory of Sheffield, or the cannon that is cast in the foundery of Woolwich, which is the great instrument of destruction. These would be as harmless, as when they slumbered in the

¹ For Thompson's discussion of the Platform or extra-parliamentary pressure group see E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 2013), p. 92.

² Joseph Gerrald, *A Convention the Only Means of Saving us from Ruin* (London, D.I. Eaton, 1793), p. 90.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

bowels of the earth, in their state of native oar, if the accursed lust of gain, that great mover of human agency, and that great source of human evils, did not stimulate them into action.

Effodiuntur opes irratamenta malorum [Riches, the incentives to evil, are dug out of the earth].⁴

Once people realised that their labour was being used to create the materials of luxury and war, that they were themselves dragging out of the earth the raw matter that allowed harm to be inflicted upon them, they would be canny to the power that they held.⁵ For Gerrald this was the reason to believe that the people might have some tactical advantage in pursuing reform. It seemed to him that a convention was a good way to start.

The year after publishing his pamphlet, Gerrald was tried for sedition and condemned to fourteen years' transportation, dying four months after arriving in Sydney. The convention he had so desired had gone ahead, in Edinburgh, styled 'The British Convention of the Delegates of the People', and it was for his participation that he had been tried. His ally through this period was Samuel Parr, who had been his schoolteacher. Parr offered to cover Gerrald's bail money and help him escape before trial, but Gerrald refused this help.⁶ He wanted to see the trial through, for the sake of loyalty to his fellow arrestees, and for the propaganda of martyrdom.⁷ Parr visited him frequently during his twelve-month confinement at Newgate Gaol, and continued to advocate for him, securing the legal assistance of James Mackintosh.⁸ Parr wrote to William Windham in 1795 that Pitt had punished Gerrald because Pitt was inferior to Gerrald in learning, and 'endowed with talents certainly not superior, and actually by a spirit more adapted to the coarseness of a Convention, than to the gravity of a parliament.'⁹ When Richard Sheridan, who Parr had also taught, remarked that Gerrald had been very clever, Parr said admonishingly that Gerrald had been 'the cleverest fellow I ever educated.'¹⁰ Parr continued to support

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁶ William Field, *Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Opinions of the Rev. Samuel Parr*, Vol. 1 (London, Henry Colburn, 1828), p. 340.

⁷ The British Convention, *The Trial of Joseph Gerrald* (Glasgow, Muir et al., 1835), p. 5.

⁸ John Johnstone, *The Works of Samuel Parr, LL.D. with Memoirs of his Life and Writings*, Vol 1 (London, Longman, 1828), p. 453.

⁹ Samuel Parr to William Windham, 8th May 1795, BL Add MS 78763, f. 27.

¹⁰ John Binns, *Recollections of the Life of John Binns* (Philadelphia, 1854), p. 78.

radicals, and in 1797 attended the trial of John Binns. To assist, he theatrically ‘beamed with satisfaction’ at every point made by the defence and ‘assumed a grave, doubting expression’ when the prosecution was speaking.¹¹

T.M. Parsinnen argues that when an eighteenth-century association found reform tactics like propaganda and petitioning to be fruitless, the approved route was for an association to become an ‘anti-parliament’, a body claiming to provide a more accurate representation of the people than parliament itself.¹² In Parsinnen’s lineage the idea of an anti-parliament was first proposed in the 1770s by Obadiah Hulme, James Burgh, and Major John Cartwright, and later adopted as a tactic in America in the Continental Congress and the 1787 Philadelphia Constitutional Convention.¹³ John Jebb, against the advice of George Savile and Christopher Wyvill, maintained throughout this period that a national association would have the authority to challenge the constitution and ultimately to dissolve the House of Commons.¹⁴ As the movement fell apart, Jebb carried the idea of an anti-parliament into the Society for Constitutional Information. On the accounts of both Parsinnen and John Barrell, the convention strategy arose from what Caroline Robbins described as the ‘English Commonwealthman’ tradition, which was revived by Whigs in the 1770s. Two texts form the backdrop of their discussion of the 1790s iteration of the idea: the aforementioned pamphlet by Gerrald, and Thomas Paine’s *Letter Addressed to the Addressers* (1792).¹⁵

While the Wilkesite agitations and the association movement promoted by Cartwright, Jebb, and Brand Hollis were enacted on an English political stage, the final act of the drama was performed in

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹² T.M. Parsinnen, ‘Association, Convention and Anti-Parliament in British Radical Politics’, *The English Historical Review*, 88: 348, July 1973. For another account of extra-parliamentary associations see Iain Hampsher-Monk, ‘British Radicalism and the Anti-Jacobins’ in Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth Century Political Thought*, (Cambridge, 2006), p. 666. See also John Barrell, *Imagining the King’s Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793-1796* (Oxford, 2000), p. 142.

¹³ Parsinnen, ‘Association, Convention and Anti-Parliament’, p. 505; Barrell, *Imagining the King’s Death*, pp. 142-144.

¹⁴ For a description of Jebb’s argument for a convention see Niall O’Flaherty, *Utilitarianism in the Age of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2018), p. 198. O’Flaherty describes how Paley’s refutation of Jebb’s ‘legalistic mentality’ was part of his wider argument for pursuing improvement based on models appropriate to the constitution rather than on ‘models of speculative perfection’ (p. 201).

¹⁵ For Paine’s arguments on conventions and the state of nature see Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought* (London, 1989), p. 93. For an excellent discussion of Gerrald’s pamphlet see Barrell, *Imagining the Kings Death*, pp. 144-146.

Scotland. The Scottish Society of the Friends of the People held three conventions in Edinburgh between December 1792 and October 1793. The last was styled as a cross-British convention and had English delegates who were subsequently arrested and tried. It was proposed by William Skirving after Margarot and Hardy wrote that they wished to follow the lead of the Scottish reformers in pursuing more ‘effectual means’ than petitioning.¹⁶ Reformers had been agitating for such methods in England for some time. In late 1792, the Holborn Society of the Friends of the People proposed that a national convention was necessary to work out effectual reform tactics, since every member could bring forward his ideas so that ‘from the whole an eligible plan may be adopted.’¹⁷ In April 1793 a letter from the Society for Constitutional Information (SCI) to the United Political Societies at Norwich asked where the reformers should look for political remedy, and concluded that they could rely neither on parliament nor the executive, but instead that they must look to ‘ourselves, represented in some meeting of delegates [...] which we suppose you understand by the term Convention.’¹⁸ The SCI line was that the public was not ready for a convention though, and they had urged the Norwich reformers to wait.¹⁹

Gerrald was one of five ‘martyrs’ arrested and successfully charged following the Edinburgh Convention. Like many radicals, Gerrald seemed more interested in the promotional platform that his trial offered than in his own personal safety. It is unclear whether the defendants from England realised the form of justice they would receive in Scotland. As Emma McLeod has pointed out, periods of long imprisonment were usual under the English penal system due to the availability of secure prisons, but in Scotland transportation was a more obvious punishment.²⁰ Relatively comfortable cultures of gaol radicalism were able to flourish in London havens like Newgate, while the Scottish martyrs found themselves cast to the other side of the world, and the Irish rebels were locked in

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁷ ‘Holborn Society of the Friends of the People’, *A Collection of Addresses Transmitted by Certain English Clubs and Societies to the National Convention of France* (London, J. Debrett, 1793), p. 46.

¹⁸ ‘First Report from the Committee of Secrecy to the House of Commons respecting Seditious Practices’ May 16th 1794 in *The Parliamentary History of England*, Vol. 31, (London, T.C. Hansard, 1818), p. 477.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Emma McLeod, ‘The English and Scottish State Trials of the 1790s Compared’ in Michael T. Davies et al. (eds.), *Political Trials in an Age of Revolutions* (London, 2019), p. 82.

Scottish and Irish military prisons. But whether or not they did so wisely, the radicals approached all the 1790s trials as a part of their propaganda strategy, as Jon Mee and James Epstein have noted, and none more so than Gerrald's fellow London Corresponding Society delegate Maurice Margarot.²¹ Margarot had lived in France during the revolution and did not return to Britain until 1792, where he became a key figure in the London Corresponding Society. Arrested in December 1793, Margarot was charged with being part of an association holding meetings with 'a dangerous and destructive tendency', and accused of putting forward a motion suggesting that a committee be appointed to consider how to create a general union between the reform societies in England and Scotland.²² It was also charged that he had been particularly enthusiastic about a plan formed in the Edinburgh Convention to immediately call an emergency convention if conventions were banned, and it was alleged that he had urged for this plan to be more specific, with a designated place of meeting, and a time-scale more exact than 'immediately'.²³ The most serious charge was that Margarot had planned a secret committee authorised to take emergency measures if the state did the same.²⁴ The indictment stated that Margarot had said that if the Edinburgh Convention were to be dispersed (as indeed it had been), this would be enough for 'a convention of emergency'.²⁵

In casting around for precedents to present to the jury as to why conventions must be legal, Margarot pointed out that Pitt himself had attended the Thatched House Tavern meeting aimed at promoting a reform in parliament in 1782.²⁶ 'Because we are poor, it is sedition in us', Margarot argued, 'but when your County Meetings are held, it is no longer sedition'.²⁷ This was an argument that Thomas Erskine, the Earl of Buchan's brother, had made in the 1792 trial of Thomas Paine.²⁸ Erskine was the doyen of the radicals during the period of the trials, becoming famous for his speeches in court where he

²¹ Jon Mee, *Print, Publicity, and Popular Radicalism in the 1790s: The Laurel of Liberty* (Cambridge, 2016), p. 97; James Epstein 'Our Real Constitution': Trial Defence and Radical Memory in the Age of Revolution' in James Vernon (ed.) *Re-reading the Constitution: New Narratives in the Political History of England's Long Nineteenth-Century* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 37.

²² *The Trial of Maurice Margarot* (London, J. Ridgway, 1794), pp. 1, 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁸ Thomas Erskine, *The speeches of the Hon. Thomas Erskine, Vol. 1* (New York: Printed for Eastburn, Kirk, and co, 1813), p. 323.

argued that it was natural and indeed nourishing for the British constitution to encompass the kind of activities the radicals were pursuing. Erskine had been the victorious co-counsel for George Gordon in 1781 when he had been tried and acquitted for leading the riots. In comparison, given the content of the indictments, the 1790s trials should have been plain sailing. But the government had learned from their mistakes with Gordon. In Paine's trial, which was concerned with the publication of the *Rights of Man, Part Two*, Erskine argued that those who had desired to reform the House of Commons in 1782, including Pitt, had participated in reform conventions and had published writings that were intended 'not as *abstract, speculative writings*'.²⁹ Erskine's examples of precedential practical reform activities did not lead to Thomas Paine's acquittal, though at the end of the trial he was received by a huge crowd shouting 'Erskine for ever' who insisted, despite the lawyer's protestations, on unhitching the horses from his carriage and dragging it themselves for a victory lap and then home.³⁰

Margarot, like Erskine and Gerrald, made the case that convention politics was a normal part of British politics. His mode of defence relied on the distinctiveness of Scottish political thought, Scottish history, and Scots law. He noted that the Lord Advocate himself had attended a convention, a piece of information he may have attained from Lord Daer, one of the Scottish Friends of the People.³¹ Daer had delightedly noted this peculiarity in 1792, when he wrote to the Manchester abolitionist Thomas Walker explaining that the Lord Advocate, Robert Dundas of Arniston, had attended a meeting of delegates appointed by the commissioners of land tax. 'To our astonishments', Daer wrote,

the Lord Advocate for Scotland, that is equivalent to the attorney general for England, seconded the motions; having come as a delegate. He may have done this to appear not beaten; and to get in and try to spoil our proposed new law: but I think he has outwitted himself, and got ministry into a hobble of sanctioning the principle of national conventions.³²

Margarot complained that some of his witnesses from England had not been compelled to attend the trial. When the lords responded that England was a different country, under a different system of law,

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *The Trial at Large of Thomas Paine, for a Libel on the King and Constitution* (London, T. Browne, 1792), p. 32.

³¹ *Trial of Maurice Margarot*, p. 16.

³² Lord Daer to Thomas Walker, 5 July 1792, BL Add MS 88955 f. 140.

Margarot was triumphant: ‘It has been said too, that England is as much a foreign country as Germany or Italy; - that I don’t understand – if this country is as foreign as Germany – don’t talk, for God’s sake, of the English Constitution; it does not belong to you.’³³ Margarot argued from the dock that even if it were to be conceded that the British constitution was a good constitution, it must be severely damaged since the martyrs were being tried for holding political meetings solely designed to secure their liberties. In a close mirroring of Erskine’s arguments in Paine’s trial, Margarot asked:

Has not a man, living under the British Constitution, a right to examine that constitution, and to say, I am told, that it is the finest institution in the world; and yet I feel my pocket emptied daily with taxes; I feel my liberties taken away one after another; and yet I must not meet with my neighbours to the number of twelve, to discuss those injuries that I daily feel, and to enquire after the means of obtaining a redress, but immediately comes a Crown Lawyer, claps the word sedition upon it, and I am punished.³⁴

In Margarot’s closing statement he quoted Lord Kames’ 1747 *Essays Upon Several Subjects Concerning British Antiquities*. Margarot began with Kames’ discussion of the *Regiam Majestatem*, the oldest Scottish law text. Margarot was being tried under its definition of sedition. Kames’ historical work was under constant dispute in the late eighteenth century, since its provenance and accuracy seemed to reformers to have huge implications for their arguments for Scottish liberty.³⁵ Margarot said that Kames believed the *Regiam Majestatem* had been compiled under one of Scotland’s King Davids by taking ‘the counsel and advice of the whole realm’.³⁶ The sedition law, then, had been formed through the very practice that it apparently now proscribed. Margarot argued that since there was a clear and generally accepted right to petition parliament, there must also be a right to *collect* opinion in the form of a meeting, since ‘the general will cannot be collected as you gather taxes from door to door.’³⁷ ‘How is the sense of the

³³ *Trial of Maurice Margarot*, p. 25.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁵ See for example William Guthrie to Lord Buchan, September 12th 1767, Laing II/588 f.2 and David Dalrymple to David Steuart Erskine, 1780, Laing II/588 f.4, 17. See also the editors comments in the preface to the 1792 edition of Gilbert Stuart’s *A View of Society in Europe* (Edinburgh, J. Robertson, 1792) that Kames’ *Historical Law Tracts* ‘bear strong marks of haste and of a lively imagination’ (p. iii).

³⁶ *Trial of Maurice Margarot*, p. 123.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

people to be taken', Margarot spluttered, 'if they are not convened?'³⁸ At least in Scotland, according to Margarot, consulting the people in this way was a recognised and acceptable practice.

Margarot explained Kames' argument, advanced after his disillusionment with Jacobitism following the '45, that governments and constitutions are fluid constructions susceptible to time and conscious improvement. 'Lord Kaimes does not fix a government, or a constitution to any one particular point', Margarot argued, 'He does not tell you that the Constitution of Great Britain is the very best that ever existed from all eternity, as our learned Lord does; or that it will endure to all eternity.'³⁹ Margarot went on to quote Kames at some length, presenting to the jury Kames' comparison between the development of arts of manufacture and industry and the development of government, which led to his argument that the mechanisms of state needed to be gradually improved as political economy developed.⁴⁰ Margarot was determined not to argue from any fixed principle of political truth, wanting instead to demonstrate proper modes of popular political correction.⁴¹ He was delighted to find that the intellectual atmosphere of Scotland in the latter half of the eighteenth century was partial to ideas of political systems evolving and changing in accordance with changes in property and society. Meanwhile, others were in the process of disowning Kames' antiquarian writings, wanting to undermine any use that Kames' ideas on the constitution might serve to radicals. John Wilde, Professor of Civil Law at Edinburgh University, wrote an address to the Society of the Friends of the People in 1793 arguing that Kames was a 'reasoner, with all the faults of a reasoner' when it came to his attempts to link antiquities with the political history of the constitution.⁴² Indeed, said Wilde, there were hardly any good Scottish historians of constitutional law, and 'of the lower people it is needless to speak'.⁴³

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁴¹ The scepticism of Scotland's eighteenth-century 'historical sociologists' towards the idea of deriving politics from first principles is elucidated by Colin Kidd in *Subverting Scotland's Past*, pp. 118-119.

⁴² John Wilde, *An Address to the Lately Formed Society of the Friends of the People* (Edinburgh, P. Hill, 1793), p. 122.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Margarot's experience at the Edinburgh convention, and his involvement in the committee that attempted to realise common goals across England and Scotland, had prepared him well for his arguments in court in favour of the convention tactic. In May 1793, the committee of the Friends of the People that had been appointed to examine 'the State of Representation of Scotland' produced a report which relied not on the English ancient constitution but instead claimed that Scotland had 'a sort of Representation which is peculiar to North Britain'.⁴⁴ The report stated that the constitution of the Scottish Parliament was 'originally popular and free'.⁴⁵ Near the end of the sixteenth century every tenant and freeholder of the crown had been allowed to vote, but because this system was burdensome for the voters a representative system was established. Over time, the Crown and aristocracy had conspired to narrow the popular rights which had formerly been 'enjoyed and exercised'.⁴⁶ The Act of Union had, through the peerage changes, exacerbated the problem, making sure that those permitted to be Scottish lords were in league with the Crown. While the British Constitution contained a technical popular right to vote, this right had been denied to Scots through 'various fictions of law'.⁴⁷ The approach of the Scots to gaining political liberty, then, would have to be different to the English approach.

Margarot and the participants at the Edinburgh Convention did not defend conventions by claiming that the practice was based on 'universal and infallible principles', as David Williams had accused the 1780s English Association Movement of doing.⁴⁸ Neither did they ground their claim in an original contract or right, or in the tenets of an original constitution. Rather, as Mackintosh had done during the regency debate, they looked to the active spirit of the constitution for indications of what was to be done. The only MP who attended the Edinburgh Convention was sceptical about the value of relying on ancient constitutional stipulations. Norman Macleod, chief of Clan MacLeod, was a keen pursuer of electoral reform, and advocated popular education carried out by men like himself to

⁴⁴ 'Report of the Committee of the Friends of the People' *The Caledonian Chronicle*, Tuesday May 7 to Friday May 10 1793, No. 52, NRS GD311/7/21.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ David Williams, *Letters on Political Liberty* (London, T. Evans, 1782), p. 43.

instruct people in how to pursue their political interests. In his 1793 *Letters to the People of North Britain* he wrote that the Scots reformers had to avoid being cowed, as the English had already been, by claims from their enemies that they advocated violence. They must instead stick to their tactics.⁴⁹ In a 1792 meeting of the delegates of the Scots counties, MacLeod had successfully countered Thomas Dundas' drive for moderation with a unanimous avowal of 'the necessity of speedy reform'.⁵⁰ He wrote to Charles Grey about this with some excitement, but also frustration at what he perceived to be a gap between the enthusiasm for reform in Scotland and England. On 13th August 1792 MacLeod wrote to Grey again, saying that he was met with much enthusiasm in the various committees he had been visiting.

I have just visited Glasgow and find them strongly disposed to go even further than we wish and I shall in the course of two months be in most of the other considerable towns. I wish for instructions. I fear doing mischief to our own Friends from ignorance of their wishes. Tell me if you wish to have the cause of Reform very strongly urged in Scotland: if you do, I can answer for its being done with effect and peaceably.⁵¹

Three months later, Macleod enthused that the proclamation against seditious writings had 'acted like an electric shock! It set people of all ranks a-reading and as everybody in this Country can read, the people are already astonishingly informed.'⁵² But while everyone was reasoning 'with great deliberation', 'they are slow in determining how to act.'⁵³ They were 'in no hurry to petition. Their ideas extend further or they are not yet ripe [...] They plainly see that in England the people are not so well informed and it seems to be their desire to excite the people of Scotland to begin before their neighbours are in a humour to join them.'⁵⁴ Macleod was frustrated with Grey since he felt that the English reformers were not keeping him in the loop about their political plans.⁵⁵ Lord Daer felt the same way. He wrote to Grey in January 1793 expressing frustration that it seemed the English might

⁴⁹ Norman MacLeod, *Letters to the People of North Britain* (London, J. Ridgway, 1793), pp. 5-6.

⁵⁰ Norman Macleod to Charles Grey, July 4th 1792 in Edward Hughes 'The Scottish Reform Movement and Charles Grey 1792-94: Some Fresh Correspondence', *The Scottish Historical Review*, 1956, 35: 119, pp. 27-28.

⁵¹ Colonel MacLeod to Charles Grey, August 13th 1792 in Hughes 'The Scottish Reform Movement', pp. 28-29.

⁵² Colonel MacLeod to Charles Grey, Nov. 30th 1792 in Hughes 'The Scottish Reform Movement', pp. 31-33.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

no longer petition since they considered themselves less numerous than the Scots.⁵⁶ Grey argued that even if there were proportionately more Scots in favour of reform, they were more at risk from the law.⁵⁷ He urged Grey not to ‘make the Tweed appear a boundary in political sentiment or action’ and complained about the Union, since ‘left to ourselves we should probably have had a progression towards Liberty and not less than yours.’⁵⁸ It was of the utmost importance to move from letters to conventions, though Daer acknowledged that

As to such assemblies I believe you and I differ and you dread the magnitude of power which might thereby be accumulated, a degree of power which I look upon as necessary to withstand and prevail over the immense power of the Opposers of Reform and which I think might more safely be entrusted to a delegated, renovating body even tho' sent from self-elected Societies, than to any self-elected body like the Jacobins in France, like the Society for Constitutional Information, or even like ourselves at Free Mason's tavern.⁵⁹

A few months later, Macleod argued that there was more political potential in the Scottish people than there was in the English, since the Scots were at once more well instructed in the nature of government, and at the same time far less represented in parliament.⁶⁰ He believed that this discrepancy would lead to stronger demands for reform, though he also acknowledged that Scotland could achieve nothing by violence: ‘Ireland is a strong man, who has demanded, Scotland is enfeebled and must supplicate.’⁶¹ He attacked Whig reformers who depended on the constitution to provide legitimacy for political action, since he believed that precedent and law were the domain of the establishment. The *enemies* of reform argued ‘that the Constitution of England knows no such thing as the people [...] that there is no definition in any law books of the thing, or word People; as if the being of mankind depended on the metaphysics or subtleties of lawyers.’⁶² The people could assert themselves politically without depending on law, said MacLeod, and he pointed to the United Irishmen’s ridicule of legalistic pedantry.

⁵⁶ Lord Daer to Charles Grey, 17th January 1793, in Hughes ‘The Scottish Reform Movement’, pp. 33-37.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Macleod, *Letters to the People of North Britain*, p. 6.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 12

If we be asked, ‘Who are the people?’ we turn not our eyes here and there, to this party or to that persuasion, and cry ‘Lo! The People;’ but we look around as without partiality or predilection, and we answer, ‘The multitude of Human Beings, the living mass of Humanity, associated to exist, to subsist, and to be happy. In them, and them only, we find the original of social authority, the measure of political value, and the pedestal of legitimate power.’⁶³

Joseph Gerrald made a similar distinction between people and law in a letter to Dundas before his trial. Whereas, in *A Convention*, he had cited the ancient constitution as a justification for convening, he now argued that from hereon in the people would directly intuit the correct political path. Their experience of losing liberty would lead them to action that did not depend on the assent of law.

When I went to Scotland, I expected persecution from the Government, and protection from the people. I have met, and do still expect to meet with both. But I trust, that the period is fast approaching, when neither legal quibbles nor fur gowns will shelter the abuse of delegated authority, and when the people will know, will feel, and will assert, that law is only the means, but that justice is the end, and that the SAFETY OF THE PEOPLE IS THE SOVEREIGN LAW.⁶⁴

Gerrald’s presentation of radical action had shifted. Before the Edinburgh Convention he had described a reimagination of Britain’s governance such that popular politics would be a standard part of the functioning of the state. Now he was arguing that Britain existed in a state of exception, where a default to preservation of liberty should guide popular responses to the circumstances at hand. In such circumstances, the criteria for political action changed. When reformers referred to history or constitutional precedent, they were providing technical arguments as to why conventions might be permitted as part of the functioning of politics. But when radicals talked about conventionism as a movement that had its epitome in the form of resistance enacted in 1688 and claimed that they found themselves in such a time, they were calling for something different, presenting their own era as monstrous, and the convention as the correct people’s mechanism to depose monsters.

Existing Circumstances

A prodigious armed force is at this moment pouring to town from all quarters, London is turned into a garrison; and all this bustle, ministerial alarm, and pretended fear has no foundation under heaven, but from their own machinations in favour of the Convention Bill.⁶⁵

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Joseph Gerrald to Henry Dundas, printed in *Politics for the People*, Vol. 2, No. 16 (London, D.I. Eaton, 1794), p. 254.

⁶⁵ Anon., [A Liveryman of London], *Cursory Remarks on the Convention Bill* (London, J. Davenport, 1795), p. 112.

In May 1793, the MP John Wharton MP made a speech in the House of Commons that would become a key part of the radicals' message that the Glorious Revolution was relevant to their own practice. Margarot read out the speech during his trial, and the Society for Constitutional Information produced ten thousand copies, two thousand of which Margarot asked to be sent up to Scotland.⁶⁶ Wharton argued that the Glorious Revolution was so glorious not because the circumstances and events were glorious in themselves – obviously no one wanted violence or tyranny – but because the right steps had been taken in response to the necessity of the times. The constitutional articles produced by the revolution gave provision for such times of political necessity when they might arise in the future, and 'they not only justified resistance but made it *meritorious*', especially in instances when the constitutional articles were at risk of being undone.⁶⁷ Wharton went on to claim that the conditions demanding revolutionary measures were currently prevailing, since *all* the provisions of 1688 had been taken away.⁶⁸ One such provision was the change to the Coronation Oath to the effect that it was no longer necessarily unlawful to take up arms against the King. Margarot emphasised this section of the speech in his trial, claiming that the relationship between King and people was purely contractual, and that the people could take up arms if the King breached his side of the contract.⁶⁹

Reformers taking this approach declared that Britain now existed in a state of emergency that had dissolved the contract between governors and the governed, necessitating acts of resistance. Radicals were therefore presented by their opponents as trying to reduce reliance on the constitution, instead encouraging people to think in terms of a super-constitutional state of resistance. In a hostile pamphlet addressed to the 1793 Edinburgh convention, it was alleged that Thomas Paine pretended there was no such thing as an existing constitution in order to prevent people from trying to restore an old one.⁷⁰

The Rev. William Dunn of Kirkintilloch was accused of the same fraud with regard to the future state

⁶⁶ *Trial of Maurice Margarot*, p. 136; 'Trial of Thomas Hardy' in *Cobbett's Complete Collection of State Trials Vol. 24* (London, Hansard, 1818), pp. 793-794.

⁶⁷ John Wharton, *Extracted from the Morning Chronicle, June, 1st. 1793 The speech of John Wharton, Esq. M.P. in the House of Commons*, p. 4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Trial of Maurice Margarot*, p. 138.

⁷⁰ Anon., [A. Scott], *Plain Reasons for Adopting the Plan of the Societies Calling Themselves The Friends of the People*, (Edinburgh, J. Balfour, 1793), p. 2.

of things by obscuring the eschatological passages in the bible in order to persuade people to act politically in the moment.⁷¹ The radicals' dismissal of the ancient constitution and their turn to ideas of resistance was at once a destruction of both precedent and prospect, forcing the population to work and act in a present state of exception.

On 18th December 1795, the 'Convention Bill' was passed, formally the Seditious Meetings Act. This made political meetings of over fifty people illegal and made it more difficult for radical lecture programmes like those of John Thelwall to continue. The period before the passing of the Act was heaving with public debate on the purpose of conventions, heightened by the sense that soon all such debate might be considered treasonous. One reply to the bill warned that the legislation itself would create a state of emergency, as the people were highly sensitive to encroachments on collective action. 'Action produces re-action:', wrote the pamphleteer, 'the bow if too tense may burst the ligament by which it is restrained, and recoil upon the hands of the injudicious performer.'⁷²

A 1795 pamphlet called *Existing Circumstances, the Watchword of Despotism*, insisted that 1688 had established a principle of resistance and jealousy as the appropriate security against violent private interests.⁷³ It was the duty of the people to 'cautiously watch the first encroachments of power even under the best and worst princes,' since force rose and fell in inverse proportion to the spirit of resistance in the people.⁷⁴ The revolution of 1688 had established that the people had a right to petition and to have arms for the sake of self-preservation.⁷⁵ But why should the people be allowed to hold conventions, which did not seem to fall under either of these categories of resistance rights, arming or petitioning? Margarot had overcome this objection by saying that the purpose of a petition was to express the public opinion, and such opinion could not be collected by going to multiple discrete individuals. Public opinion or the general will could only be formed and expressed when people were gathered as a body. The author of *Existing Circumstances* took a different strategy, claiming that the

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3. Thanks to Colin Kidd for identifying this character.

⁷² Anon., *To the British Nation: Thoughts on the Convention Bill* (London, D. I. Eaton, 1795), p.2.

⁷³ Anon., *Existing Circumstances, the Watchword of Despotism!* (London, J. Smith, 1795), p. 5.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Convention Act was curtailing the right to bear arms. Meetings of the people were ‘the only means of effecting a general union’ of a kind that might enact armed resistance if necessary.⁷⁶ Private individuals, if kept apart, would not know each other, and their interests would diverge, until they found themselves weak and alone before the hand of government. Government would deliberately try to effect this divide and rule, and would turn the parts of the population against each other, until it would be ‘impossible to awaken a general concern’.⁷⁷ Montesquieu’s *Causes of the Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* was cited to show that despotism is preceded in all cases by a lack of unanimity in the population, and flourishes through kindling continued division:

[In a despotic state] the Peasant, the Soldier, the Merchant, the Magistrate and the Grandee have no other conjunction, that what arises from the ability of the one to oppress the other without resistance; and if at any time a union happens to be introduced, citizens are not then united, but dead bodies are laid in their grave contiguous to each other.⁷⁸

The effect of the Convention Bill and the growing culture of surveillance would be to make politics secret rather than public.⁷⁹ In a similar vein, on 18th November 1795 a meeting of Journeymen in London presented a petition objecting to the bill on the basis that it would ‘destroy the social intercourse of society’.⁸⁰ Pitt’s ministry of course claimed that these were exceptional times. An advertisement for a pamphlet made fun of the government’s desperation in presenting a case of pretended necessity by fabricating the ‘pop-gun plot’ of 1795.

Plots, tis well known, are necessary tools
To lift up knaves, and scare believing fools!
Then marvel not why courtiers, in this season,
IN TRUTH find LIBEL, and in POP-GUNS – TREASON.⁸¹

In a last-ditch act of protest against the bill, the London Corresponding Society called a meeting in a field near Copenhagen House on 12th November 1795. Had the Bill been already passed, the meeting would have been an enormous infraction of its stipulation: the London Corresponding Society claimed

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁸⁰ *Convention Bill. At a numerous united Meeting of the Journeymen of the respective branches of [...]* (1795).

⁸¹ Anon., *Existing Circumstances*, p. 37.

that between three and four hundred thousand people attended.⁸² The meeting had a dual symbolism. The substance was to protest the bill through speeches and petitions, and the form was to show how glorious convening really was. The resolution the huge mass of participants apparently arrived at was that ‘we know how to cherish and to practice, in cases of last extremity, the constitutional right of resistance to oppression.’⁸³ The London Corresponding Society’s official description of the meeting, published by Richard ‘Citizen’ Lee, emphasised how respectable the crowd was, and the ‘decency, gravity, and decorum of their demeanour and behaviour’.⁸⁴ Never before had there been a finer opportunity of ‘contemplating the mental energies of so vast a number of fellow creatures’.⁸⁵ The Edinburgh Convention had made a similar claim as to the power of collective intellect, saying that ‘the nineteenth day of November, the day on which the British Convention first met at Edinburgh, will form a pleasing and memorable epoch, not only in the history of our country, but in the history of the human mind.’⁸⁶

William Duane, en route from Calcutta to America, addressed the crowd, citing the fifth article of the Bill of Rights (the right to petition) and the seventh article of Magna Carta (the right to resistance).⁸⁷ Duane insisted on the ‘right of public Meetings and private deliberations; the necessity of private and public opinion, and free discussion on all topics which could interest or affect men.’⁸⁸ Duane was canny to emphasise the importance of private political meetings as well as public ones, since Margarot had been hard-pressed during his trial to defend his role in the secret committee of the Edinburgh convention, which had seemed irrelevant to his apparent desire to effect political meetings purely in order that petitions representing the general will of the people may be drawn up.⁸⁹

⁸² Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (London, 1797), p. 391.

⁸³ *Account of the proceedings of a meeting of the people, in a Field near Copenhagen-House, Thursday, Nov. 12* (London, Citizen Lee, 1795), p. 14.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Address of the British Convention* (London, D.I. Eaton, 1793), p. 4.

⁸⁷ *Account of the proceedings of a meeting of the people...*, p. 5.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Trial of Maurice Margarot*, p. 49.

When the government cited ‘existing circumstances’ or a state of emergency, they were, claimed the responders to the Convention Bill, haplessly inviting radicals to do the same. In proportion to Pitt’s attempts to annul the practice of political assembly, many radicals began to frame conventions as a vehicle for the right to resistance, rather than as proper re-enactments of the glory of the ancient constitution. When Burke said that there was no way to theorise about resistance, since ‘the speculative line of demarcation, where obedience ought to end, and resistance must begin, is faint, obscure, and not easily definable’, the response was threefold.⁹⁰ Firstly, to avoid getting into a situation of resistance being deployed, it was necessary to have a constitution that was not fixed to abstract principles but could be moulded by the kind of political tactics being adopted by reformers. Secondly, such manipulation could only be effected through the ability to petition, which required finding a general will, which in turn could only be created and gathered through physical assemblies and conventions. Thirdly, the correct way to divine the ‘line of demarcation’ was, just as Burke had said, not speculative. Instead it was something that could be achieved by gathering the people together in an association that was armed, an association designed to be jealous of the corruption of power. When rights to freedom of the press, freedom of speech, or freedom of assembly were threatened, the radical response was not simply to assert that these were natural rights or precedential privileges and work out a political strategy on the basis of defending the abstract right. Instead, reformers outlined how these rights held society in balance, and outlined the process of action and reaction that their curtailment necessarily provoked. Rights then were not ideas or possessions, they were practices, and never more so than when realised through associations that had the potential for armed force.

Only when conventions were armed were they taken seriously in practice. The 1797 Spithead and Nore mutineers, having constituted themselves as a body, engaged in direct correspondence with their generals. This total subversion of the line of authority of the navy was lamented by William Cobbett, who recognised the dangerous game that was being played, since to engage in correspondence with the body of mutineers was to recognise them as a political body. He complained that the mutineers

⁹⁰ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London, J. Dodsley, 1790), p. 43.

used ‘the language of a deliberative body, and not that of men, who have sworn to yield implicit obedience.’⁹¹ Similarly, Burke bemoaned the handling of the Spithead mutiny in a letter to William Windham. He thought it had been terribly bad judgement to send Lord Howe, a senior member of the admiralty to ‘hunt amongst mutineers for grievances’ (Howe had ended up agreeing that the sailors may have a veto on whether to accept officers).⁹² The Duke of Bedford tried to impress on his fellow Lords the magnitude of the event, saying that ‘he knew of no instance but the present, in which the ministers of the king had entered into correspondence and negotiation with any body of his majesty’s subjects.’⁹³ Earl Howe thought that the situation was absurd and dangerous to the upholding of sovereignty, since ‘it was gravely proposed that the king himself, or at the least, a deputation from both Houses of Parliament, should journey to Portsmouth without the least delay.’⁹⁴ The London Corresponding Society on the other hand completely failed to grasp what was happening, merely complimenting the sailors for adopting forms of democratic organisation similar to their own.⁹⁵ Few who argued for the right to convene went so far as to link the practice to the bearing of arms, as the author of the *Existing Circumstances* pamphlet did. Those who did were indebted to the Scottish theorist of militias, Andrew Fletcher.

The Andrew Fletcher Tradition

At their boldest, those arguing against the Convention Bill insisted that the right to associate necessarily fused with the right to bear arms in association. After all, what power did a popular convention have unless it had the potential to enact legitimate violence against a tyrannical state? Pro-militia radicals argued that bearing arms together and holding a political discussion together were not essentially different modes of popular politics. John Robertson in his seminal work on the militia issue in eighteenth-century Scotland said that there was no agitation for a militia in the 1790s, and that the

⁹¹ Cited in William Cobbett, *Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register*, January 30th, 1802, p.61.

⁹² Edmund Burke to William Windham, April 26th 1797, in William Windham, *The Windham Papers* (London, 1913), p. 54.

⁹³ ‘Debate in the Lords on the Mutiny of the Seamen’ May 3rd, 1797, *The Parliamentary History of England Vol. 33* (London, Hansard, 1818), p. 476.

⁹⁴ William Johnson Neale, *History of the Mutiny at Spithead and the Nore* (London, Thomas Tegg, 1842), p. 65.

⁹⁵ David Featherstone, ‘Contested Relationalities of Political Activism: The Democratic Spatial Practices of the London Corresponding Society’, *Cultural Dynamics*, 22:2, July 2010, p. 99.

militia created in 1797 was purely the interest of the government and Henry Dundas.⁹⁶ That Dundas' measures themselves did not have some input from interested Scots has now come into question. Anna Plassart has shown that Adam Ferguson welcomed the attempt to form a Scottish militia and was involved in its conception, and Atle Wold's monograph on Scotland and the French Revolutionary War demonstrates the extent of 1790s arguments for a militia which he denotes as 'loyalist'.⁹⁷ Dundas' militia vision aside, there are a number of ways in which consideration of militias crept into discussions about political tactics.

On 22nd December 1792, an anonymous pamphlet was published in Edinburgh entitled *An Address to the People of Scotland on the Necessity of an Immediate Application to Parliament for a Scots Militia*. The writer argued that Scotland might lose out if she allowed the military and commercial considerations of the British government to govern her, and so she must construct her own symbiotic system of commercial interest and military safety. The economic debate known as the 'rich country - poor country' debate here took on an angle related to arms, an angle that had gained traction in discussions of political tactics in Ireland from 1778. The pamphlet began with a quote from Andrew Fletcher:

I cannot see why arms should be denied to any one who is not a slave, since they are the only true badges of liberty; and ought never, but in times of the utmost necessity, to be put into the hands of mercenaries or slaves: Neither can I understand why any man that has arms should be denied the use of the them.⁹⁸

The argument for a militia was inseparable from financial arguments about the union, the pamphlet argued. Should England not be willing to contribute to the cost of Scotland's militia, why then should England's be funded from the joint purse?⁹⁹ The government's military strategy was suspect when considered in commercial terms, since it could only be presumed that it would protect the 'rich country', England, over the 'poor country', Scotland.¹⁰⁰ Scotland needed a militia, then, both to avoid this prejudice and stay safe, and in order to begin to gain the kind of commercial clout that England

⁹⁶ John Robertson, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Militia Issue* (Edinburgh, 1785), p. 151.

⁹⁷ Anna Plassart, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 143; Atle Wold, *Scotland and the French Revolutionary War, 1792-1802* (Edinburgh, 2015), Chapter 6.

⁹⁸ Anon., *An Address to the People of Scotland on the Necessity of an Immediate Application to Parliament for a Scots Militia* (Edinburgh, Peter Hill, 1792), p. i.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

had, since (and here another sage Fletcher quote was inserted) ‘he that is armed is always master of the purse of him who is unarmed’.¹⁰¹ This commercial context for armed strength was of crucial importance to radicals in the late eighteenth century.

The arguments of Andrew Fletcher were siphoned into the 1790s radical political debates largely through the efforts of the Earl of Buchan. Even Thomas Paine, who J.C.D. Clark says did not endorse ‘those early-eighteenth-century figures like Andrew Fletcher [...] who drew inspiration from the mid-seventeenth century but re-expressed it in a newly commercial idiom’, either consciously or subconsciously quoted Fletcher.¹⁰² His line in the *Rights of Man, Part Two*, that ‘an hereditary system is as inconsistent as an hereditary author’ was borrowed from an anecdote that Buchan promoted about Fletcher in 1791.¹⁰³ E.P. Thompson said of this passage of Paine’s that ‘It is not that Paine was the first man to think in this way: many eighteenth-century Englishmen must have held these thoughts privately. He was the first to dare to express himself with such irreverence’.¹⁰⁴ The first Englishman, perhaps, but there was a strong currency for these expressions in Scottish writing.

In his introduction to his *Essay on Fletcher*, Buchan railed against the refusal to grant Scotland a militia and took the opportunity to ‘marl with my blackest coal the game license act, which is an insidious and dangerous disarming of the commons.’¹⁰⁵ Buchan said that Fletcher was

continually attentive to the rights of the people, and jealous, as every friend to his country ought to be, of their invasion by the king and his ministers; for it is as much of the nature of kings and ministers to invade and destroy the rights of the people, as it is of foxes and weasels to rifle a poultry yard and destroy the poultry. – All of them therefore ought to be muzzled.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁰² J.C.D. Clark, *Thomas Paine: Britain, America, and France in the Age of Enlightenment and Revolution* (Oxford, 2018), p. 52.

¹⁰³ Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man Part the Second* (London, J.S. Jordan, 1792), pp. 26-27; The Fletcher anecdote was first relayed by Lord Buchan when he was collecting information for his biography of Fletcher in ‘A Card: Enquiry Concerning Scottish Worthies’, *The Bee, or Literary Weekly Intelligencer, Vol. 3*, June 22nd, 1791, (Edinburgh, Mundell and Son, 1791), p. 240: “Fletcher being in company one day with the witty Dr. Pitcairn, the conversation turned on a person of literature, whose history was not distinctly known. I knew the man well, said Fletcher: He was *hereditary* professor of divinity at Hamburg. *Hereditary* professor! Said Dr. Pitcairn, with a laugh of astonishment and derision. Yes, Doctor, replied Fletcher, *hereditary* professor of divinity! What think you of a hereditary king?” The story then re-appeared in Buchan’s *Essays on Fletcher*, and was re-printed in various publications.

¹⁰⁴ Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 100.

¹⁰⁵ David Steuart Erskine, Earl of Buchan, *Essays on the Lives and Writings of Fletcher of Saltoun and the Poet Thomson* (London, J. Debrett, 1792), p. xxxv.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

For Fletcher, a militia was the most important part of the constitution of any free government. The constitution could be excellent in every other respect, but without this guard against tyranny ‘the liberty of that people must perish’.¹⁰⁷ Buchan claimed that this principle had been preserved in Scotland until the Union of the Crowns, which had introduced the Scots for the first time to unlimited monarchy and the associated slavishness of manner which this generated.¹⁰⁸ Before that point, no monarchy in Europe had been more limited than the Scottish one.¹⁰⁹ The English had a false notion that the abuse of prerogative had been introduced by the Scottish line of Stuarts, when in fact the Scots were preservers of liberty, and the English were poor at recognising and resisting tyranny. ‘Hume told the people of England the truth about their old constitution,’ said Buchan, ‘and they called him a Tory. I tell them that Hume was in the right, and I defy them to call *me* a Tory. It was no rarity for the Scots to dethrone a King for attacking the liberties of the people.’¹¹⁰ For this reason, Buchan preferred Hume’s account of the events of the seventeenth century to the Whig accounts. He wrote in a note on Catherine Macaulay’s history that ‘with a wrong bias Hume told the disagreeable truth of England being in all-times a monarchy with a monarchical constitution and tendency and Catherine Sawbridge with a right bias reasoned on the other side with great admixture of error.’¹¹¹

Scotland had a history of constitutional liberty. It had never had Peers, Buchan claimed, but only Earls who were represented according to their land.¹¹² The House of Peers, or as Buchan preferred to call it, ‘a separate house for [the King’s] servants and chaplains, to stop the progress of laws in favour of the rights of the people, before they should come to receive the royal assent’ was a ‘monstrous organ of power’ for the King, and one completely alien to Scotland.¹¹³ Buchan had a more violently republican interpretation of what a militia was than its English proponents. Buchan was aware of this divergence, saying

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* p. 51.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* p. 84.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹¹¹ ‘Note on Catherine Macaulay’ Laing 2 588, f. 2.

¹¹² Buchan, *Essays on Fletcher*, p. 57.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

I David Stewart, Earl of Buchan, do throw this gauntlet of Fletcher's down, in the presence of all England; and if any man shall take it up, I will try my strength with him; but I will not argue with women or priests, till I shall see them leaving their trenches of petticoats and superstition, and meeting me on the fair and manly field of historical knowledge.

Buchan's carved his beliefs about military virtue onto a garden ornament on his Uphall estate in 1787.

This erection he dedicated to James Buchanan, a descendant of George Buchanan's who had been

Buchan's teacher at St Andrews, and who later taught oriental languages and mathematics at Glasgow

University.¹¹⁴ The monument carries the following inscription:

Ille ego qui quondam patriae percussus amore,
Civibus oppressis, libertati succurrere ausim,
Nunc Arva patema colo, fugioque limina regum.

[I who, formerly animated by love of country,
dared to succour liberty and oppressed citizens,
now cultivate my paternal fields and flee/shun the threshold of kings].¹¹⁵

Buchan had often voiced a complaint that he had been forced from the political sphere, but here he

seems to suggest that even the pastoral life can beget republican virtue of the kind that can restrain a

king. Buchan was so pleased with the inscription that he appended it to his life of Fletcher. Two years

later, in 1793, he published a collection of his earlier *Letters on the Impolicy of a Standing Army, in times of*

Peace, where he wrote that,

Among the Romans we find, that the best and bravest of their Generals came from the plough; contentedly returning to it again when the work was over, and never demanding their triumphs till they laid down their commands, and reduced themselves to the state of private men.¹¹⁶

Buchan argued that the standing army, which used to be so widely seen as a threat to liberty, was

wrongly considered after the Glorious Revolution not to be a threat any longer. Even Lord

Molesworth 'of whose Whiggism no doubt can be made', had said that 'all we pretend to by the late

Revolution, bought at so great an expence, was to be as we were, and that every man should have his

own again, the effecting of which may be called a piece of good luck, which is *the best that can be said of*

¹¹⁴ James Gordon Lamb, 'David Steuart Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan: A Study of his Life and Correspondence', (PhD Thesis, University of St Andrews, 1963), p. 14.

¹¹⁵ This monument has been moved South-East from its original location and is now next to the Visitor Centre in Almondell Country Park, near Uphall.

¹¹⁶ Lord Buchan, *Letters on the Impolicy of a Standing Army* (London, D.J. Eaton, 1793), p. 19.

*it.*¹¹⁷ Before the revolution everyone had been wary of prerogative, and knew that the main prop of prerogative was the standing army.¹¹⁸ But prerogative, the enemy of liberty, having been thought destroyed, its more dangerous successor, interest, was not sufficiently guarded against.¹¹⁹ Now a new case against the standing army needed to be made. Buchan made the case not only from the typical concern that a standing army could act on behalf of a part of the court against the people, but also from the claim that men who composed a standing army were effectively slaves, obliged to be at the command of another.¹²⁰ ‘Enslaved’ Britons in the standing army would have to follow any command they were given, becoming ‘cooped up Machines of Despotic Vengeance [who] may be expected to “sheath their swords in every breast they meet”’.¹²¹ The French had almost been victim to this, but luckily the enlistment terms in the French standing army were so short that the military had been able to take the side of the people.¹²² This idea of enslavement of service and compelled murder in a standing army ceased to be a purely academic concern for the main proponent of a militia in England, Major John Cartwright, only five years later in 1798.

In 1798, echoes of Fletcher were still sounding. Robert Watson, a Scottish activist in the London Corresponding Society who had been Lord George Gordon’s secretary, published the *Political Works of Fletcher of Salton*, which heavily referenced Buchan, and opened with the claim that:

The present short sketch of Fletcher’s life will not be confined to a dry narrative of sieges and battles, nor will it dwell long upon the changes of Whigs and Tories, of hunting parties and voluptuous feasts. That task is reserved for the worshippers of kings: their blood-cemented thrones require advocates of a particular mould. We have a nobler object in view; it is to strew the tomb of the patriot with wreaths of laurel, and raise a monument to departed greatness.¹²³

Watson, like the other followers of Fletcher, was particularly enchanted by the idea that the chief distinction between a free man and a slave was the right to bear arms. Watson thought that the French militia was a good model to follow, though he lamented that fewer than one in ten people in Britain

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33-34.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Robert Watson, *The Political Works of Fletcher of Salton* (London, H.D. Symonds, 1798), p. 7.

were acquainted with how to bear arms, and echoed Buchan's concerns that the game laws had been introduced in order to disarm the people.¹²⁴ 'If this really be our situation,' urged Watson, 'surely the people ought to form themselves into associations, and learn the use of arms.'¹²⁵ In the meantime, every individual should procure arms for himself; for 'while a virtuous man survives, no tyrant thinks himself secure.'¹²⁶

In the 1790s, then, there was still an interest in armed political action, interest that tended to modernise the issue to incorporate considerations of the new commercial state. Fletcher's arguments on having a guard against tyranny were used in the Edinburgh Convention's 1793 address. 'In the words of him who is now no more, but whose spirit is immortal,' they wrote, "every government is tyrannical, which has not a sufficient guard against its being so administered."¹²⁷ The sagacious Fletcher had also been mentioned in the United Irishmen's address to the Scottish Friends of the People of the same year, and in Mackintosh' *Vindiciae Gallicae* in 1791.¹²⁸ But an edition of Fletcher's *Discourse on Militias* had been published by the Society for Constitutional Information well before this period of enthusiasm, in 1786. The man driving the English enthusiasm for a militia was the Society's founder, Major John Cartwright.

Major John Cartwright

In 1794, the London Corresponding Society printed an excerpt from Lord Hawkesbury's 1757 *Discourse on the Establishment of a National and Constitutional Force*. Hawkesbury was no friend to the radicals, which made this work all the more appropriate given the crackdown on press freedoms. The London Corresponding Society prefaced the work with a quote from the 1770s reformer James Burgh's *Political Disquisitions*: 'No kingdom can be secured, otherwise than by *arming the people*. The

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Address of the British Convention*, p. 17.

¹²⁸ William Drennan, 'Address from the Society of United Irishmen in Dublin to the Delegates for promoting a Reform in Scotland', reproduced in *The Trial of Thomas Muir, 2nd edition*, (Edinburgh, Alexander Scott, 1793), pp. 73-78; James Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae* (London, G. G. J. Robinson, 1791), p. 311.

possession of ARMS is the distinction between a FREEMAN and a SLAVE.¹²⁹ Hawkesbury's *Constitutional Maxims* argued that the 1688 constitution lacked a good militia clause. People entered society in order to preserve their property, argued Hawkesbury, so they had an obligation to participate in collectively defending it.¹³⁰ Such principles of self-interest had driven the Saxon militia, which was superseded by the feudal militia in which people bore arms for other peoples' property interests.¹³¹ It was evident to Hawkesbury that commerce and security were necessary companions: history showed that wherever there was a strong national militia, the balance of trade was favourable. 'No one will labour to 'have'', said Hawkesbury, 'if he is not certain he shall be able to "hold"'.¹³² 'It is the duty of an *Englishman* to be even *timidly suspicious in the concerns of his liberty*,' he argued, 'and to labour for its continuance in his most remote posterity; to accept, with gratitude, the favours of good princes, but to secure himself with caution against the oppressions of the bad.'¹³³

The London Corresponding Society had alighted on an issue that could theoretically garner interest from all commercially-minded citizens. Cartwright probably provided the impetus for this approach. Cartwright had been delighted with the French Revolution, and had written to the President of the Committee of Constitution of the Estates General in August 1789 to warn them about errors that the 1688 revolutionaries had made which the French Revolutionaries should be sure to avoid: they should take care to put specific clauses in the constitution regarding the freedom of elections and the frequency of parliamentary sessions.¹³⁴ Eventually, Cartwright would put the French Revolution's failure down to a lack of 'landmarks': the English had the ancient constitution, Magna Carta, and the Bill of Rights to steer by.¹³⁵ While he supported republican forms of government in the event of total revolution as had occurred in France, Cartwright was of the same reluctant mind as the Earl of

¹²⁹ Charles Jenkinson, Lord Hawkesbury, *Constitutional Maxims, Extracted from a Discourse on the Establishment of a National and Constitutional Force* (London, London Corresponding Society, 1794), p. i.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹³⁴ John Cartwright, *Life and Correspondence of Major Cartwright, Vol. 1*, ed. Frances Dorothy Cartwright (London, Colburn, 1826), p. 183.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 185-186.

Buchan, and would rather, claimed his niece, ‘have seen the old edifice repaired and beautified, than have built an entirely new one in its place.’¹³⁶ Cartwright was heavily involved assisting Horne Tooke in his 1794 treason trial and was questioned as to whether he was happy to pursue political reform even if his comrades in this project were bad people. Cartwright had affirmed that he would, since, as he explained later,

he who has a necessary journey to take, and no means but by a stage-coach, has not the choice of his company. Conceiving a reform in the House of Commons necessary to preserve the liberties of my country, I am not likely to refuse the assistance of any man in such moral means as I choose myself to adopt for that end.¹³⁷

In 1795, Cartwright published *The Commonwealth in Danger*, a searing critique of Arthur Young’s recommendations for national security, and one which drew liberally from Hawkesbury, Harrington, and Burgh.¹³⁸ After witnessing the Irish Volunteer movement from 1778, for the next four decades Cartwright untiringly promoted his theory that the constitution was ‘twofold’, with both a military and a civil branch.¹³⁹ His own background was as a militiaman, and Cartwright’s political and military strategy was now to arm the people, a tactic which allowed him to present reform and necessary national defence as going hand in hand. In *The Commonwealth in Danger*, he presented those loyalists who equivocated on the issue of a militia as acting against the interests of national security:

Knowing the solid concentrated ‘wedge-like force’ of our enemy’s phalanx, to be victorious, we must be united. Dissention must be taken to our bosoms. Squinting suspicion and polluted treachery must no longer be our torment and disgrace; but the generous, manly openness of free men again become our characteristic. Internal alarm, thank God and our laws, begins to subside: and I trust will leave nothing behind it to prevent a reconciliation of parties. THE ENEMY IS AT THE GATE AND WE MUST BE FRIENDS, OR PERISH. Adversity is the school of the sublime virtues. Necessity is an eloquent reconciler of differences. By means the most simple she bends the will, and enlightens the understanding. By saying to Britain BE AN ARMED NATION, she secures her defence, and seals her freedom.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

¹³⁸ John Cartwright, *The Commonwealth in Danger* (London, J. Johnson, 1795).

¹³⁹ Cartwright was still promoting this idea in 1820, in the preface to *A Bill of Free and Sure Defence* (London, T. Dolby, 1820) pp. iii, 1.

¹⁴⁰ Cartwright, *The Commonwealth in Danger*, p. 17.

One million taxpayers would be armed, and having both a commercial and corporeal interest in the state they would recognise their ‘right to have a voice in the direction of affairs.’¹⁴¹ The militia would necessarily reform parliament, since ‘the circle of representation will consequently be at least co-extensive with the circle of arms. Hence arming the people, and reforming parliament, are inseparable.’¹⁴² Cartwright railed against the ‘affected fears’ which had contributed to the disarming of the people, quoting Hawkesbury to the effect that militias do not act against their own national interest.¹⁴³ In any case, in the context of the war Cartwright had the power of eschatology on his side, since ‘we must either arm in a mass, or cease to be a people’, and it was happy consolation that ‘the measure of *arming*, must either set us at the same time about *reforming*; or at least obtain that most important question, a *fair hearing*’.¹⁴⁴

It was not the case then that an armed people would strong-arm parliament into reform. Instead the practice of bearing arms would enact citizenship, introducing an understanding of the necessary functions and rights associated with the state. The people would, through their participation in a militia, ‘feel and know’ that they were defending their liberty and constitution ‘by their own immediate guardianship, their own personal, individual exertions, their own understandings and courage’.¹⁴⁵ This would create an intimate knowledge of the true philosophical nature of the constitution, so that the government would not dare proceed in funding ‘lunatic attempts to *write down* the doctrine of LEGISLATIVE REPRESENTATION, on which the very existence of our liberties depends.’¹⁴⁶

With this strong base of armed property owners defending and promoting liberty, Cartwright found himself able to argue for massive franchise extensions, since fears of levelling caused by universal suffrage could be assuaged through armed security of property:

In case of a contest, would those who had once a year a *vote*, or those who had all the year round *balls and bayonets*, be most likely to come off victorious? To imagine that the unconnected, unarmed, unorganised and unprovided cottagers and mechanics of this

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-20.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

country, could despoil of their lands and goods a million of armed nobles, gentlemen, merchants, traders, and farmers compacted, organised, and completely provided with every requisite for war, were a chimera fit only for the brain of a madman.¹⁴⁷

The next year, in 1796, Cartwright published *The Constitutional Defence of England, Internal and External*.

Now he was trying to revive the idea of the *posse comitatus*, which according to Cartwright was an institution that provided external defence as well as internal peace-keeping.¹⁴⁸ The reason such an efficient system had fallen out of use was that ‘such a system of national defence was too congenial with a spirit of freedom not to be subverted, if the craft of courtly statesmen could contrive the means.’¹⁴⁹ But the ‘body’ of the *posse comitatus* still resided in the people, and its ‘soul’ was still in written law. It was this form which determined military success, and for Cartwright, France was a prime example. Cartwright would continue to expend his literary energies in the service of the cause of the militia, publishing in 1797 *An Appeal, Civil and Military, On the Subject of the English Constitution*, and in 1806, *England’s Aegis, or, The Military Energies of the Constitution*.

Ultimately Horne Tooke, for whom Cartwright had acted as a witness in 1794, lost hope in the cause of reform before Cartwright did. ‘If the people consent to a substitute for bread,’ Horne Tooke wrote to Cartwright in 1797, ‘the poor of this country will eat bread no more. This war is intended to put, and is likely to put the seal to the deed of transfer of the English constitution. I think the cause of reform is dead and buried.’¹⁵⁰ Cartwright wrote in the margin of the letter, ‘But J.C. is a believer in the resurrection.’¹⁵¹ His faith would be sorely tried a year later.

The Model Militia

The leading proponents of the tactic of association in the early 1780s had been acutely aware of its limitations. They were looking to Ireland for inspiration, to a movement that they believed held much more promise. Associations were being raised in Ireland as well, but these were armed Volunteer

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁴⁸ John Cartwright, *The Constitutional Defence of England, Internal and External* (London, J. Johnson, 1796), p. 138.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Cartwright, *Life and Correspondence*, p. 240.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

forces, ostensibly to provide defence against any potential American invasion.¹⁵² These associations had been co-opted by Patriots for the cause of reform, and Ireland won major legislative independence and favourable trade. Major John Cartwright wrote to Francis Dobbs, one of the masterminds of this operation, in January 1780, to discuss the reform resolutions they both wanted to pass. ‘In your country’, wrote Cartwright,

the prospect is much the fairest. Much genuine patriotism and very great ability in its support have been manifested; and when eighty thousand men have taken up arms in the cause, it is the clearest proof that the people are disposed to think, and consequently to read or attend to information on the points which they have at heart.¹⁵³

Cartwright did not believe that such a corps could be raised in England at that time, but he hoped that it might happen if the external danger to Britain increased. He asked Dobbs to outline the practice they had undertaken in Ireland as clearly as possible, in order that he could use the same plan if such events occurred. He wanted to be ‘minutely acquainted’ with the process of ‘originally associating, arming, clothing, training, and supporting a volunteer corps.’¹⁵⁴

The rules by which they have been officered, and the system of discipline on which they have been agreed, are particulars I wish to know: as well as the provisions that have been made for their continuance so long as may be necessary. At your leisure I would request information on the foregoing heads. In London, there are a few associations, but I doubt much whether upon the best systems. In Ireland your latter associations must be on a very improved model. If you have interwoven with them any institutions for exciting a spirit of emulation, or for making the thing pleasurable under proper guards against degeneracy, I beg you will not omit them.¹⁵⁵

By October, Cartwright did not have any more faith in the capacity of the English reform movement, and wrote to Dobbs that Ireland had to save not only herself, ‘but her sister England also, who seems but too little disposed to do herself that office.’¹⁵⁶ Cartwright was worried that he would not be allowed to piggyback on the success of the Irish reform movement, and insisted to Dobbs that working together would not harm Ireland.¹⁵⁷ Dobbs should not worry about rivalry between England and

¹⁵² For the background and origins of the Volunteer Movement, see Ian McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998), p. 123.

¹⁵³ John Cartwright to Francis Dobbs, 12th January 1780, NLI, MS 2251/29.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ John Cartwright to Francis Dobbs, 13th October 1780, NLI, MS 2251/31.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Ireland in manufacturing, said Cartwright, since a correct view of political economy demonstrated that this concern was baseless.¹⁵⁸

John Jebb wrote to Dobbs expressing similar sentiments, letting him know about what was happening in his own committee work and apologising for his ‘selfish’ anxiety about the progress of Ireland’s reform movement, since the Scottish and English movements’ success depended entirely on the Irish movement.¹⁵⁹ ‘I will freely own’, wrote Jebb, ‘that the resolutions of Dungannon and the animated address to the three promises occasioned a glow of satisfaction beyond the power of language to describe – O that a portion of the same spirit would rest upon my Countrymen! But we are lost to virtue, and all sense of shame! May Ireland flourish, and may we though late imitate the fair example!’¹⁶⁰

Christopher Wyvill, who was leading a rather different arm of the English reform movement, became engaged in the Irish question from July 1783, when he received a letter from the Delegates of 45 Volunteer Corps at Lisburn. The delegates, chaired by Henry Joy, had written to several notable English reformers requesting their advice.¹⁶¹ They had a strategy of flattery regarding the English reform movement, saying that it was led by great men, and they trusted it had only miscarried ‘for a season’.¹⁶² These Volunteers, led by Henry Joy, presented their own movement as having arisen from the English one, and said that they hoped soon to see the two movements united.¹⁶³ Wyvill responded that when a ‘free people’ tried to improve their legislature, it was their duty to ‘preserve antient foundations; and to suffer every part of the fabric to stand, which is not absolutely incapable of substantial repair.’¹⁶⁴ In making the seemingly innocent claim that reformers constituted a ‘free people’,

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ John Jebb to Francis Dobbs, NLI, MS 2251/135; John Jebb to Francis Dobbs, NLI MS 2251/143.

¹⁶⁰ John Jebb to Francis Dobbs, NLI, MS 2251/147. Ian McBride proposes the opposite direction of influence, writing that Burgh’s *Political Disquisitions* influenced John Jebb, who in turn influenced the Volunteers (McBride, *Scripture Politics*, p. 130). However while Irish radicals sought approval and advice from English radicals like Jebb, Cartwright and Wyvill, it seems unlikely that in tactical terms they made any attempt to mirror the English association movement, especially given that they were being implored to lead the way by the English radicals.

¹⁶¹ An overview of the responses to this consultation from Charlemont and Grattan is given in John Cannon, *Parliamentary Reform, 1640-1832* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 103.

¹⁶² ‘Letter to Wyvill from Delegates of 45 volunteer corps at Lisburn, 19th July 1783,’ in *A Collection of Letters on the Proposed Reformation of the Parliament of Ireland* (York, W. Blanchard, 1783), p. 2.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ ‘Mr Wyvill’s Answer to the Queries proposed to him by the Committee of Correspondence at Belfast, in *A Collection of Letters* p. 10.

Wyvill was heading off arguments that were becoming increasingly popular in Ireland that the Irish people were not free and so not obligated to follow rules of popular political engagement relating to ancient constitutions or abstract rights of resistance. Wyvill thought that the demands of the Irish Volunteers were too general. They asked for reform but did not specify how such reform should be carried out.¹⁶⁵ Wyvill recommended that the Volunteer Assemblies call a general assembly of delegates to determine what specific plan of reform they should demand from parliament.¹⁶⁶ Wyvill's concerns about unclear reform plans were also ones he held with regard to the English movement. He had been criticised for not supporting a vote of thanks to the Duke of Richmond at the Thatched House Meeting – the reform meeting that Pitt, to the delight of the lawyer Thomas Erskine, had attended. Wyvill did not like the Duke of Richmond's plan because it appeared to him to be 'impracticable, and not to be attained by any regular or constitutional effort of the people.'¹⁶⁷ Until a general union of the people took place, he said, 'discordant petitions, recommending to Parliament different specific plans of Reformation, would but expose the people to the derision of their adversaries.'¹⁶⁸ Wyvill insisted that no reform plan could succeed without such a general union right up until 1799, when he eventually began to support the Whig strategy of secession, a position he reluctantly arrived at after Buchan levelled his greatest powers of persuasion at him.

Jebb did not take the 1783 Irish flattery of the English reform movement as seriously as Wyvill, still maintaining the depressed position he had held in 1780. 'It appears to me,' he wrote to the Volunteers, 'that you will lead the way in the great point of parliamentary reformation. Next to yourselves, Scotland appears most in earnest.'¹⁶⁹ He reiterated that he hoped the English reform movement would learn from Ireland and Scotland.¹⁷⁰ He had much more hope for the Irish style of Volunteer pressure than for any reform deriving from parliament, since he had witnessed the 'force of influence' against Henry

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁶⁹ 'John Jebb to Lieut. Col. Sharman etc.' August 14th, 1783, in *A Collection of the Letters which have been addressed to the Volunteers of Ireland, on the subject of a Parliamentary Reform* (London, J. Stockdale, 1783), p. 77.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Grattan when the Irish had attempted a parliamentary route.¹⁷¹ ‘If it be left to Parliament to form a plan’, he said, ‘the scheme will infallibly be defeated. The aristocratic interest united with the regal, like a blight from the East, will assuredly blast every hope of harvest.’¹⁷²

While Jebb believed that ‘political truth and political expediency are terms synonymous’, and urged the Volunteers to ‘GO ON, as you have begun’, Richard Price responded to the Irish Volunteer question in a very different mood.¹⁷³ He thought that it was favourable that they had seized the moment offered by the war with America, and he said he disagreed with the common adage ‘not to disturb what is quiet.’¹⁷⁴ But he warned the volunteers ‘to avoid the danger of all by aiming at too much’, and said he wished that the reformers in England had confined their demands to ‘the extension of the right of voting to Copyholders, and Leaseholders; and the substitution of a hundred knights for counties in the room of a hundred members for boroughs.’¹⁷⁵ A shocked response to Price was written by Thomas Northcote, who affected horror that Price had ‘forsaken his old ground of general Principles’, and had sunk from being a philosopher to a ‘state partisan.’¹⁷⁶ Northcote wrote that Price ‘stoops to adopt the selfish maxims of partial reformation in this corrupt and slavish kingdom’, and that such maxims were inappropriate for a nation that was armed and ready to meet ‘the law of Power with the Right of Self-Defence.’¹⁷⁷ ‘Will they who have usurped the Power over the public Purse quit their Hold without a desperate Struggle, like all other Robbers?’, Northcote asked, and ‘Shall we in such a Case rely upon Petitions or upon Pistols?’¹⁷⁸

Prudential maxims of *practical reforms*, may suit a Yorkshire Committee, (for Englishmen, shame upon them! Are only *Beggars of Rights*) but for a nation where wisdom hath adopted Strength, and Perfection is within the grasp of Valour, a single chance must not be left in the power of Fate, were it possible to prevent it [...]. Free Subjects are never safe, but when they have Suffrages to guard their Rights, and Arms

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ ‘John Jebb to Lieut. Col. Sharman etc.’ August 13th, 1783, in *A Collection*, p. 116.

¹⁷⁴ Richard Price to Lieut. Col. Sharman etc.’ August 7th, 1783, in *A Collection*, pp. 81-82.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ Thomas Northcote to Lieut. Col. Sharman etc.’, October 15th, 1783, in *A Collection*, p. 90.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

to defend their Suffrages. An Englishman, without a Vote or a Musket, is stripped more naked and defenceless than the Savage in the Desert.¹⁷⁹

Fifteen years later, when the Irish Union began their rebellion in May 1798, English militia forces were called to go to Ireland and help suppress the unrest. One of the officers was Cartwright's nephew, Edmund. Cartwright was devastated, and wrote to his nephew with information that while only a minority of officers refused to go to Ireland, many more disapproved of the orders but did not have the fortitude to resist.¹⁸⁰ From a 'constitutional point of view', said Cartwright, the act of calling the English militia to serve in Ireland had 'broken down the last fence we had between a militia and a standing army,' and ought to be resisted on those grounds.¹⁸¹ The existence of a standing army in Britain had introduced terrible habits of thinking, extinguishing 'all discrimination as to *the cause* in which we draw the sword.' Buchan's fears had been realised, and Cartwright found himself miserably proselytising to his nephew:

Are you then sufficiently acquainted with the measures and the system of government that have been pursued in Ireland, to say decidedly whether or not the resistance of the people be justifiable or the contrary? If on this point you are in the dark, to volunteer to Ireland in the service of Government, is to leave it to chance whether the acts you commit are to be justifiable homicide or murder. Can you run such a risk? If you will allow me to offer an opinion on this point, not taken lightly up, nor without inquiry and information, and a certain knowledge to a sufficient extent for governing that opinion; I have to say, that in my judgement, no nation ever had a juster cause for resistance to oppression than the Irish.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁸⁰ 'John Cartwright to Edmund Cartwright, 25th June 1798' in *Life and Correspondence*, p. 280.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² *Ibid.* pp. 281-282.

Chapter IV: Ireland Against Speculation

The Volunteers

In *Americomania and the French Revolution Debate in Britain*, Wil Verhoeven describes how political innovation across the Atlantic in the 1770s and 1780s inspired British radicals in the 1790s. This innovative impulse found an outlet through either local millenarian imaginings or emigration twinned with utopian social planning. In Verhoeven's telling, the 'epistemological break' caused by the French Revolution allowed political systems to be compared by a public that liked thinking about how society might best be theoretically arranged.¹ The American Revolution certainly titillated the political imaginations of radicals in England. But it had a different effect in Ireland, where the reformers' interpretation of events surrounding the American War had provoked ideas not about blueprints for the ideal society but instead about strategies for popular power. While in England William Godwin was considering the speculative implications of the American 'experiment' in 1793, Irish reformers were pursuing tactics that they had learned ten years earlier in the Volunteer Movement. In 1778, as a self-defensive measure against France, militias had been formed across Ireland, some allowing Catholics to join, and had quickly burst out of their stated remit. The Volunteers moved from sabre-rattling to the forming of a convention in November 1783 at Dungannon, in the name of free trade and then parliamentary reform. This convention counted among its delegates several members of parliament, and sat contiguously with the Dublin parliament, which made no constitutional objection to the existence of the convention.² The Irish MP Francis Hardy claimed that the convention posed 'no danger to the constitution' and that while it was undoubtedly strange to have a 'military assembly sitting in the metropolis', the novelty of the proceedings matched the novelty of Ireland's situation.³

¹ Wil Verhoeven, *Americomania and the French Revolution Debate in Britain, 1789-1802*, (Cambridge, 2013), p. 4.

² Warden Flood, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of the Right Hon. Henry Flood, MP*, (Dublin, John Cumming, 1844), p. 237.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

During the life of this militia the Volunteers won what would turn out to be short-lived legislative independence for Ireland from the British government.⁴

The power of the volunteers declined from 1783, as the gains were consolidated. The war ended that year, and with it the necessity to arm. This was despite the efforts of Joseph Pollock and Francis Dobbs who issued an address from the Committees of Ulster and Connaught on the 28th May 1782 proclaiming victory but urging the people ‘not to relax in your Military Discipline’ for

we have now a Constitution as well as Property to defend against the common Enemy – let us remember too, that there is a public spirit and high Sense of Honor annexed to the Volunteer Institution, which, we have found the great Support and incentive to national Virtue, and which having already made Corruption sink before it, can alone prevent its rising again into Existence.⁵

Despite the 1780s lull, the experience of the Volunteer movement profoundly influenced Irish ideas of political practice over the next two decades. While both Irish and English movements for reform in the 1780s broadly relied on the practice of associating and holding conventions, Ireland’s experience of armed strength in a convention was markedly dissimilar to the English experience of reform associations. Ireland’s tactics had mirrored America’s, and this was not just to do with the use of arms and the capacity for physical force. Integral to the militia strategy in Ireland was the use of financial tactics reflecting the non-importation methods practiced in America from 1766 until the revolution. Discussions of consumption and commodities have a tendency to be bracketed under the label of ‘culture’, and I want to push against this – the Irish interest in consumption was not a defanging of Irish politics but was a tactical innovation derived from a militarised anti-luxury stance and a cynicism about the relevance of constitutional and law to Irish affairs.⁶ The Volunteers and later the United Irishmen often disavowed ideas of a perfect historic or original constitution as the basis for their

⁴ An excellent account of the later progress of the Volunteer movement can be found in Ian McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 130-144.

⁵ ‘The Address of the Committees of Ulster and Connaught, in Ireland, to the Volunteers of those Provinces.’ *The Derby Mercury*, 6th June 1782, p. 2 For an alternative view see McBride’s *Scripture Politics*, p. 131. McBride places more emphasis on the explicit acceptance by Grattan, Charlemont, Dobbs and Pollock of the repeal of the Declaratory Act, arguing that they wanted the Volunteers to ‘withdraw from the political arena’. McBride points out that Dobbs saw the reign of speculation getting out of control at this point; he wrote that ‘every private was taught, that he was competent to legislate, and consequently to express his sentiments on the most speculative points.’ (p. 132).

⁶ For a cultural interpretation of the Irish politics of consumption see Chapter 3, ‘Shopping for Ireland’ in Padhraig Higgins, *A Nation of Politicians: Gender, Patriotism, and Political Culture in Late Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Madison, 2010).

strategy. This stance was due in part to the Scottish education of some of the principal actors in Ireland – Thomas Addis Emmet, William Drennan, Joseph Pollock, and William Steel Dickson. Much has been made of the influence of Francis Hutcheson’s ‘New Light’ moral philosophy on Irish eighteenth-century political thought, but by the 1790s it was John Millar’s legal and political thought that had become the foundation of theories of political practice for many in the United Irish generation.

Realism and Rudeness in the Volunteer Movement

The Volunteer Movement was a crucial step in developing Irish patriotism and a political national consciousness. In 1782 a parliamentary reporter, Charles Henry Wilson, wrote a retrospective on the movement. The experience of associating in arms had, he said, given people a sense of their power and importance and had given them the ability to confer about political matters. Associating in arms was only half the story. The Volunteer associations also made agreements on private and trade-based consumption of goods, and in some cases, such as with regard to clothing and uniform, agreements to consume only Irish commodities were made.⁷ ‘Now clothed in her native manufacture’, wrote Wilson,

With rustic air,
Blooming she stands, and innocently fair
Let polish’d arts the bashful nymph refine,
In silken raiment let her beauties shine;
Th’ admiring world shall own her peerless charms,
And distant bosoms pant with soft alarms.⁸

Wilson believed Ireland to be at risk from a Montesquieuian encroachment of customs and moeurs from the larger, neighbouring power.⁹ He thought that the means the Volunteers had adopted were well-suited to the predicament Ireland found herself in. The militia tactic and the consumption tactic ensured a continuation of national political spirit and a nourishment of custom.

⁷ A study of the politics of consumption in Ireland at this time can be found in Martyn J. Powell, *The Politics of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (London, 2005), pp. 172-187. See also pp. 89-93 for a discussion of the military aesthetics of the Volunteers.

⁸ Charles Henry Wilson, *A Compleat Collection of the Resolutions of the Volunteers, Grand Juries, etc. of Ireland, Vol. 1* (Dublin, Joseph Hill, 1782), p. cxlvii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. cxlii.

Francis Dobbs, with whom Cartwright and Jebb had been corresponding, believed that part of the success of the Volunteer movement lay in fashion and emulation. ‘Volunteer rank was an object of ambition’, said Dobbs, ‘and it was considered as the most glorious distinction of a gentleman, to be at the head of a well-appointed corps.’¹⁰

Among the lower orders of men, the smartness of those who had enrolled themselves, became an object of envy and emulation. The idea of glory, which attended it, also had its weight, and every able young man felt ashamed, that he was not amongst the guardians of his country.

The fair, also, materially served the Volunteer cause. Countrymen from being slovenly in their dress, and awkward in their manners, became neat in their persons, and comparatively polished and refined. They were also to be the protectors of their mistresses, and obtained from the softer sex in return, an envied precedence. – In short, these various causes operated so powerfully, that almost every man who could, became a volunteer.¹¹

This sense of fashion was tied to the tactic of the consumption boycott. As Dobb’s friend Pollock pointed out later, a consumption boycott was a ‘subtraction from the supplies of the minister’ which was ‘in exact proportion to the former luxury, vanity and folly, and to the present self-denial and resolute determination of the non-consumer or associator.’¹² It was impossible, Pollock added, for any legislature to say to the people ‘Ye shall use, whether ye will or not, our luxuries, or we shall tax, as we please, your necessaries.’¹³

The non-consumption agreements adopted by the Volunteer associations were precursors to non-importation agreements later adopted by the Dublin parliament. This idea was probably inspired by Portugal as well as by America. In 1780, Portugal realised that it could alter the unfavourable balance of trade established by the Methuen Treaty of 1703 by objecting to the 1779 extension of the treaty’s terms to Ireland. Portugal’s strategy was to refuse to import certain Irish linens.¹⁴ While this did not have a huge economic impact on Ireland, it was the final straw. In a situation of escalating poverty and ruined manufacturing, Irish politicians used this instance to show that British politicians thought

¹⁰ Francis Dobbs, *A History of Irish Affairs* (Dublin, M. Mills, 1782), p. 37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

¹² Joseph Pollock, *Letters to the Inhabitants of the Town and Lordship of Newry* (Dublin, P. Byrne, 1793), p. 56.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁴ An excellent account can be found in James Kelly, ‘The Irish Trade Dispute with Portugal 1780 – 87’ *Studia Hibernica*, 25, 1990, pp. 7-48.

of Ireland as a place from which wealth could be extracted, to the detriment of her native population. In 1781, the movement to make consumption political began, with the *Hibernian Journal* recommending that if the Volunteers 'are doomed to undergo actual inebriation, then they shall enjoy the Reflection of its being effected by the Produce of their own County.'¹⁵ After the House of Commons failed to resolve the problem, the Ulster Volunteers passed a motion at Dungannon on 15th February 1782 resolving 'that we will not consume any wine of the growth of Portugal, and that we will to the extent of our influence, prevent the use of said wine, save and except the wine at present in the kingdom'.¹⁶ This was followed by a stream of resolutions. Two weeks later the principal freeholders of Teemore and Johnstown resolved 'that we will not use any of the produce of Portugal (not even its salt)'.¹⁷ Within two months, the resolution had been extended in scope, so that, for example, the Curraghmore Rangers resolved that because the Irish woollen trade was struggling, 'it is our wish that the Irish Volunteers should be cloathed in the manufactures of their own country only', and 'that we are fully determined not to wear any uniform in future but what is entirely of Irish manufacture'.¹⁸ The movement continued into 1783, with the Dublin Evening Post advocating the non-consumption of port, until the Irish Parliament took a different course, adopting prohibitory duties in February 1785.¹⁹ James Kelly has carefully documented how the prevailing public discontent was redirected from this point from Portugal to the Irish and London Parliaments, which now looked like they had instigated the initial crisis in a clumsy attempt to extract even more duties from Irish trade.²⁰

Irish reformers from 1779 were pursuing a course very different to that of their English counterparts. From England, John Cartwright and John Jebb enviously believed that the movement in Ireland was superior and had a much stronger hand. Internally, though, many of the leading reformers sounded

¹⁵ Maurice R. O'Connell, *Irish Politics and Social Conflict in the Age of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1965), p. 93.

¹⁶ 'Ireland', *The Scots Magazine*, Vol. 44, 1782, p. 106.

¹⁷ 'Resolutions agreed at a meeting of the Principal Freeholders of the Manors of Teemore and Johnstown, at Hamilton's Bawn, on Thursday the 28th of February, 1782' in Wilson, *A Compleat Collection*, p. 11.

¹⁸ 'Curraghmore Rangers. At a full meeting of said troop at Newtown, on Monday, April 1, 1782' in Wilson, *A Compleat Collection*, p. 151.

¹⁹ Kelly, 'The Irish Trade Dispute with Portugal', p. 33.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

warnings about the danger of slipping into discussions of abstract right and morality, and they cautioned that the next moves of the Volunteer movement should be plotted with care. Right at the beginning of the movement, in 1779, the politician Henry Flood wrote one such pamphlet ‘on the expediency and necessity of the present associations in Ireland, in favour of our own manufactures’, which both praised the associations and urged them to maintain their commitment to forging their own way.²¹ Flood had been a major political player in Ireland since the 1760s and had taken office in 1775 in the hope of achieving reform.²² This meant that he found himself on the establishment side of the political divide when the Volunteer Movement sprung into being, despite broadly agreeing with many of the patriot demands. Two years before his dismissal from Dublin Castle, he tried to show the burgeoning movement for free trade where its theoretical and practical weaknesses lay.

The first problem was a lack of realism regarding the commercial interests of England. It was a mistake, Flood argued, to imagine that England could ‘feel’ for Ireland since ‘the political body has no heart’ and ‘political humanity’ does not exist.²³ If it did, said Flood, it was not likely to be found in a commercial state, since ‘jealousy, monopoly, and pride, combining in the soul of a commercial Empire, exclude everything, except industry, punctuality, and that species of probity which is necessary for credit.’²⁴ Flood claimed that the tyranny of merchants was worse than the tyranny of a monarch, since a monarch would only plunder part of the acquisitions of a nation, enacting cruelty on some individuals, whereas the mercantile interest would prevent acquisition in the first place, creating widespread poverty.²⁵ In a comparison between monarchy and commerce it was clear that ‘the one takes from the tree much of its fruit, the other starves the root, and prevents the bearing – The one is a moral evil, the other a tyranny, amounting to a physical interdict.’²⁶ Ireland was suffering from such

²¹ Henry Flood, *A Letter to the People of Ireland on the Expediency and Necessity of the Present Associations in Ireland, in Favour of our own Manufactures* (Dublin, Isaac Colles, 1779).

²² Henry Flood has been placed in the ‘civic humanist’ or ‘country’ tradition by Hampsher-Monk in ‘Civic Humanism and Parliamentary Reform’, pp. 75-76.

²³ Flood, *A Letter to the People of Ireland*, pp. 3-5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

commercial tyranny, for England effectively controlled her trade, and this crippled her whole internal economy. There was no point countering this with expressions of abstract morality or right.

Flood recommended a programme to save Ireland from the extreme poverty she was falling into, based on the principle that the economic viability of Ireland depended not on her ability to produce food for herself, but to produce manufacturing she could export. Since ‘the fruits of the earth are a monopoly; the common people, not having land by inheritance, must subsist by industry, otherwise provision does not come within their circulation.’²⁷ The fact that most people in Ireland wore clothing manufactured in England implied that Irish trade was not free. The real challenge was how to resist this commercial tyranny. For Flood, the Volunteer associations had been a good tactic after a succession of poor ones. One of these poor tactics had been to give Irish manufacturers charity, which had encouraged idleness and caused sudden over-consumption of native manufactures which ‘was to delude into a trade, by a sudden consumption, men whom we would not support by a steady demand; and to sow the seeds of future expedients, and future beggars.’²⁸ Flood identified a raft of such ‘temporary expedients’ that tricked manufactures into over-production, such as subscriptions to encourage production of various articles.²⁹ Internal resolutions to use only Irish manufactures were not ‘lasting’ or ‘palpable’, said Flood, and he knew people would forget them, since ‘the very violence with which they entertain them now, secures their departure from them.’³⁰ Many people would be tempted to forsake the internal resolutions if they spied a bargain on imported goods, or would think their own particular actions insignificant in the broader picture, or would break the resolution at the first sign of slight improvement.³¹

Flood thought that the Volunteer movement should set the agreements that had been adopted about consumption into a written covenant, so that people would have to make a public pledge.³² This

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

approach, he claimed, was more ‘systematic and comprehensive’, though it would no doubt be difficult since it required shunning the foreign luxuries which the Irish had become accustomed to, and instead drawing on deep reserves of national pride.³³

We are to contend against the manufactures of a country completed in everything, and against our own habits of admiring that country in everything. We are to forsake the vanity of foreign magnificence, and to resort to superior and profounder sources of pride – the want of it – the merit of exhibiting the rude efforts of our own country, of bringing out her hidden faculties, and training her on in arts and industry.³⁴

Were the agreement to be formalised, Flood argued, the public would demand that Ireland’s political representatives adhere to a consumption covenant. The woollen-drapers and mercers would have to be watched carefully, since ‘they have it in their power, unless bound, to render the association of other men of little or no consequence, by imposing one manufacture for another’.³⁵ Flood claimed that these tradesmen already had foreign cloth hoarded in warehouses, which they were waiting to use when ‘the present spirit shall abate’.³⁶ Flood’s covenant would be enforced by two means. People would refuse to vote for anyone who refused to sign, and the name of every draper or mercer who refused to sign would be published so that people could have no dealings with them.³⁷ This would reduce Ireland’s state of commercial dependence and therefore counter an ‘abject political spirit’, and it would create national union through common action between Catholics and Dissenters, Whigs and Tories, Country and Court.³⁸

Flood’s concerns were reflected even more forcefully in the writing of Joseph Pollock, a lawyer at Newry, who later became a proponent of the continuation of Volunteer tactics in Ireland in the 1790s. Pollock loved the patriotic spirit of the Volunteers but harboured frustration that they did not evaluate their political strategy with any care. His first major publication, *The Rights of Ireland Asserted*, was one of the two publications at the time of the Volunteer Movement that ‘deservedly caught the public eye’, according to Francis Dobbs, who alongside Pollock was an Ulster delegate to the Volunteer meetings,

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 52, 54.

and a fellow member of the political club ‘The Monks of the Screw’.³⁹ These two men had issued the address in 1782 warning the movement not to dissolve at the appearance of victory. In *The Rights of Ireland*, Pollock pursued lines of enquiry very similar to those that Flood had investigated.

Pollock claimed that politics often contained a ‘timidity’ which had the potential to quash resolution and enterprise, and projects infused with such timidity ‘must end in inaction, if not ignominy and remorse.’⁴⁰

He who sets himself down, and weighs every possible accident that may thwart his design, and where much good is promised, allows himself to be terrified at every appearance of evil, such a man may live harmless in a solitude, but he has not virtue for society. Let him retire to a cell! He was not made for action, - he may be fainted by superstition, but a spirited reformer will expunge him from his calendar.⁴¹

This kind of timidity did become more useful in periods of great change or revolution, and Pollock’s goal was to coach his readers through the great considerations they must necessarily go through when considering their own political moment, in the hope that they would be able to take political action at the end of the thought-process. Pollock’s starting point was to consider whether it was possible for Ireland to obtain her independence, which he wanted to work out before deciding whether he even wanted to attain this goal. ‘It would be of little importance’, he said,

to enquire whether a certain change would be advantageous, if the improbability of effecting it almost amounts to *the impossible*. Were I to institute an enquiry, whether it would be useful to man to have power over the elements, I believe I should be able to find a few fellow adventurers in the speculation. But if I begin by enquiring if such power could possibly and easily be obtained, the very novelty of the subject might perhaps procure me a hearing.⁴²

Pollock began with a principle similar to the one stated by Flood, that political bodies act from selfishness ‘and are totally incapable of a steady or uniform principle of generosity.’⁴³ It was important

³⁹ Dobbs, *A History of Irish Affairs*, p. 11. For a description of the Monks of the Screw and its potential collaboration with the French in a plot for Irish independence in 1779, see A.T.Q. Stewart, *A Deeper Silence: The Hidden Origins of the United Irishmen* (London, 1993), pp. 175-176.

⁴⁰ Joseph Pollock, *Letters of Owen Roe O’Nial* (Ireland, 1779), p. 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

to Pollock to draw a distinction between morality and politics. 'Morality is felt', he insisted, but 'Politics must be studied.'

The conscience of the man is natural. That of the politician artificial. The habit of reasoning only, is not favourable to feeling. The habit of being cunning is not favourable to feeling. The habit of being cunning is not favourable to strictness of principle.⁴⁴

As Flood had argued, there was no point thinking about England's attitude to Ireland as if it came from the heart. Pollock agreed with Flood that nations could not be jealous, since their principle is policy.⁴⁵ Letting go of sentimental ideas about states made it even clearer that the attitudes of free states to other states was often a tyrannical one - where the Spartans had their Helots, the English had their Irish.⁴⁶ But the realist position was not a totally pessimistic one, since Holland and Switzerland had both gained their independence even though, Pollock claimed, they were inferior to Ireland in natural advantage.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Ireland had the possibility of assistance from America. Pollock believed that the main problem for the Volunteer movement was the lazy reliance on the panacea of conventions which infused the current political mood. Pollock believed that political reform needed to be achieved by 'the collective body of the people', but questions of the mode and object of such an interposition needed to be established before rushing headlong into political reform.⁴⁸ There were three possibilities open to Irish reformers: the pursuit of union, the practice of associations to consume home-produced manufactures and to learn the use of arms, and independence.⁴⁹

Pollock's starting point was that Ireland was in a situation of slavery. David Hume had written that the nation of Ireland was enslaved, but the people were free, a view which Pollock called 'mightily philosophic'.⁵⁰ The English constitution had been revealed to be fallible through its corruption, and Montesquieu's prediction that the legislative power of England would become more corrupt than the

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

executive had been realised.⁵¹ This did not encourage Pollock to pursue a union. In the event of a union, Ireland would simply contribute even more corrupt politicians to the British parliamentary system. Associations seemed more promising, but they would fail if they did not have a further object than trade and defence.⁵² ‘Associations are a first step’, said Pollock, ‘which should lead to the final one’.⁵³ They needed to target the root of the disease. Where a Whiggish line of thought led to the erroneous belief that the English constitution would support association movements, Pollock saw that

the same radical fault in our present constitution, which rendered Associations *necessary*, will, while it continues, *defeat* them. They will be sapped as the constitution was destroyed. The same power which renders abortive all barely ‘internal resolutions of individuals’, will gradually undermine our ‘written covenants;’ and I do not think a single argument can be used to prove the necessity of these last, that will not demonstrate that even *they* will not bind – *if the power of the English Parliament over this country shall continue*.⁵⁴

In any case, associations were problematic political organs because they were explicitly time-limited, intended to self-destruct with the absence of necessity. Since there was no universal way to prove necessity, associations would fizzle out.

In all voluntary Associations, where there is not a *power* established to *keep* men to them, (which power, though formed upon the free-est principles, must, to be effectual, be in a degree arbitrary,) the Associators will judge how far the majority itself, whom they bound themselves to obey, adhere to the *primitive intention* of the Association, or what they will call *the spirit of the constitution*. This spirit will be what every individual conceived it to be at first, conceives it now to be, on mature reflection, or *chuses* to conceive it, for motives known to himself. Some may for a while be retained in the croud by indolence, by shame, or want of spirit; but when once a few break through the rules, and give their reasons with plausibility and boldness, especially if the multitude feel any inconvenience from their virtue, or those who draw off, gain any advantage by their secession, - the *written covenant of all* degenerates into the *internal regulation of each individual*.⁵⁵

Pollock, like Flood, worried about how the associations might enforce the non-consumption covenant. Some people might have plausible reasons not to sign, and the government was so corrupt anyway that holding it to such a pledge was unlikely. You might publish the names of those who refused to sign and agree not to have any dealings with them, as per Flood’s recommendation, but,

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

said Pollock, these people were just ordinary people acting as you would expect them to.⁵⁶ Because of the likely ineffectiveness of association, Pollock claimed that the only choice was independence – or ruin.⁵⁷ Despite Pollock's scepticism, he persisted with the movement and the drive for encouraging national unity. As one of the members of the first Dungannon Committee, Pollock found himself issuing a plea to the public in April 1782, insisting that

The nation is an aggregate of individuals, and the strength of the whole is composed of the exertions of each part; the man, therefore, who omits what is in his power, because he has not more in his power, and will not exert his utmost efforts for the emancipation of his country, because they can, at best, be the efforts of but one man; stands accountable to God and to his country, to himself, and to his posterity, for confirming and entailing slavery on the land, which gave him birth.⁵⁸

Flood and Pollock thought the initial gasps of the Volunteer Movement were a good sign but believed that legislative and commercial independence could never properly be achieved by the movement. They resented the unfounded optimism of their opponents, which they believed was due to a lack of tactical consideration. The MP Henry Grattan, Flood's sometime-rival, sometime-protégé, was one such optimist. He gave the movement a lot of credit, partly because he was the midwife of the short-lived 1782 constitutional settlement won by the Volunteers. In the House of Commons on 12th October 1779 Henry Grattan had said that Ireland, 'ruined by a balance of trade against her for so many years, and the drain of absentees, owes its present existence to association'.⁵⁹ Just before this speech Galway had entered into a non-importation agreement, and the rest of Ireland followed suit.⁶⁰ 'We obtained trade and liberty in the character of an armed, active community,' wrote Grattan in 1781, and 'in that character will we preserve them.'⁶¹ Throughout his life Grattan continued to promote the idea that the Volunteer movement had been both an act of commercial self-sufficiency and a kind of constitutional restoration. Thus in 1800, in a speech against the proposed Union, Grattan argued that Ireland had

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁵⁸ *The Belfast Mercury, or Freeman's Chronicle*, 22nd August 1783, p.1.

⁵⁹ Wilson, *A Compleat Collection*, p. cxlv.

⁶⁰ A description of the spread of the non-importation movement can be found in Maurice R. O'Connell, *Irish Politics and Social Conflict in the Age of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1965), pp. 133-143.

⁶¹ Henry Grattan, *Observations on the Mutiny Bill* (Dublin, W. Wilson, 1781), p. 6.

her own idea of the British constitution, which had been expressed at the 1782 Dungannon Convention:

It is her own freedom and constitution; it is our own idea of that internal freedom and constitution, not such as British ministers, who have invaded that constitution, shall hold forth; nor such as English nor Scotch metaphysicians, who made chains for America, and called them her constitution, and are ready now to cast links for Ireland; but that constitution which she herself, Ireland, feels, comprehends, venerates, and claims; such as she herself expressed in her convention at Dungannon, and through all her counties and cities, and in every description and association of people, and afterwards in full parliament claimed, carried, registered and recorded; it is for the preservation of this constitution that she is interested in British wars.⁶²

Grattan's binding of constitutional adherence with active conventionism was alike to the formulae followed by many English parliamentary reformers when they had been backed into a corner, in court or in the furore surrounding the Convention Bill. Marianne Elliot's diagnosis of the tactical results of this way of thinking in Ireland shares the frustrations that Pollock also voiced. Elliot argues that Presbyterianism encouraged a dismissal of central authority and therefore a reliance on 'extra-parliamentary bodies.'⁶³ This move caused immobility, since Presbyterians would form a covenant but then refuse to explore futures that were not part of the destiny the ancient constitution prescribed, instead relying on a 'strict adherence to the letter of the law' and the collective memory of the Glorious Revolution.⁶⁴ Elliot blames this insubstantial contractarianism on Francis Hutcheson's theories of militias and resistance, which significantly influenced Thomas Drennan (the father of the United Irishman Thomas Drennan), Samuel Halliday (the father of a leading Volunteer, Alexander Henry Halliday), and another leading Volunteer, William Bruce (who was Hutcheson's cousin).⁶⁵ These kind of frustrations with the complacency of those late eighteenth-century Irish reformers who believed that the glorious revolution had created a perfect constitution were rife in the Volunteer Movement,

⁶² Henry Grattan 'Anti-Union Speeches, 15th January, 1800'. *The Select Speeches of the Right Hon. Henry Grattan* (London, Henry G. Bohn, 1847), p. 242.

⁶³ Marianne Elliot, *Watchmen in Zion: The Protestant Idea of Liberty* (Derry, 1985), p. 11.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

and later in the United Irishmen.⁶⁶ One mode for expressing such frustrations was to use the philosophy of John Millar.

Irish Political Practice and the Scottish Universities

Since so many Irish Presbyterians in the eighteenth century were educated in Scotland, it is unsurprising that leading United Irishmen had a familiarity with Scottish eighteenth-century philosophy. When William Drennan attended Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities, he carefully noted which professors seemed to be radicals and which were conservatives. He remarked with pleasure that Dugald Stewart gave less money than the other Professors to aid Britain in the American war.⁶⁷ Conversely, when Drennan's sister Martha McTier visited Scotland she observed that William Robertson, the Royal Historiographer and Principal of Edinburgh University, 'was the only man I have met with in Scotland who did not name the Volunteers [...] It was plain he was determined, for what reason I cannot tell, to avoid the subject that he well knows does us the most honour.'⁶⁸

Drennan studied philosophy at Glasgow University from 1769 to 1773 and then completed a degree in medicine at Edinburgh University between 1773 and 1778.⁶⁹ He would go on to establish and direct the United Irishmen, and eventually in 1794 was arrested for Seditious Libel, a charge of which he was acquitted. Drennan's Presbyterian credentials were very strong. His father Thomas Drennan had set up a Dissenting school with Hutcheson in Dublin and had studied in Glasgow. Thomas Drennan and Hutcheson had taught William Drennan's friend Alexander Halliday, who went on to play a crucial part in the Volunteer movement, working with Charlemont and William Bruce. William Drennan thought that the Volunteers had had a real chance at obtaining political liberty, and this made him sceptical about reform efforts in the years following the movement, such as in the case of the Dublin Reform Club, which he saw as mere clubbism in comparison to the armed patriotic Volunteer

⁶⁶ Stephen Small points out these 'important early arguments against precedent and ancient constitutionalism', though he mistakenly assumes that 'British radicals of the early 1780s always called for renovation of the constitution to its former purity.' *Political Thought in Ireland, 1776-1798: Republicanism, Patriotism, and Radicalism* (Oxford, 2002), p. 124.

⁶⁷ William Drennan, *The Drennan Letters*, D.A. Chart, ed. (Belfast, 1931), p. 5.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶⁹ McBride, I. (2008, January 03). Drennan, William (1754–1820), physician, poet, and political reformer. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

movement.⁷⁰ ‘It is a sorry sight’, he wrote to his sister in 1785 ‘to see all our efforts dwindled down into a Reform Club, a plan that might have looked well enough seven years ago but which now is I think rather malignant to the Volunteer establishment’.⁷¹ The Volunteers had reaped participants from across social classes, so reverting to aristocratic reform societies was a step backwards.⁷² By 1791 Drennan had settled on a preference for a clandestine development of the Volunteers – ‘A benevolent conspiracy – a plot for the people – no *Whig* club – no party title.’⁷³ He believed in the power of symbolism and covenanting to bind people together, wanting this organisation to place importance on ceremony, a test (‘compact’) and a secret symbol.⁷⁴

Drennan was frustrated by the simple conventionism of organisers like Napper Tandy who advocated processes in which plans for reform were threaded together clumsily by a working group and then presented to a national convention ‘which is the worst place for maturely digesting any plan’.⁷⁵ Ultimately, Drennan thought Tandy’s methods too close to the unrefined reform plans of the Catholics. In 1791 Drennan chastised six United Catholics for their belief that they should petition parliament, saying that ‘to petition was the long experienced method of *not* gaining a request, experienced by us at our conventions, experienced by them [the Catholics] for a century.’⁷⁶ He suspected foul play, as they were of course playing the Government off against the United Irishmen. In 1792, the Catholic reformers rejected the tactic of a non-consumption agreement, which Drennan thought was a mistake.⁷⁷ He clearly approved of such tactics, the same year planning a sugar and rum boycott in an attempt to undermine West Indian planters involved in the slave trade.⁷⁸

⁷⁰ Ian McBride notes that Drennan described his activity as attempts to revive the ‘ghost of volunteering’. McBride, ‘William Drennan and the Dissenting Tradition’ in David Dickson et al., *The United Irishmen: Republicanism, Radicalism and Rebellion* (Dublin, 1993), p. 49.

⁷¹ Drennan, *The Drennan Letters*, p. 29.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.* p. 54 For a description of Drennan’s developing ideas about organising in covert associations rather than in public ones see McBride, *Scripture Politics*, pp. 159-160.

⁷⁴ Drennan, *Drennan Letters*, p. 54.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁷⁸ David A. Wilson, *United Irishmen, United States: Immigrant Radicals in the Early Republic* (London, 1998), p. 134.

Drennan believed that the only real distinction in the world that was not merely nominal was the distinction between rich and poor. He compared the Irish experience to the experience of the Gracchi in Rome when, counterintuitively, the whole people were obliged to act ‘as a party’ since ‘the commonwealth was a monopoly’.⁷⁹ The rich had subverted the constitution to seize land that was intended for the poor. Drennan imagined Tiberius Gracchus arguing that the ‘equalised distribution of lands’ provided both national unity and armed strength due to the new interest in the nation every individual would have.⁸⁰ In this sense, the policy of the Gracchi was not to make the poor richer, but ‘to strengthen the Republic by an increase of useful members’, by making laws to work against ‘excessive wealth’ and to ‘put a staff in the hand of indigence’.⁸¹ This was effecting through the distribution of wealth what Cartwright wanted to do through the distribution of arms. Where there was an unequal distribution of property, said Drennan, the state needed to balance that by offering more power to the poor rather than the rich. ‘If property be in itself power’, said Drennan’s Gracchus, ‘why add to it the power of government?’⁸²

Drennan’s published defence, intended for his 1794 seditious libel trial, gives a clearer sense of how these principles influenced his political strategy. It was a trope among radicals that the elite scorned youthful interest in Roman virtue. Drennan said that Robert Walpole made a habit of saying to young men, ‘Well, sir, are you really resolved to continue an old Roman?’⁸³ A similar caricature of Walpole was made by the Jacobin novelist Robert Bage in *Man As He Is*. After Sir George objects to the advice of his warden Lord Auschamp to enter politics through a rotten borough, his warden responds:

‘Sir George,’ said Lord Auschamp, ‘it is not worth your while to set up for a virtue the times will not bear. The price of your borough, if you chuse to sell it, would be four times the value of your property in it.’

‘I shall never make it an object of venality, my Lord,’ said Sir George.

‘I have known,’ answered Lord Auschamp, ‘many young statemen profess this inflexibility of public virtue; not one who did not change it.’

⁷⁹ William Drennan, ‘The Jewels of Cornelia’, *Fugitive Pieces* (Belfast, Finlay, 1815), p. 161.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ William Drennan, ‘Intended Defence, on a Trial for Sedition, in the Year 1794’, *Fugitive Pieces*, p. 194.

'I am sorry for it,' said Sir George, 'and wish great men better minds.'

'Did your Greeks and your Romans,' resumed Lord Auschamp, 'who said these fine things, practice them?'

'Once they did,' Sir George answered.

'I wish.' Said Lord Auschamp, rather peevisly, 'I wish, Sir George, you would be content to take the world as it is.'⁸⁴

Drennan defiantly claimed that he was glad that he had been able to study politics through the Classics.⁸⁵ He refused to take the world as it was, and he was determined to re-establish certain principles of Classical popular politics in modern-day Ireland.⁸⁶ He thought that men with potential political clout ought to '*popularise* themselves' so as not to be considered a political party apart from the people, accustomed to enjoying 'representative power'.⁸⁷ This could not be achieved through munificence, since

The social intercourse of the higher and lower orders ought not to be sustained solely by charity on the one hand, and blessings on the other, but by an adequate equivalent, given and received, that might make the poor and rich reciprocally dependent; and thus endowing every individual, however low, with an exchangeable value, must make the happiness of the community depend, not on inadequate and intermitting benevolence, but on the action and re-action of self-interest; a principle constant and universal.⁸⁸

Drennan thought that the British Constitution had developed entirely through party interest, which only ever 'accidentally' operated for the public good.⁸⁹ It was a 'selfish' resistance to established power that had actuated political action by those who had benefited from commerce, who thought of themselves as the commons.⁹⁰ This commercial class was not the popular class though.⁹¹ Its representatives described themselves as the party of the people, but in fact they hated them. Drennan saw the constitution as having developed through successive revolutions against the previous manifestation of power:

The clergy maintained their order against the King; the nobles, their rank against the clergy and King; the commons, their privileges against the clergy, nobles, and King:

⁸⁴ Robert Bage, *Man as He is, Volume 2* (London, William Lane, 1792) pp. 119-120.

⁸⁵ Drennan, 'Intended Defence', p. 194.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

and the people are now to maintain their personal rights against the propertied and privileged community, including commons, clergy, nobles and King.⁹²

Drennan's adversaries might argue that the series of revolutions had ceased, because all property was now represented. To counter this, Drennan returned to his Gracchian argument. Giving property all the representation in parliament was 'to form the propertied community into one great corporation, whose end it may be, to league together, and combine their whole influence, against the population of the country.'⁹³ At best, said Drennan, this was 'a conspiracy between two classes of people – the landholders and tenantry against the intendment of the constitution; a collusive traffic of franchise and private judgement, which the rich buy, and the poor sell.'⁹⁴ Drennan's desire to harness the will of the people was echoed by others at the time, but never in such stark terms. His sense of the development of the constitution, and his cynicism about the idea of improvement over time, seems undoubtedly linked to his Scottish background and education. It was mirrored in the thought of William Steel Dickson and Joseph Pollock.

John Millar's civil law teaching had a profound effect on William Steel Dickson. Dickson was a minister, who went to Glasgow University in 1761, and became a keen Volunteer. He believed that the Volunteer movement had spurred Ireland into action. In order to have the means to 'appear in arms, and in uniform, among their brethren', Irish people had become more industrious, and this common goal broke down ideas of rank and profession.⁹⁵ In a speech to a Volunteer association, Dickson urged them to 'extend your views of doing good beyond the narrow limits of party, or outward profession, in matters civil, or religious.'⁹⁶ While times of war were good moments for rousing national spirit, they were also the times when it was most difficult to gain Catholic support, since war was often against Catholic countries.⁹⁷ This meant that attempts at establishing national militias and forms of self-defence were perceived by Catholics to be against their interests. Dickson was constantly

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ William Steel Dickson, *A Narrative of the Confinement and Exile of William Steel Dickson* (Dublin, J. Stockdale, 1812), p. 9.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11-12.

wary of how the division between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland could affect the potential for a viable reform strategy. At one meeting, Dickson realised that support was going to be given for only gradual Catholic emancipation, due to the belief that the Catholics were not ready to be free.⁹⁸ He made every effort to give an argument against gradualism, and was successful:

I only hung a few rags of ridicule on the step-ladder of 'gradual emancipation,' which were eagerly laid hold of, and, in the heat of imagination, formed into a mantle under which Mrs. 'Time to time' looked so silly, that her god-fathers were ashamed of, and abandoned her. In consequence, Lady 'total and immediate' was unanimously adopted, embraced, and cheered.⁹⁹

In 1798, Dickson participated in the rebellion. When Dickson was imprisoned and taken to Scotland to be held in Fort George, he found to his alarm and amusement that the Scots thought the rebellion in Ireland had been a 'real popish rebellion', and he had to spend some time proving that many of the prisoners were Presbyterian.¹⁰⁰ This casts doubt on the idea that the Scottish public were aware of United Irishmen activities. Arthur O'Connor said the activities were kept as separate as possible, deliberately, and Dickson said that the crowds who came out to watch the procession of Irish prisoners to Fort George only did so because there were carriages of the Kings Guard transporting them so the public believed they must be important dignitaries.¹⁰¹

When Dickson had started university in Glasgow he had become friends with several professors such as George Moorhead, Adam Smith, John Millar and William Leechman.¹⁰² It is likely therefore that he was involved with the Literary Society of Glasgow. All the above men were members of the society, Millar joining the same year that Dickson arrived at Glasgow. David Stuart Erskine, soon to become Lord Buchan, also started a course at Glasgow University around this time, and was a member of the society, studying under Millar and Leechman, and becoming friends with Ogilvie and the Foulis

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 120, and Emmet, O'Connor, and MacNeven, *Memoire; or detailed statement of the Origin and Progress of the Irish Union: Delivered to the Irish Government*, (n.p., n.d.), p. 41.

¹⁰² Dickson, *A Narrative*, p. 3

brothers.¹⁰³ The society was concerned with the Hellenistic revival promoted by Hutcheson and the Foulis brothers, at the instigation of Ramsay.¹⁰⁴ Muir was also a member.

The most profound influence on Dickson came from the teaching of John Millar. Dickson said that Millar's instruction, and the books he had directed him to,

produced a yet unaltered conviction that absolute monarchy is not the best possible government, except in the hands of absolute perfection – that aristocracy is, and ever must be, a bad government – that despotism, under the *masque* of limited monarchy, a mixed government, or a free state, is worse – that any government, by *favouritism*, is worse still and, that a government, of whatever description, the administration of which is entirely submitted to action, or sect – and particularly, to upstarts and underlings of such faction – subject to the influence, and liable to the control, of spies, informers, and mercenary clerks in office, is worst of all.

In regard to a republic, or democracy, political theorists have presented nothing that could satisfy my mind. The states so called, whether ancient or modern, are sources of information equally unsatisfactory. In no two of them has the constitution been the same. Their fate is the only thing in which they have been ever similar. In fact, rational republicanism, as appears to me, has never had a fair trial.¹⁰⁵

Millar left Dickson with the sense that there was only a nominal difference between a limited monarchy and a well-constituted republic, 'provided the chief magistrate be elected by the state, and amenable to the laws'.¹⁰⁶

In his 1779 preface to the third edition of his *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* Millar had rejected the eighteenth-century notion of the wise legislator. He had already questioned such ideas in the first editions in 1771 and 1773, writing that his empirical enquires had 'a tendency to restrain that wanton spirit of innovation which men are too apt to indulge in their political reasonings' and to promote 'gentle improvements' proceeding from a 'gradual reformation of manners'.¹⁰⁷ Like Williams would argue later, Miller wrote that a system of government was like a machine, and that altering it required knowledge of the 'several wheels and springs of which it is composed' rather than of only one part.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ James Gordon Lamb, 'David Steuart Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan: A Study of his Life and Correspondence', (PhD Thesis, University of St Andrews, 1963), p. 25.

¹⁰⁴ An account of the Glasgow Literary Society's members and its relationship to Hellenism can be found in Iain Maxwell Hammett, 'Lord Monboddo's *Of the Origin and Progress of Language*: Its Sources, Genesis and Background' (PhD Thesis, Edinburgh University, 1985), p. 109 et seq.

¹⁰⁵ Dickson, *A Narrative*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁷ John Millar, *Observations Concerning the Distinction of Ranks in Society* (London, W. and J. Richardson, 1771), p. iv.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. vi.

In 1779 Millar was more explicit. Extensive political change was not effected by individuals, Millar argued. ‘Great’ legislators were usually educated in the customs of a society, and so either preferred the existing system from habit, or understood that any attempts at system change would be extremely unpopular. It was probable that those people we think of as wise legislators

were at great pains to accommodate their regulations to the situation of the people for whom they were intended; and that, instead of being actuated by a projecting spirit, or attempting from visionary speculations of remote utility, to produce any violent reformation, they confined themselves to such moderate improvements as, by deviating little from the former usage, were in some measure supported by experience, and coincided with the prevailing opinions of the country.¹⁰⁹

In fact, changes in legislation came about as a reflection of changes in manners. This is an argument we saw earlier being made by Maurice Margarot in his 1794 trial using the words of Lord Kames. With the development of commerce, said Millar, came luxury, and the new lifestyle made people reluctant to serve in a militia.¹¹⁰ The development of a standing army both gave the king greater opportunity for war and absolute power, and required new forms of taxation which also gave the king more power from revenue, allowing him to secure a third kind of power, through offering pensions to supporters.¹¹¹ The progress of commercial society also introduced a new class, however, which gained power that was not tied to the king, in money and property.¹¹² This class would be pitted against the luxurious class that the king retained.¹¹³ In a small state the former would win, and in a large state despotism was more likely.¹¹⁴

Millar’s *Historical View of the English Government*, published in 1787, was influential in Ireland in its challenge of a foundational ancient constitution.¹¹⁵ Millar was concerned with the mythology of a *wittenagemote*, a historical constitutional form often used as a legal justification for the convention tactic.

There were two opposing views of the *wittenagemote*, said Millar. The supporters of prerogative (such

¹⁰⁹ John Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks, Third Edition* (London, J. Murray, 1779), p. 9.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 275-281.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 284.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 289-290.

¹¹⁵ A discussion can be found in Duncan Forbes, ‘Scientific Whiggism: Adam Smith and John Millar’, *Cambridge Journal*, VII, 1954, pp. 663-668.

as David Hume) insisted that the members of this body were appointed and directed by the sovereign, so its role was to give advice only.¹¹⁶ Whigs went to the other extreme, and in their efforts to legitimise their preferred political forms engaged in anachronism, claiming that from the beginning the *wittenagemote* had taken on a modern political form of nobility, knights, and borough representatives.¹¹⁷ Millar thought both interpretations were ridiculous. This was a problem for the Whigs since they wanted to make the constitution a determinant of politics. For Millar it had no political implications, since he was not attached to the idea that politics should track the intention of the original constitution. Of course, Millar realised that this would not endear him to the Whigs, even though he had dedicated the book to Charles James Fox. As he wrote to Samuel Rose in October 1786,

What is chiefly to be apprehended is that the hostility of the Tories may not procure the friendship of the Whigs, because my view of the ancient constitution does not, I suspect, coincide with that of the greater part of the Whigs in England. I remember, as far back as the noise about Mr. Wilkes' election for Middlesex, to have heard that Lord Cambden, who at that time was endeavouring to figure by Whiggism, declared in publick, that it was *a novel doctrine* to deny the existence of *representatives* in the Saxon Wittenagemote.¹¹⁸

Millar's principles were however embraced in Ireland.¹¹⁹ In 1792 the Dublin United Irish wrote an address to the Scottish Society of the Friends of the People, signed by William Drennan and Archibald Hamilton Rowan. The ringleader of the Scottish Society of the Friends of the People was Thomas Muir, who had also been taught by Millar. Both Drennan and Archibald Hamilton Rowan had established a correspondence with Muir from 1792 and in 1793 Rowan visited Muir in jail in Edinburgh.¹²⁰ In their address, Drennan and Hamilton Rowan made it clear that deriving political practice from original constitutional principles was a bad move. They explained that before the point when the Protestants in the Volunteer movement worked out their political tactics, 'The wheel merely

¹¹⁶ John Millar, *An Historical View of the English Government* (London, A. Strahan, 1787), p. 137.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ John Millar to Samuel Rose, 19th October 1786, published in John W. Cairns (2019) *The Letters*, History of European Ideas, 45:2, 237-303, letter no. 38.

¹¹⁹ There seems to have been little English uptake, though it is worth noting that Millar's argument about the deficiencies of the Whig interpretation of the Saxon constitution was mentioned in a 1791 radical pamphlet printed in London which opposed reliance on precedent. Anon., [British Common Sense], *Reflections on the Present State of the British Nation* (London, J. Ridgway, 1791), pp. 117-118.

¹²⁰ Archibald Hamilton Rowan, *Autobiography of Archibald Hamilton Rowan*, ed. William Hamilton Drummond (Dublin: 1840), pp. 170-179.

turned round, but it did not move forward, and they were as distant as ever from the goal. They resolved. – They convened. – They met with arms. – They met without them. – They petitioned, But all in vain.¹²¹ Their strategy was not working because they needed a ‘union of the whole people’, a concept more important than the constitution.¹²² ‘We do not worship the British, far less the Irish constitution as sent down from heaven,’ the address read, ‘but we consider it as human workmanship, which man has made and man can mend. An unalterable constitution whatever be its nature, must be despotism.’¹²³ There was significant scepticism in Ireland and Scotland about seeking political direction from the ancient constitution, despite the clear use of the concept as a landmark to refer to when engaged in the flights of rhetoric. Michael Ignatieff believes that there is ‘clear evidence’ (Muir’s trial) that the Scottish Jacobins ‘learned nothing’ from Millar, but it is apparent that Millar’s scepticism of the Whig tradition was flourishing in Ireland and Scotland.¹²⁴ Even Christopher Wyvill, who Ignatieff thinks never budged from his Country Party ideology, was influenced by Millar’s adherents, as we will see in the final chapter.

Joseph Pollock and the Second Dungannon Convention

Ten years after his initial political interventions in the Volunteer movement, Joseph Pollock, who had also been taught by Millar at Glasgow, found himself involved in a second iteration of the original ‘Dungannon Convention’. This was a meeting of delegates being held by the United Irishmen in 1792, which Pollock attended as one of the delegates for County Down, alongside Steel Dickson and three others.¹²⁵ Pollock was not pleased that a convention had been called at all, since he considered conventions to be an inefficient tactic, at best distracting and at worst destructive. He wrote to Lord Leinster before the convention describing the range of tactics he had employed to attempt to delay

¹²¹ ‘Address from the Society of United Irishmen in Dublin to the Delegates for Promoting a Reform in Scotland’ in *Proceedings of the Society of United Irishmen of Dublin* (Dublin, 1793), p. 22.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Michael Ignatieff, ‘John Millar and Individualism’ in Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (eds.) *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 326.

¹²⁵ The resolutions agreed upon at the Dungannon meeting, which Pollock put his name to as a delegate on the 15th February 1793 can be found in ‘Dungannon Meeting’, *The Northern Star*, 20th February 1793, p. 3.

it.¹²⁶ He was unsuccessful, and was instructed by the county representatives to ‘co-operate with the other Delegates assembled at Dungannon, in such legal measures as shall appear to them necessary or useful, in procuring a radical Reform in the Representation of the People, including the emancipation of our Roman Catholic Brethren, which we are convinced is the only means of ‘strengthening and cementing a general union of sentiment among all classes and descriptions of his Majesty’s Subjects, in support of the established constitution’.¹²⁷ Like many Irish reformers, Pollock thought it sensible to praise the British constitution where possible, so that the movement would not be shut down, and so that the French would not try to run Irish politics. He therefore proposed a resolution supporting the constitution, but was surprised,

to hear it proposed, by a worthy, but, I think, much too zealous delegate from Belfast, that we should adopt a proposition, from another gentleman which professed that good-sort-of common-place, ‘*cut-and-dry*’ attachment to the Constitution, (consisting, to be sure, of King, Lords, and Commons) which one might grind out of any *resolution-mill*; which, in fact, has been so often repeated, that, if it stand by itself, it passes, like some of our oaths, for words of course, and which King James, so pleasantly found the *value* of, when he carried with him ‘the lives and fortunes of *all his Majesty’s loyal subjects of Great Britain,*’ – on *his abdication voyage*. The proposal was acceded to; - opposition from me, if not then indelicate, would have been ineffectual.¹²⁸

The Dungannon Convention delegates argued against Pollock that they wanted to declare allegiance to the *original principles* of the constitution rather than its modern spirit. Pollock thought this move was ridiculous, since the constitution is only a ‘rude sketch’ which is filled in by ‘the experience of a nation’.¹²⁹ These were ideas he had learned from Millar, who he called ‘the Truly Philosophical Historian of the English Government’; of course they are also ideas we have seen reflected in the Scottish and English movements.¹³⁰ Pollock argued that the idea of an original, ancient and perfect constitution to which the actual constitution should be restored was absurd. The constitution had been gradually improved over time by the ‘accidental’ union of interest among the people of England which arose from constitutional defects, and bouts of monarchical tyranny.¹³¹ ‘A form of government’,

¹²⁶ Joseph Pollock to William Robert FitzGerald, NLI MS 41/522/34.

¹²⁷ ‘County of Down’, *The Northern Star*, 6th February 1793, p. 4.

¹²⁸ Pollock, *Letters to the Inhabitants of the Town and Lordship of Newry*, p. 40.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

said Pollock, 'is simply an invention, - or an institution, the mixed produce of accident and invention.'¹³² The constitution was a delicate and complicated machine, which had to be understood before remedy was applied.¹³³ Pollock was relieved at least that allegiance had only been sworn to the original *principles* of the constitution, since delegates had to be persuaded out of including the 'original form', which Pollock knew from Millar contained no tripartite representative structure.¹³⁴

As in his letters on the Volunteer movement, Pollock took on the self-appointed role of helping people to weigh 'most deliberately and deeply, men and their measures, principles and their probable consequences.'¹³⁵ Most concerning to Pollock was what he saw as a painfully obvious move by reformers in Ulster to pretend that the movement was leaderless, or led by the people, when in fact they were the self-appointed leaders. These were similar concerns to ones that Francis Dobbs had expressed to Shelburne a decade earlier about the direction of the Volunteer movement. Dobbs wrote to Shelburne in 1782 warning that some individuals were attempting to exert control over the Volunteer movement.¹³⁶ These men were trying to persuade people that in order to approve a way forward, each corps should debate its opinion and then send a delegate to a convention to express that opinion, rather than sending delegates to debate and deliberate.¹³⁷ Dobbs wrote 'they perceive that the gentlemen, who are at the head of the volunteers, see thro' the schemes of disappointed ambition, and that the only chance that remains, is to raise up wild ideas in the minds of the people at large.'¹³⁸

'I worship not the people', said Pollock,

for I do not intend either to mislead or betray them. I will not lick the dust under their feet; for I wish not to mount on their shoulders, or to plant my heel in their neck. I respect the *rights* of the people, for this plain reason, if for no other, that I am, and ever must be, one of them.¹³⁹

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹³⁶ Francis Dobbs to Lord Shelburne, 17th August, 1782, BL Add MS 88906/3/8 f. 1.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Pollock, *Letters to the Inhabitants of the Town and Lordship of Newry*, p. 5.

A pamphlet was circulating at the time recommending that reformers bow to the majesty of the people. Pollock asked for a little time to think, and to ‘improve my acquaintance with ‘the king-people’, before I consent to assist at their coronation, either as a priest of the holy popular oil, or as *grand carver* of the Constitution, or in any other capacity, even as a news or link-boy.’¹⁴⁰ Pollock said he considered the happiness of the people to be more important ‘than their *occasional* and *ingested opinions*.’¹⁴¹

Poor-quality popular speculation was a source of constant misery to Pollock, who complained that the Friends of Parliamentary Reform in Belfast had issued a resolution saying that they would not be to blame if the country descended into crisis. Pollock wearily remarked that nobody should hasten calamity ‘merely, because they *may* afterwards defend themselves in a school of metaphysicians.’¹⁴²

Popular societies were not the appropriate body when it came to considering

the detail, depths and delicacies, or of pointing out, distinctly and particularly, the chief political *objects* of this national union, when accomplished, and the *means*, at least the best and most practicable means, - of attaining these objects. Such popular societies, - in order to be *even safe* in attempting any thing above the diffusion of the simplest, and most incontrovertible, and most plainly applicable principles, - should be *qualified* by the infusion of a spirit not strictly popular, but scientific and philosophic, - by the intermixture of not merely a few, but a pretty numerous *body of members* of such political information ability and integrity, as would be equally above seducing or yielding to the ignorance, indiscretion, or violence of *the many*.¹⁴³

The cleverness of the principal political actors could not solve the problem, because, Pollock said, many wise men made a stupid assembly. ‘For my part,’ said Pollock of his experience at the 1792 Dungannon Convention, ‘though I do not profess myself a perfect Solomon, I own I lost occasionally, and without afterwards recovering it perfectly, much of my own great wisdom: other gentlemen know best what happened to themselves.’¹⁴⁴

Pollock had his own ideas about the means that might be fruitfully adopted, and proposed a resolution at the convention, which should declare that the assembly would pursue reform

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

by means equally peaceable and safe – by means, which levy no war, which threaten no commotion, which offer not even a constructive violence to authority; (and from which, if war *could* arise, it would be the open, undisguised, and unprovoked war of *a minister, or, a cabal, against* THE PEOPLE – a war which would unite all hearts, and raise every arm, in favour of freedom – a war to which mercenaries would be unequal, under which treasuries would sink, and in which conquest itself would, to the reviving despots, be ruin.)¹⁴⁵

These means consisted of:

addresses to the People, petitions to his Majesty and Parliament, framed by such meetings as may appear best qualified to explain, and procure attention to, public grievances; - and by associations of the people, using that *private* and *personal* liberty which the law cannot, without ceasing to be law, deny them – the liberty of chusing what *commodities* they shall individually consume, what description of *persons* they shall, on certain occasions in the commerce of life, individually employ, encourage, and hold intercourse with, and what support they shall, by their habits of expence, contribute to *the revenue*, or to *the current expenses of administration*.¹⁴⁶

Pollock's proposal was not adopted, since the moderates attacked it for being too moderate, which he found very embarrassing.¹⁴⁷ He thought he had gone further in 'real strength of measures' than his accuser, Henry Joy.¹⁴⁸ The strongest measure he proposed, he believed, was the first one: non-consumption or non-importation agreements mirroring the tactics of the Volunteers, which he described as 'agreements of interdict'.¹⁴⁹ He wanted the people, rather than the representatives, to refuse supplies and thereby start 'a commercial and political war', ending supplies to the minister and giving the people commercial independence.¹⁵⁰ This would have a positive effect on the virtue of the people and would end the luxury of the ministry.¹⁵¹ Pollock said that compliance would be guaranteed if people refused to deal with those who would not follow the agreement.¹⁵² The best thing about this approach was that there was no way to challenge it legally, as for instance had been done with widespread possession of arms.¹⁵³ But the reformers at the 1792 convention refused to adopt Pollock's proposal, preferring to remain vague about their means.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

‘The more I thought of the measures to be proposed to the Convention’, said Pollock, ‘the less I liked them.’¹⁵⁴ The reformers seemed incapable of thinking in terms of political problems and remedies, instead seeing only a complex mass of moral and political principles. He worried about a lack of political wisdom. The principles of the Constitution could not be intuited, he argued, and he blamed certain Paineite assumptions: just because political wisdom was not hereditary, that did not mean it was ‘heaven born and universal’.¹⁵⁵ The United Irishmen relied on the *principles* of universal emancipation and a representative legislature, rather than any ideas of political action, and released an address saying that ‘we are confident, that on the pivot of this principle, a Convention, - still less, - a society, - less still, - a single man – will be able first to *move*, and then to *raise* the world.’¹⁵⁶ Pollock thought this was incredibly funny.

Without stopping to bow before these improvers upon Archimedes, or to wonder at the power of their miraculous pivot, out-doing so far the wooden peg of Malumbruno or Pactolet, let us try to find out what this same pivot is made of, as a means of discovering *how* it is to be fastened, and how twirled about, in the *head* of that (otherwise) lifeless animal, the people, whom these knights, squires, and magicians, are to ride and guide, it seems, through the most aerial regions of reform. ... First, I suppose, the fit men in the country societies are to form the support or fulcrum of liberty-lever which Ireland is to hold in her *own* hand, - when she gets *properly* personified or embodied. Then the mother society above her, or some single child of her’s, is to clap in the *pivot*, on which and round which, and up and down and every way (it being a well-fitted pivot, and the lever a well-made lever) the whole is to turn: - and then Ireland and this society, or her ‘single man’ or man-child, will agree which of them shall hold the lever, and twirl the pivot, and how they are to use both, and to use each other, - and the whole will be settled; - and *the world* will be *moved*, and *raised*, and *kept up*, at any height required by the spectators; - and one end of the lever will be up, - and the other end then *cannot be down!* – O rare philosophy! Benign and great spirit of More, and divine spirit of Plato how eclipsed are your lofty visions! Hear of *our* Republic, and *our* Utopia, and blush for the cold barrenness of your hearts and imaginations!¹⁵⁷

The Rebellion and Political Economy

Of course, the United Irishmen did go on to pursue various routes to political power that went beyond the purely speculative. One of the clearest statements of United Irishmen philosophies of practical politics among the younger generation - those who had been adolescents during the Volunteer

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.

movement - is the pamphlet that Thomas Addis Emmet, Arthur O'Connor and William MacNeven published following their hearing before the Secret Committee of the House of Lords in 1798.¹⁵⁸ They agreed to this hearing after their arrest and imprisonment, in exchange for a sentence of banishment.

Thomas Addis Emmet, who had been at university with James Mackintosh in Edinburgh, was worried that the three would be misrepresented for having made such an arrangement with the government. He wrote to a friend that he hoped his friend would relay the circumstances of this deal, and how beneficial he thought it would be to have their account of events out in the world.¹⁵⁹ So long as he was not declared a traitor to the rebels, he did not mind being called a traitor to the state. 'If by that expression be only meant what we lawyers technically know as such,' wrote Emmet, 'I have no objection to the title; since it was 'what Fletcher was in Scotland until the revolution washed out his stains.'¹⁶⁰

In their introduction to the pamphlet, the three said they were particularly surprised by the success of one strategy in particular. The Executive of the United Irishmen had issued a recommendation to 'abstain from spiritous and exciseable articles', a measure they claimed was intended to preserve sobriety (necessary to secrecy) rather than damage the government financially through a non-consumption agreement.¹⁶¹ Even though this recommendation was 'painful to the people, and contrary to their former habits', it was followed very loyally.¹⁶² Whether this really was purely a moral measure rather than a financial one is questionable, since the Executive also discouraged the circulation of bank notes, and cautioned against the purchase of quit rents, 'declaring, that as such a sale was an anticipation of the future resources of the country, it should not be allowed to stand good in the event of a revolution.'¹⁶³

¹⁵⁸ For a biography of MacNeven see Séamus Mac Cnámhín, 'MacNeven of Ninety-Eight: Rebel, Doctor, Scientist' *Dublin Historical Record*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Mar., 1974), pp. 65-69.

¹⁵⁹ Thomas Addis Emmet Letter to an unknown correspondence, Sept 22nd 1798, Add MS 22130, f. 40.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Emmet, O'Connor, and MacNeven, *Memoire*, p. 14.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

The United Irishmen had sought help from foreign allies once they were no longer allowed to convene (the Irish Convention Act had preceded the British Seditious Assemblies act by three years). Emmet, O'Connor and MacNeven justified the turn to foreign powers on the basis that it was a component part of the right to resist that had clearly been deployed in the Glorious Revolution.¹⁶⁴ There were good strategic reasons for making this claim. Emmet was sure that the committee of the Lords was trying to goad the United Irishmen into saying that nothing would content the people apart from a departure 'from what they chose to call the English constitution and the English system'.¹⁶⁵ If they could get this evidence, then the Lords could make a better case to Pitt that all popular demands must be resisted. The three also explained how the position on armed tactics had developed in the interim between 1782 and 1798. Each member of the United Irishmen was instructed to obtain a musket, a bayonet, and as much ammunition as possible, and about half the members were to obtain a pike and a case of pistols.¹⁶⁶ Given these instructions, many among the 'lower orders' went to private houses to look for arms, but

this the Executive constantly endeavoured to prevent; because they were unwilling to raise alarm in their adversaries, or let the members of their body acquire habits of plunder, and be confounded with robbers. They endeavoured to dissuade them from these acts, by representing to the people, that the arms would always be kept in better condition by the gentlemen than by them, and could be easily seized whenever necessary.¹⁶⁷

The investigative Committee asked MacNeven why, if they were armed, they did not bring forward an insurrection. MacNeven said that the kind of insurrection they had in mind was similar to the Glorious Revolution, 'in which a popular General, with only a small army, gave the friends of liberty the opportunity of declaring themselves'.¹⁶⁸ The Committee argued that the comparison was poor, since the people who brought in William of Orange were more educated and had more property, whereas a United Irish revolution seemed to be the opposite and require a banishment of property.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

MacNeven replied that there was a lot of property in the organisation, and that there would probably be no need for banishment of property as the rich would join them.¹⁷⁰ MacNeven insisted on the right to bear arms based on property, including the pike, which the committee argued was ‘not in the contemplation of the law which gives the subject the right to bear arms’.¹⁷¹

Emmet thought a revolution to be very likely, but unlike MacNeven thought they would have to take many of the rich and powerful hostage and confiscate their property.¹⁷² This was in line with Emmet’s political ambitions. He believed that the people cared little about Catholic emancipation or parliamentary reform, apart from insofar as these measures would change the law on tithes and land leases.¹⁷³ ‘If a revolution ever takes place’, Emmet explained confidently, ‘a very different system of political economy will be established, from that which has hitherto prevailed here.’¹⁷⁴

O’Connor went one step further than Emmet, arguing that there would be confiscations, and that the kind of justification that MacNeven relied on as to why property conferred the right to arm was irrelevant in this instance. Arthur O’Connor told the Committee that the Executive of the United Irishmen saw no point in starting from ideas of the existing constitution. Since there was no connection at all between the people of Ireland and their parliament, the right of resistance never came under consideration, as the people were not in a constitutional position to resist encroachments.¹⁷⁵ There was nothing constituted to be encroached upon in the first place. His position echoed a famous 1791 circular letter by the United Irishmen of Dublin which proclaimed that

in thus associating we have thought little about our ancestors – much of our posterity. Are we for ever to walk like beasts of prey, over field which these ancestors stained with blood? In looking back, we see nothing on the one part but savage force succeeded by savage policy; on the other, an unfortunate nation ‘scattered and peeled, meted out and trodden down!’¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁷⁶ ‘Appendix No. V’ *Report from the Committee of Secrecy of the House of Lords in Ireland*, (London, J. Debrett, 1798), p. 74.

O'Connor explained that there were also monetary considerations that trumped constitutional ones. The Executive of the United Irishmen believed that England's war debt was extortionate.¹⁷⁷ They thought that France would be in a superior economic situation after the end of the war, so British capital would flow to France.¹⁷⁸ Britain would extract all possible wealth from Ireland to counteract this, so Ireland's economic future looked incredibly bleak.¹⁷⁹ Political theories of resistance and constitutional forms seemed somewhat irrelevant given these circumstances, and Emmet believed the people

have laid by the instant all idea of speculative politics, and think only how they shall annihilate the insupportable usurpation and cruelty of the British and Irish government, and how they shall best avenge the blood which has been shed, and the tortures which have been inflicted, to support a Government they detest.¹⁸⁰

O'Connor's thought they did not need to worry about monetary issues before embarking on rebellion, such as debts they might incur to foreign powers during the course of an insurrection, since he knew that Ireland when free could set up a viable system of political economy. The Committee questioning him were confused about his confidence and asked him whether he also believed that there were men of property in the Union (the UI). O'Connor said that 'men of property usually consult their own personal interests, which is a great check to any generous or disinterested exertion of patriotism; such men seldom run great hazards in the public cause.'¹⁸¹ The plan was therefore to borrow about half a million from France or Spain; O'Connor believed they could repay this just as well as the British government could repay its debts, and that Britain extracted millions from Irish industry.¹⁸² In comparison, MacNeven believed they would pay back the loan from the money saved in places and pensions.¹⁸³

The three men were banished, as per the agreement. Thomas Addis Emmet spent some time in Fort George, Inverness, with MacNeven and others, where he determined to write a history of Ireland. In

¹⁷⁷ Emmet, O'Connor, and MacNeven, *Memoire*, p. 51.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

1802, before his emigration to Ireland, we find him still intending to write the history, and claiming that his principles remained firm.¹⁸⁴ In 1803, Thomas Addis Emmet's brother, Robert Emmet, led the final uprising of the United Irishmen. Like his brother's attempt, his plan failed, despite, as he explained to his brother before his death, complex plans for barricades built from upturned coaches and chains across the streets, 'pikes and blunderbusses lying under great boats', and a plan to mine underneath a cheese shop in order to blow up the Custom House.¹⁸⁵ Perhaps, as Pollock suspected, the economic tactics of the volunteers were the pinnacle of the late-eighteenth-century reform movement in Ireland.

¹⁸⁴ Thomas Addis Emmet to J. Curry, 1802, BL Add MS 33110, f. 209. Marianne Elliot discusses United Irish interpretations of Irish history and Emmet's own tendency to the 'Catholic' viewpoint in *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence* (Yale, 1989), p. 310. The Scots' interest around the same time in a Catholic interpretation of their own history, such as that investigated by Mark Goldie, may not be unrelated – 'The Scottish Catholic Enlightenment', *Journal of British Studies*, Jan., 1991, 30:1, Part VI.

¹⁸⁵ 'Account by Robert Emmet of the plan of his insurrection at Dublin and the causes of its failure, delivered by him before his execution, to be forwarded to his brother Thomas Addis Emmet', 20th September 1803, BL Add MS 38103 f. 19. An excellent account of the complex relationships surrounding this plot can be found in Roger Wells, *Insurrection: The British Experience 1795-1803* (Gloucester, 1983), pp. 250-252.

Chapter V: Lord George Gordon and the Financial System

Lord George Gordon and Ireland

Of all the precursors to the reform movement of the 1790s, the Gordon riots of 1780 have traditionally been regarded as the most primitive. Where the English reform movement of 1779-1781 experimented with ideas of association, and the Irish Volunteers at the Dungannon Convention in 1781 wielded commercial clout and militia threats over Westminster, Lord George Gordon's riots used deep reserves of anti-Catholicism to fuel a mob that exploded a gin factory and drank the resultant stream of alcohol from the gutters. Lord George Gordon, or King Mob as he came to be known, has been presented as either mad or as a proto-fascist leader – or both. Herbert Butterfield said, 'as on other occasions in other centuries, the idol of the masses in a time of hysteria was a man psychologically unbalanced, an orator who could be quietly moving at one time, but picturesque in his very violence at another.'¹

Gordon may have been mad and may have made a habit of mob-raising. His role with regard to 1790s radicalism is often discussed in terms of his disservice to the practice of associating: just as the Association movement was kicking off, his riots 'threw this new form of extra-parliamentary agitation into immediate and lasting disrepute'.² He certainly flirted with the power of religious sectarianism. But his ideas help to fit the pieces of radical political practice in the 1780s and 1790s together. When the Anglo-French Commercial Treaty is placed alongside the tactics of Gordon and his interest in the Irish question, and when Gordon's attacks on the Bank are considered in the light of his promotion of the Volunteer movement, ideas about reform strategies in the 1780s and '90s rise to the surface that would otherwise be obscured. It is clear from an examination of Gordon that the argument about the relationship between popular politics and the consumption of luxury was not confined to the Irish Volunteers. Many 1780s reformers believed that Pitt was using liberal lines of policy – toleration for

¹ Herbert Butterfield, *George III, Lord North, and the People: 1779-80* (London, 1949), p. 375.

² Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (London, 1797), p. 62.

Catholics, commerce with France – to open up new lines of warfare. Pitt himself admitted that while the commercial treaty would encourage future administrations to avoid war, it ‘would also strengthen the resources of the country towards carrying on a war, whenever it should become indispensably necessary to engage in one.’³ The men involved in the struggle for legislative independence in Ireland believed that Britain was using double standards when it came to negotiating commercially with Ireland and with France. These lines of thought provided crucial terms of reference for radicals thinking about how to tackle the new commercial state.

George Gordon’s career running up to the Gordon Riots in 1780 can be characterised in terms of his increasing hold on the Protestant Association, as he graduated from being leader of the Scottish association to his eventual place at the head of the British one. His life was a journey of increasing charisma and popular draw. But there is another story to be told as well, about how in the run-up to the riots Gordon’s propagandistic efforts were not centred on objecting to the Catholic Relief Act. Instead he was supporting demands from Ireland to be put on an equal trade footing, and to gain an independent legislature. Of course, there is crossover between the religious cause and the Irish one. Gordon received a letter from Protestants near Killarney in 1780 ‘desiring his Lordship’s advice how they should behave, as they were under great apprehensions from the Papists in that part’.⁴ But Gordon also had an intense interest in the commercial argument and the commercial tactics that the Volunteers were advancing. On 25th November 1779, Gordon read out in parliament the debates of the Commons of Ireland on the demand for free trade and claimed that Scotland should have similar freedoms.⁵

In the months before he would lead his destructive riots, Gordon told everyone who would listen that the Irish Volunteer force wanted more than a new trade arrangement. Instead they wanted the means to secure for themselves perpetual liberty of trade through an independent legislature. Gordon became

³ *The Speeches of Mr. Sheridan, Mr. Fox, Mr. Burke, Mr. Pitt, Major Scott, Mr. Beaufoy, &c. &c. on the charges brought against Mr. Hastings, and on the Commercial Treaty* (London, J. Stockdale, 1787), p. 20.

⁴ Earl of Hillsborough to the Earl of Buckinghamshire, 11th June 1780, NLI, Lothian Mss. 368.

⁵ George Gordon, *The History of the Right Honourable Lord George Gordon* (Edinburgh, James Murray, 1780), p. 25.

obsessed with a particular piece of writing, a pamphlet addressed to Lord North, by Francis Dobbs.⁶ We met Dobbs earlier promoting Joseph Pollock's writing, and working with him in the political club The Monks of the Screw to try to sustain the Volunteer movement through the 1780s. Dobbs was also the man who Cartwright and Jebb had written to praising the Volunteer movement. In his pamphlet, Dobbs demanded to know whether Ireland was a free nation, in which case she should be allowed to assert her rights, or whether she was under an absolute and arbitrary power.⁷ If the latter were the case, said Dobbs, then there was no opportunity for commerce or economic development in Ireland, since in absolute governments wealth has no protection and so cannot be enjoyed. Given that Ireland had no security against arbitrary British taxation, she was 'but a treasury, filled for the use of Great Britain'.⁸ 'In absolute governments,' Dobbs argued, 'wealth and danger go hand in hand, and poverty is happiness. If individuals grow rich they dare not enjoy their wealth, and are careful to conceal it.'⁹ The only solution to Ireland's predicament was that she should gain trading rights and legislative independence simultaneously, since 'free trade could not exist without a free constitution'.¹⁰ Pursuing only one of these objects was nonsensical.

Lord George Gordon was an MP, and he read the pamphlet in the House of Commons on 24th January 1780, in the Debate on the Irish Trade Bill. Gordon had spent some time already in the debate trying to get Lord North to admit that the Act he was proposing was not seen as acceptable by the Volunteer forces, since 'notwithstanding the voice of both Houses of the Irish parliament, the armed associations would have more, and that they did not expect it as a matter of favour, but demanded it as a matter of right.'¹¹ Gordon read out a resolution of the Newry Association and implied that there would soon be a rebellion in Ireland.¹² Gordon then began to read Dobbs' pamphlet, verbatim.¹³ Half way through

⁶ 'Debate in the Commons on the Irish Trade Bill', 1780, *Cobbett's Parliamentary History*, Vol. 20 (London, Hansard, 1814), p. 1311.

⁷ Francis Dobbs, *A Letter to the Right Honourable Lord North, on his Propositions in Favour of Ireland* (Dublin, M. Mills, 1780), p. 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Francis Dobbs, *A History of Irish Affairs* (Dublin, M. Mills, 1782), p. 13.

¹¹ 'Debate on the Irish Trade Bill', p. 1308.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 1309.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 1311.

a member asked the Speaker, if any gentleman had a right to introduce a pamphlet, and read the whole as a part of his speech, whether the House liked it or not? Because if he had, he said, there would be an end to business, as another member might take up a folio volume and insist on reading it through.¹⁴

Thus hastened, Gordon moved for a repeal of the Declaratory Act of 1719, the act which curtailed the legislative independence of Ireland.¹⁵ He continued to read out various excerpts from pamphlets and newspapers in the following days, stating that ‘though the parliament of Ireland was satisfied, the people at large were not, and particularly the armed associations.’¹⁶ Gordon tried to read the Dobbs pamphlet again, since it ‘was really so excellent that it ought to be read every day in the week: however, as the House wished not to hear it, he would proceed in the shortest manner to his motion.’¹⁷ Gordon received no seconder for moving the Bill on repealing the 1719 Act.¹⁸

Three days later, Gordon decided to try the pamphlet out on a different part of the constitution. Given his noble lineage, he was entitled to an audience with the King, which he requested. ‘The moment he was admitted into the Closet,’ Walpole claimed, Gordon ‘began reading an Irish pamphlet, and continued for an hour, till it was so dark he could not see, and then left the pamphlet, exacting a promise on royal honour that his Majesty would finish it.’¹⁹ This ‘mad lord’, Walpole said, had ‘assumed the patronage of Ireland.’²⁰

Lord George Gordon’s Political Tactics

Lord George Gordon was a third son in a family that was trying to regain its reputation and political standing after a treacherous role in the Jacobite rebellions. Gordon entered parliament after a brief stint in the navy, and did not choose a party, instead acting as an independent gad. He hated both the ministry and the opposition, and accused the latter of ‘bawling about liberty’.²¹ When he went south to London he entered the company of men like Thomas Hardy, future leader of the London

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1312.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1314.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1315.

¹⁹ Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, February 6th, 1780, in *Letters of Horace Walpole to Sir Horace Mann, Vol. 3* (London, Bentley, 1844), p. 211.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Robert Watson, *Life of Lord George Gordon* (London, H.D. Symonds, 1795), p. 8.

Corresponding Society.²² Gordon was suspicious of the Whigs, saying that he suspected they were not real friends to the people, and were only ‘making horses of Mr. Wyvill and the Yorkshiremen to ride into office upon, and to compass the winning-posts of the political race ground.’²³

Somewhere along the way, the Protestant cause became his pet issue. The government were trying to recruit more soldiers for the American war, especially in the Highlands, and found that they could recruit better if they waived the oath of loyalty to Protestantism. This was the spark for the formation of Protestant associations across Britain, and particularly in Scotland, where eighty-five Friendly Societies combined into a large association of journeymen that in 1779 burned down mass houses and threatened personal violence to Catholics.²⁴ Gordon had a good relationship with the Scottish societies. When he was arrested for his role in the riots, he and his counsel, Thomas Erskine, asked the eighty-five societies to distribute literature supporting him, which they did.²⁵ Gordon agreed to lead the Scottish Protestant Association, and informed the House of Commons that the people in Scotland had formed themselves into confederacies, that they would enforce their aims by the sword, and that he would ‘go to every length the constitution would allow’ to assist them.²⁶

His own interest in the matter is unclear. He was a strong opponent of the American war, so would naturally oppose recruitment tactics. Two years after his riots he was still interested in the effect of the American cause on Britain, and was writing to Shelburne demanding clarity on negotiations with Washington.²⁷ His personal secretary and biographer, Robert Watson, claimed that Gordon believed ‘that religion has a very great influence upon the actions of men, and was ever firmly persuaded that nothing operates so powerfully on the minds of the people, as the hopes and fears of future rewards

²² Thomas Hardy, ‘Memoir’, BL, Add MS 65153 A, pp. 5-6.

²³ George Gordon, ‘Narrative of the Heads of a Conversation between Lord Petre and Lord George Gordon [written by Gordon, when he was in the tower, for the use of his counsellors], *The Weekly Entertainer*, May 5th, 1783 p. 422.

²⁴ Prior to the Gordon Riots there had been months of significant disturbances in Scotland, suggesting that Gordon was aware of the potential for his activities to result in political violence. See NA SP 54/48/56,109, 115. An excellent description of the formation of Protestant Associations in Scotland can be found in Eugene Charlton Black, *The Association: British Extraparliamentary Political Organisation, 1769-1793* (Cambridge, MA, 1963), pp. 131-147.

²⁵ NA SP 54/48/117.

²⁶ *History of Lord George Gordon*, p. 12.

²⁷ Lord George Gordon to Lord Shelburne, October 15th 1782, BL Add MS 88906/3/10, f. 126.

and punishments.²⁸ Gordon himself reported that Lord William had told him that ‘people of fashion thought Lord George had as little religion as any Body, that he was making it subservient to other views’, which Gordon of course denied.²⁹ There were certainly some strange tactics being deployed when it came to religion. The year after the riots, a ‘Petition of the Naturalists’ was circulated which claimed common cause between the dissenters and the Protestant Association, its authors claiming that the circle around David Williams supported George Gordon and that ‘the Roman Catholics would not have been persecuted in England, did not the pityless spirit of religious intolerance intimidate every-where the sovereign authority.’³⁰ Some investigative journalism from the *Westminster Magazine* revealed that David William’s set had no connection with the petition.³¹ Gordon was keen to the potential for a movement based on a covenanting tradition to pose a direct challenge to the government. The disturbances in Scotland were successful in preventing the Catholic Relief Act being extended there, and in view of this the Protestant Association in England asked Gordon to be *their* president, so that he could apply similarly successful tactics down south. Gordon agreed, without much reluctance.³²

Gordon was insistent on particular tactics when it came to the London Protestant Association. He demanded that a petition be not only signed but also physically presented to the government by a mass meeting, even when he was advised that this may be illegal. His own narrative of the days leading up to the riots presents the majority of the Association as being of the same mind - ‘we all meant to go up!’. They wanted to present the petition as a collective, but the committee of the Association had tried to block the move.³³ After this division in the Association had been revealed, ‘There was so much inclination apparent in every face to go up with their petitions together with some mixture of anger at the committee for being intimated a different intention, that no person spoke for some time – only a

²⁸ Watson, *Life*, p. 76.

²⁹ ‘Lord George Gordon’s Narrative’, Add MS 42129, p. 34.

³⁰ *A petition written with an intention that it should be presented to the House of Lords, concerning freedom in religion; wherein are stated the principles of that most glorious institution, the Philosophical Society in London* (London, J. Stockdale, 1781), p. 76.

³¹ ‘A Petition of the Naturalists’ in *The Westminster Magazine*, June 1780, Vol. 8, p. 327.

³² Watson, *Life*, p. 13.

³³ ‘Lord George Gordon’s Narrative’, p. 6.

kind of buzz about going up generally thro' the whole people.³⁴ Gordon had always been sensitive to the power of spectacle. When Gordon was new to London, Thomas Hardy asked Gordon if he wanted to come and hear a sermon. Gordon had gone along, but had interrupted the preacher because he was reading his sermon from notes – Gordon said that it was contrary to the rules of the Kirk to *read* a sermon in the course of public worship (his fellow MPs would have been incensed to learn of this anecdote).³⁵ When it came to the presentation of the petition, Gordon's thespian flair was realised. He called a mass meeting in St George's Fields, organising the protestors into four sections, London, Westminster, Southwark and Scots.³⁶ They all marched to parliament, where Gordon presented the petition to the House of Commons, and shouted updates from an upper window down to the mob. Gordon had repeatedly emphasised to the crowd the effectiveness of the covenanting tradition. He had always argued in the House of Commons that the Scots were a formidable force who would not concede to any King when in the past they had banished one, and brought another to the block.³⁷ Gordon told the protestors beforehand something to the effect that the only way the Scots had got what they wanted was by burning down the mass-houses.³⁸ To this extent, at least, he was the author of the several days of violence that followed.

The newspapers reported afterwards that:

The riot of last Friday completes the triumph of the Scotch over this degenerate kingdom [...]. The *bagpipe* blew the notes of sedition; the tragedy of the Archbishop of St Andrews was attempted to be renewed, in the person of the amiable and respectable Bishop of Lincoln, and another Knox, in the habit of a Presbyterian parson, headed the mob that violated the rights of nations and set fire to the domestic chapels of the Romish Ambassadors.³⁹

The mob burned houses that they associated with popery, and quickly started on the jails. They released the prisoners from several jails, in a manner depicted in contemporary prints as chaotic and

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Hardy, *Memoir*, p. 6.

³⁶ 'The Trial of Lord George Gordon', *The Scots Magazine*, March 1781, Vol. 43, p. 116.

³⁷ *History of Lord George Gordon*, pp. 21-22.

³⁸ 'The Trial of Lord George Gordon', p. 117.

³⁹ *The London Courant and Westminster Chronicle*, June 6th 1780, NA, WO 34/104/29.

rioters.⁴⁰ But this impression seems to be false. ‘They did not proceed to storm’, *The Gentlemen’s Magazine* reported, ‘until they had given their terms like regular assailants’ and had placed sentinels at every approach to the prison so that any prisoners who escaped could not be taken off to other gaols.⁴¹ The Committee examining the damage after the riots reported that Newgate ‘is totally destroyed, nothing being left standing but the bare walls.’⁴² George Rudé carefully catalogued the aspects of the riots that seemed to point more to ‘social protest’ than sectarianism, such as the recorded remark of a rioter that ‘Protestant or not, no gentleman need be possessed of more than £1,000 a year; that is enough for any gentleman to live upon.’⁴³

As the riots raged, the ministry became increasingly alarmed. The attempt to quash the rebellion using the city authorities had been dire, since at crucial moments magistrates could not be found to read the Riot Act, and so the police could not act. It was suspected in any case that there were high levels of support for the rioters from within the ranks of the police and city authorities, and it took some time before the government and the King declared martial law. Most of all, the protectors of London were scared about the attacks on the Bank, the tolbooths, and the East India Company. There were not adequate protections in place for these buildings, and the threat to the bank was making their priorities clearer in their minds.⁴⁴ Contemporaries denied that the actions of the mob could have been inflamed purely by religious causes, given that they attacked *private* security by letting loose criminals, and *public* credit by trying to destroy the bank.⁴⁵ Lord Kinnoull, William Thomson’s benefactor, wrote from London to James Beattie in Aberdeen that he was

ignorant of the real causes of this dreadful and destructive confusion, which rose to so exorbitant a Height; whether it was owing solely to the intemperate zeal of wild enthusiasm, or whether when the flame was once kindled, other ingredients were not

⁴⁰ See for example Henry Roberts, ‘An Exact Representation of the Burning, Plundering, and Destruction of Newgate by the Rioters’ (London, Fielding and Walker, 1781), ‘The Burning and Plundering of Newgate and setting the Felons at Liberty by the Mob’ (London, Fielding and Walker, 1780) and John Hamilton, ‘The Devastation occasioned by the Rioters of London Firing the New Goal [sic] of Newgate and Burning Mr. Alderman’s Furniture’ (London, T. Thornton, 1780).

⁴¹ Cited in Christopher Hibbert, *King Mob* (London, 1959), p. 84.

⁴² NA PC 1/3097.

⁴³ George Rudé, ‘The Gordon Riots: A Study of the Rioters and Their Victims’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 1956, Vol. 6, p. 111.

⁴⁴ NA WO 34/103/110, 160, 211.

⁴⁵ Anon., [A Real Friend to Religion and to Britain], *Fanaticism and Treason: or, a Dispassionate History of the Rise, Progress, and Suppression, of the Rebellious Insurrections in June 1780, 3rd Edition* (London, G. Kearsly, 1781), p. 102.

thrown in to feed, and increase it; for the plan was deep, and popery has no connection with the destruction of the bank, and the possession of the Tower.⁴⁶

One contemporary said that ‘An attempt to strike at the credit of the nation, by an attempt upon the Bank of England was provisionally defeated, but defeated under circumstances that left no doubt of an intention to carry them into effect.’⁴⁷ It was striking to observers of the riots that the mob seemed carefully organised so as to cause maximum disruption. Prisoners were let loose to overturn the law, distillers were targeted so that fires would spread more easily, and attempts were made to destroy the water supply so that fires could not be extinguished.⁴⁸ Thomas Holcroft wrote that while history provided examples of attempts to destroy prisons, ‘no history can parallel the depth of their schemes upon the Bank, the Treasury, and the demolition of the water-works.’⁴⁹

Gordon’s biographer Watson was amused that the Ministry had originally intended to let the rioters run to excess, to justify strict law and order in the future. They had nearly carried this plan too far, since, Watson argued, ‘it is supposed that whoever is master of the bank and the tower, will soon become master of the city, and whoever is master of the city will soon be master of Great Britain; with this belief, a plan was laid to seize them both, and to bring the matter at once to a crisis.’⁵⁰ The next year, Lord North said that the Bank of England was effectively ‘part of the constitution’, and after the riots the Bank and State worked together to provide adequate military protection.⁵¹ Following the riots 534 men were garrisoned at the bank, the largest armed encampment in London.⁵² It was agreed that 33 soldiers should march every evening from Westminster to Threadneedle St, a tradition that persisted until 1973.⁵³ This patrol was hated by Londoners, since the soldiers refused to march in

⁴⁶ Thomas Hay, 8th Earl of Kinnoull to James Beattie, June 19th 1780, AUL MS 30/2/338.

⁴⁷ Thomas Holcroft, *A Plain and Succinct Narrative of the Late Riots and Disturbances* (London, Fielding and Walker, 1780), pp. 31-32.

⁴⁸ Anon., *Fanaticism and Treason*, p. 102.

⁴⁹ Holcroft, *Plain and Succinct Narrative*, p. 44. Gregory Claeys writes of two attempted attacks on banks in the 1790s, a 1794 Edinburgh plot and the Despard plot. See Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought* (London, 1989), p. 169. The Cato Street Conspiracy of 1820 also involved a seizure of the bank.

⁵⁰ Watson, *Life*, p. 23.

⁵¹ ‘Debate in the Commons on the Renewal of the Charter of the Bank of England’, June 13th, 1781, *The Parliamentary History of England*, Vol. 22 (London, Hansard, 1814), p. 519.

⁵² Daniel M Abramson, *Building the Bank of England: Money, Architecture, Society 1694-1942* (Yale, 2005), p. 86.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

single file, and therefore caused chaos on the streets.⁵⁴ Repeated offers from the city militia to replace the standing army soldiers were ignored: the governors had learned from the Gordon riots that the bank was an institution too precious to be placed in the hands of the citizenry.⁵⁵

After the riots, Gordon was tried for treason, and acquitted, thanks in part to the able defence of the Earl of Buchan's brother, Thomas Erskine. His supporters in Edinburgh illuminated their windows, and so did everyone else to avoid having their windows broken.⁵⁶ But seven years later, a charge was found that would stick: libel against Marie Antoinette. Gordon certainly disliked Marie Antoinette – he had apparently been introduced to her when he had visited Paris a few years earlier – and Watson said that 'his imagination was not enraptured with Burke's *Celestial Vision*, nor could he be comfortable whilst millions around him were unhappy.'⁵⁷ But Gordon was being accused of more than blackening the Queen's name. The charge was that he was trying to sour the relationship between Britain and France so that a Treaty of Commerce could not be enacted. Gordon had opposed the treaty from the outset, believing that the countries were uniting out of a common desire to crush a growing democratic spirit. When details of the treaty began to emerge, Gordon decried the secrecy surrounding it, writing in the newspapers that its aim was not commercial and that it was instead 'designed as a cloak for transplanting the principles of Versailles to England.'⁵⁸ He threatened Pitt, saying that he would get his mob to burn the treaty in various parts of London if it was not released in its entirety. Pitt released the draft.⁵⁹

The Anglo-French Commercial Treaty and Ireland

The agreement between France and Britain in 1783 at the end of the Anglo-French war, the Versailles treaty, had stipulated that a commercial arrangement between the two nations would be arrived at by the end of 1786. The treaty that was negotiated reduced tariffs on most imports and exports and set

⁵⁴ See James Gillray, *A March to the Bank* (London, 1787) and commentary in Mary Dorothy George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the British Museum*, VI (London, 1938).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ NA SP 54/48/131.

⁵⁷ Watson, *Life*, p. 37.

⁵⁸ Watson, *Life*, p. 74.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

the duty on French wines at the same rate as that for Britain's major trading partner, Portugal. In one iteration, the treaty was a triumph of liberal economic policy and represented an adoption of a commercial idea of the state. The move to frame it in this way was made on the British side by William Pitt, apparently inspired by Adam Smith, and for the most part applauded by the circle of politicians and intellectuals around William Petty, Earl of Shelburne, the Prime Minister who brought the war to a close. Smith's name seems to have been dragged into the business at a later date, and his writings were also used by opponents of the treaty who considered him to take a line more favourable to agriculture.

On the other side were the Foxite opposition. Fox, Burke and Sheridan refused to acknowledge any benefits of the treaty, which had been negotiated by their erstwhile ally turned place-hunter, William Eden.⁶⁰ Burke argued in parliament that the treaty was not simply a commercial treaty, and that there were higher considerations relating to the 'political interests' of Britain that must be taken into account.⁶¹ Burke said that Pitt, who was acting both as Prime Minister and Chancellor, was approaching the treaty as a mere commercial consideration because he had a narrowness of mind that led him to 'look at great objects in a confined point of view'.⁶² Burke argued in parliament that

Such men, when in power, converted large cities into small villages; while those of a more noble and more liberal way of thinking acted on a greater scale, and changed small villages into great cities. The Right Hon. Gentleman had that day talked of the Treaty as the affair of two little counting-houses, and not of two great countries. He seemed to think it was the sign of Fleur de Lis and the sign of the Red Lion contending with each other, which house should obtain the best custom.⁶³

A similar sentiment to Burke's was expressed by the Irish pamphleteer Denis O'Bryen, who said that any subject 'which falls not within the sphere of ordinary acquirement' in which the knowledge could be gained from a warehouse more readily than from a library, and from a clothier more readily than from a classic text, 'affords no opportunity for either the invention of genius, or the embellishments

⁶⁰ For Eden's defence of his conduct see William Eden, *Letters from the Right Honourable W E : On the Late Political Arrangement, to the Earl of Carlisle, Lord North, Hon. C. J. Fox, [et al.]* (London, S. Bladon, 1786) In a letter to John Lee he claims that his involvement in negotiations was an attempt to 'give action to idea, and afford efficacy to theory' (p. 20).

⁶¹ *The speeches of Mr. Sheridan. &c. on the Commercial Treaty*, p. 81.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

of art.⁶⁴ ‘The obscurity’ of these considerations of commerce, said O’Byren, ‘like many meaner and many nobler sciences, consists more in the barbarous jargon, the technical ambiguity, and pitiful craft of its professors, than any absolute mystery in the science itself.’⁶⁵

This opposition from the Whigs amplified the voices of certain manufacturers and commercial organisations who opposed the treaty on the grounds that British manufactures would be undermined. For some therefore the story of the Anglo-French Commercial treaty is about old and new industry – the new industrialists saw benefits to the treaty, while more conservative manufacturers remained committed to the old protections and monopolies. Again, this is a simplification, but certainly there was a demand for a continuation of protections in organised trades, and a different strategy pursued by those who judged the destruction of trade privileges to be a risk worth taking in order to gain a French market.⁶⁶

The debate in parliament and pamphlets had several angles. There was of course a discussion about the immediate effect of the Treaty on certain areas of manufactures, and analyses of how state policy had impacted trades in the past. More large-scale or long-term arguments tended to concentrate on whether it was sensible to trade necessities for luxuries or to trade manufactures for products of the soil. Some of these arguments concentrated on political economy, others from moral arguments about luxury. One squib read:

All you who are assembled here, and love a little oddity,
Whose taste has been refined to prefer a French commodity

[...]

⁶⁴ Denis O’Byren, *A View of the Treaty of Commerce with France* (London, J. Debrett, 1787), p. vii.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ For an account see Robert J. Bennett, *Local Business Voice: The History of Chambers of Commerce in Britain, Ireland, and Revolutionary America, 1760-2011* (Oxford, 2011), p. 414 et seq. Bennett gives an excellent description of Thomas Walker’s opposition to the treaty. Walker went on to lead the Society for Constitutional Information in Manchester and was a correspondent of Lord Daer’s and Gordon’s; he was defended by Thomas Erskine in his 1794 treason trial. For an example of manufacturer support for the treaty see Anon., [A British Manufacturer], *A Letter from a Manchester manufacturer to the Right Honourable Charles James Fox, on his political opposition to the Commercial Treaty with France* (Manchester, J. Stockdale, 1787), and for an example of ‘old trade’ opposition see Anon., [A Liveryman of London], *Danger at Our Doors: An Address to the Freemen of London, and of every Corporate Town in the Kingdom, on the Unconstitutional and Injurious Tendency of the Fifth Article of the Commercial Treaty* (London, J. French, 1787).

You'll please them much if you will give a substance for a shadow,
And in return they'll send a bone, but keep themselves the marrow.⁶⁷

Another anti-luxury argument came from the vegetarian Robert Pigott who said that the introduction of French 'raw hungry French wines' and spirits was a move from which Britain would never recover, since it was 'the means to introduce more drunkenness and idleness, the cause and maintenance of all misdemeanours and offences.'⁶⁸ The French only drank these things in moderation, and their 'nerves and solids are parched up and dried by their usage'.⁶⁹ Pigott identified a class problem at the heart of this introduction of luxury. Ladies and gentlemen set the fashion for the lower classes, and since they believed it was genteel to drink wine, the lower classes would aspire to take up such luxuries themselves.⁷⁰ While some might ask 'What is life, if we do not enjoy it', Pigott retorted 'And what is it, if we do? When maladies of every kind, as gout, stone, gravel, scurvy, etc. and feebleness, so as not to be able to enjoy any thing, are the consequence.'⁷¹ The only sensible economic move was well-known, said Pigott: it was to establish a commerce based on agriculture.⁷²

There was a further approach to the debate that contemporaries called a 'political' angle, which was mostly about whether opening up trade to France would damage trade with Britain's commercial ally, Portugal. Linked to this was the much more abstract question of perpetual peace and a new commercial age. Pitt and his allies accused opponents of the treaty of being xenophobic Brits who were engaging in self-fulfilling prophecies, creating the conditions for war with France by presuming her to be an enemy. The opponents of the treaty responded that they were being prudent rather than illiberal, that philosophy had not yet changed the world into a glorious peace-ridden place, and that the world of commerce might look very peaceful, but as soon as France's imperial actions were considered this became absurd. Samuel Parr, always a loyal supporter of the Whigs, took this point of view. Parr thought it was obvious that 'nature seems to have placed an insuperable bar to union in

⁶⁷ Anon., *The Commercial Treaty, A New Ballad, From France* (Salisbury, John Fowler, 1786).

⁶⁸ Robert Pigott, *New Information and Lights, on the Late Treaty of Commerce with France* (London, J. Ridgway, 1787), p. 5.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

divided shores, opposite fortunes, laws, customs, and genius.⁷³ Pitt would undoubtedly reply that France and Britain had a long history of animosity, but given that France was now acting from a spirit of amity, it was right to treat them with the same spirit.⁷⁴ Pitt insisted that ‘the ambitious spirit of the French will now be lulled to repose, and we shall have nothing hereafter to fear from their arts, or from their perfidy.’⁷⁵ This was a mistake, said Parr. The character of the French involved a lust for power. He predicted war.⁷⁶

This response was mirrored in other publications responding to the debate around the treaty. One anonymous publication argued that suspicion of the French ‘arising from long experience and conviction of treachery and deceit’ should be given the name of prudence rather than illiberality.⁷⁷ The writer denied the reports that ‘liberality and humanity’ were generally adopted in his age.⁷⁸ Even though philosophy in Europe condemned war, and showed the benefit of peace to commerce, and even though the author approved of such doctrines, he did not think that Europe was close to a ‘political millennium’.⁷⁹

There are some seeds still existing, not only in the northern, but in the western part of the quarter of the globe, which afford room to suspect, that philosophy has not yet had that full and complete effect, towards eradicating those SAVAGE and INHUMAN PRINCIPLES, which some writers, on the present occasion, would fain persuade us that they have. There are still some irregular longings after power, some seeds of ambition, some lurking taints of that ORIGINAL SIN of Sovereigns; which not all the charms or efforts of philosophy hitherto have been able to remove; but which will still leave room, and find employment and exercise for the ingenuity as well as benevolence of the future friends of mankind.⁸⁰

Similarly, another anonymous pamphleteer wrote that when people were told that national prejudice was about to end through the medium of commerce, people now accustomed to critical thinking, or those who ‘suffer their judgements to be directed by their feelings’, may be tempted to ‘approve the

⁷³ Samuel Parr, *A Free Translation of the Preface to Bellendenus; containing Animated Strictures on the Great Political Characters of the Present Time*, (London, 1788), p. 45.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Anon., [A Country Gentleman], *A Series of Letters, on the Commercial Treaty with France* (London, G. and T Wilkie, 1787), p. 24.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* p. 39.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

means for the sake of an end'.⁸¹ Others who could see back into history and precedent, however, 'may declare themselves unwilling suddenly and for light reasons to abandon the policy of their ancestors, or, in pursuit of temporary commercial advantages, to hazard that national superiority which has hitherto protected their commerce and preserved their liberties.'⁸² We can see then, why Burke's position in the Commercial Treaty debate was consistent with the position he was soon to adopt on the French Revolution.

When Ireland's trade situation had been debated in the House of Commons in 1780, much had been made of the resistance of English manufacturers to the breaking down of protections. This provided Fox, Burke and Sheridan with significant ammunition when it came to the Anglo-French commercial treaty, since they could question how it was that manufacturers had been so resistant to competition from Ireland but apparently were happy to compete with French commodities. Sheridan asked rhetorically whether Pitt intended 'to follow up the Commercial Treaty with France, with a new commercial system with Ireland'.⁸³ He argued that it was ridiculous for Britain to treat France's commodities more favourably than Ireland's.⁸⁴ Burke agreed. He had heard nothing, he said, 'but panegyrics on the French', while Ireland was considered an 'infatuated island', and Portugal an 'unnatural, a base, a worthless, an ungrateful nation!'⁸⁵

Henry Flood of course was livid. He pointed out that manufacturers in England had objected strongly to the treaty with Ireland, predicting 'infinite losses from the removal of the trade from this country'.⁸⁶

What grounds did manufacturers have, then for not making the same complaints with regard to the Anglo-French Commercial Treaty?

Would it be, because France is a great manufacturing country and Ireland not? Because she is full of inhabitants, and Ireland comparatively desolate? Would it be because France is a country rich in its produce, and Ireland almost barren? Or, if benefit is to

⁸¹ Anon., *Observations on the Agricultural and Political Tendency of the Commercial Treaty* (London, J. Debrett, 1787), p. 4.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

⁸³ *The Speeches of Mr. Sheridan. &c. on the Commercial Treaty*, p. 188.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ 'Debate in the Commons on the address upon the Treaty of Commerce with France', 21st February 1787, *Cobbett's Parliamentary History of England, Vol. 26*, p. 487.

⁸⁶ 'Debate on the Petition from the General Chamber of Manufacturers for Postponing the Consideration of the Treaty with France', Feb 12th, 1787, *Ibid.* p. 433.

be derived from the Treaty, were they apprehensive that Ireland would have it, while they entertain no such uncharitable scruples in regard to France?⁸⁷

Flood said that while the rule of law governed commercial relations between Ireland and Britain, opening up commerce with France would introduce a new set of laws under French control – the laws of fashion and of court. Just as England had controlled Ireland before the Volunteers engaged in their consumption tactics, through these ‘laws’, France would have ‘the power of causing her own manufactures to be worn instead of those of any other nation whatever.’⁸⁸

Flood argued alongside Parr that Britain and France would continue to be rivals, both in terms of commerce and empire. France would win the competition because she would trade mischievous luxuries for necessities. ‘The man who gives things useful or necessary for things that are neither necessary nor useful’, said Flood, ‘makes a losing exchange’.⁸⁹ It would be folly in any country to encourage such imports, but it was particularly pernicious to encourage the importation of luxuries in a country ‘deeply in debt’ and dependent on the ‘artificial capital’ of paper money and credit.⁹⁰ Such capital could only be maintained by a ‘given quantity of specie’, which could only be produced through a favourable balance of trade, which would be upset by unnecessary importation of luxuries.⁹¹

Marie Antoinette and the Comte de Cagliostro

How then did George Gordon come to be imprisoned through his involvement with this treaty, six years after he had instigated the riots? In 1786, while William Eden was in Paris negotiating the treaty, Eden had witnessed the fallout of the Necklace Affair romance scam, and Marie Antoinette’s resultant unpopularity.⁹² It was thought that Marie Antoinette had some involvement in the commercial treaties being negotiated at this time, and that she had urged that the French pay half of the sum owed by the

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p. 430.

⁸⁹ Henry Flood, *Speech of the Right Hon. Henry Flood, in the House of Commons of Great Britain, February 15, 1787, on the Commercial Treaty with France* (Dublin, P. Byrne, 1787), p. 18.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁹² Eden’s account can be found in a letter from Eden to Pitt, June 1786, William Eden, *The Journal and Correspondence of William Eden, 1st Lord Auckland, Vol. 1*, (London, Bentley, 1861), p. 132.

Dutch to Joseph II, her brother. This treaty between Joseph and the Dutch was a resolution of his 1783-84 claims on the United Provinces and was achieved with the mediation of Vergennes.

In London on 23rd January 1787 charges were brought against Lord George Gordon for libel against Marie Antoinette. Pitt's administration had been waiting for an opportunity to rid themselves of Gordon's interferences. In February 1783 Gordon had fomented rebellion and mutiny among the Atholl Highlanders, who suspected that they were to be used by the East India Company.⁹³ In 1784 he had supported journeymen in Paisley who were objecting to new taxes, taxes that Gordon claimed were to fund new pensions.⁹⁴ He also raised a militia of sailors, who quit their posts and demanded to go and fight with the Dutch.⁹⁵ Pitt refused and told the Sailors that Gordon had betrayed them, whereupon they went to Gordon's house to demand redress. Gordon talked them round, and they determined to go and pull down Pitt's house instead.⁹⁶ As Baron Gordon observed, Gordon's 'dispositions were originally no worse than yours or mine, but we are strangely the children of habit; we become gamblers and dram-drinkers by habit; and I thence conclude that his Lordship's eminent practice and great success has made him by habit a Mob-raiser.'⁹⁷ Gordon's habit was one he carefully cultivated. He disagreed with the pacifism of Quakers, preferring the 'fighting Quakers' of the American Revolutionary war, and trusted in his ability to command a mob, particularly one charged with hatred of the British system of commerce, taxation and colonies.⁹⁸

The ministry had never quite found the means to destroy Gordon until this point. But in 1786, he became intimate with the Count de Cagliostro, a magician who had been blamed for the necklace affair. Cagliostro had been released from the Bastille, but Gordon claimed that the French queen's spies and courtiers were trying to ensnare Cagliostro in London, and he became his protector. Upon arriving in London, Cagliostro published a letter in the *Public Advertiser* criticising the Bastille and the

⁹³ George Gordon to Lord Shelburne, Feb 10th 1783, BL Add MS 88906/3/10, f. 132 .

⁹⁴ Watson, *Life*, p. 42.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Margaret Forbes, *Beattie and His Friends* (London, A Constable, 1904), pp. 215-216.

⁹⁸ Watson, *Life*, p. 59.

lettres de cachet.⁹⁹ A month later a notice in the public advertiser advertised that Cagliostro would hold ‘no intercourse with any of Le Sieur Breteuil’s messengers from France, except in the presence of Lord George Gordon’ and that the Queen’s spies were loose in London.¹⁰⁰ This provided the ministry with the ammunition for a libel charge. The charge read:

It has been the business of Parliament to endeavour to cement a friendly correspondence between the two nations, by establishing a Treaty of Commerce, calculated for the mutual benefit of each country, and by that means to obliterate the traces of former enmity.

This prospect of tranquillity (so pleasing to the mind of every good subject) you could not behold with satisfaction; and therefore, as far as in you lay, you endeavoured to rekindle an animosity between the two nations, by a personal abuse of the Sovereign of one of them.¹⁰¹

Gordon was not only interested in Cagliostro because he showed up the French court at a critical point for the success of Commercial Treaty, but also because he was a good figurehead for the case for prison reform, a cause Gordon had adopted, and for which he would continue to fight from within the walls of Newgate Gaol. The arrival in London of a Bastille veteran who had angered the French court seemed to Gordon like an opportunity not to be missed. While the influence of French fashion was a concern for those like Flood who were worried about commerce, a greater concern for many was the possibility that greater cultural exchange between Britain and France would result in Britain adopting some characteristics of the French police. This had already been raised during the Gordon riots, when Shelburne questioned whether the Westminster police should be instituted as a new police force and cautioned against the French approach of *espionage* while commending the original principles of the force.¹⁰² Margarot said in his trial in 1794 that the Commercial Treaty had been part of an already thriving cultural exchange in which ‘Pitt applied to Bretagne, and from them obtained every article of the French Police, Spies, and Informers, and every thing except the Bastille’.¹⁰³ The arrival

⁹⁹ ‘Translation of a Letter written by Count Cagliostro’ *The Public Advertiser*, 26th July 1786, p. 3, ‘I was there for the space of six months at five yards distance from my wife and was ignorant of it.’

¹⁰⁰ *The Public Advertiser*, 24th August, 1786, p. 2.

¹⁰¹ ‘Trial of Lord George Gordon for a Libel’ *A Complete Collection of State Trials and Proceedings for High Treason, Vol. 22* (London, Howell, 1817), p. 233.

¹⁰² ‘Proceedings in the Lords Relating to the Riots’, June 3rd, 1780, *The Parliamentary History of England, Vol. 21* (London, Hansard, 1814) pp. 680-681.

¹⁰³ *The Trial of Maurice Margarot* (London, J. Ridgway, 1794), p. 130.

of Cagliostro, a Bastille veteran, at this moment of finalising the Commercial Treaty, was horrible for the government precisely because of these rumours.¹⁰⁴

The other half of the charge against Gordon, beyond the libel against Marie Antoinette, was that he had been attempting to distribute seditious literature inside Newgate. Gordon made repeated visits there in 1787, and when refused entry him and his footmen gave pamphlets to the guards, visited again at night to find another entrance, engaged Maria de Fleury to go into the jail and distribute them, and dispersed pamphlets around the street surrounding the jail to people who were going in.¹⁰⁵ The object of Gordon's pamphlet was to convince the convicts who were imprisoned for debt or theft that they did not deserve execution or transportation, because crimes against property did not warrant those punishments. Gordon proposed the legal system should follow the bible and Thomas More, rather than that of Pufendorf.¹⁰⁶ He then managed to organise a petition from the prisoners, which was one of the charges on which he was brought to court for the second time (the charge was that he was questioning the power of the King to make laws that punished people corporally for offences of property).¹⁰⁷ Gordon was wary of the power that the state wielded if it could exact such harsh punishments for petty crimes, particularly financial crimes. In many ways of course, his riots increased the state's penal powers – the state learned from the failure to convict Gordon for treason (and learned the value of the charge of libel), incitement to riot was a charge that could now be applied more plausibly, and the difficulty of containing the riots spurred police reform. Gordon lamented the executions of children after the riots, saying 'Can a *child of twelve or thirteen years of age*, be supposed to know that, by throwing a stool or hat-box *out of a window*, he or she becomes subject to the penalty of death?'¹⁰⁸ His strategy was to rouse up the prisoners, and when Gordon himself was eventually

¹⁰⁴ Ironically, Breteuil, whom Gordon believed was trying to ensnare both him and Cagliostro in London, had an agenda in France of liberalising the penal system.

¹⁰⁵ *The whole proceedings on the trials of two informations exhibited ex officio by the king's attorney-general against George Gordon* (London, M. Gurney, 1788), pp. 19-25.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁰⁷ NA KB 33/14/2/(i).

¹⁰⁸ George Gordon, *A letter from the Right Hon. Lord George Gordon to the Attorney General* (London, J. Ridgway, 1787), p. 13.

imprisoned he tutored other prisoners on how to mount a defence in court on the basis that crimes of property were inferior crimes.¹⁰⁹

Perhaps the tipping point for Gordon came when he became involved in advocating for the cause of the London 'Black Poor'. The Sierra Leone scheme was an ultimately disastrous scheme to colonise Sierra Leone with poor black emigrants living in London, organised by the 'Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor' with Pitt's support.¹¹⁰ Some of the black poor seem to have sought Gordon's advice on their engagement with the scheme. In the *Public Advertiser*, to which Gordon was a regular contributor, the account went as follows.

We hear the some of the leaders of the seven hundred poor Blacks who had signed an engagement to go to a Free Settlement on the coast of Africa, submitted the new system, intended for their government in Ethiopia, to the consideration of the Right Hon. Lord George Gordon, and requested his advice and opinion upon the subject, before they sailed from England. His Lordship advised them not to go; and pointed out to them the various miseries, rebellions, calamities, discredit, and final loss of liberty, which had uniformly attended the settlement of foreign colonies by the different nations of the earth, who had not yet themselves incorporated the law of God into their own establishments. In consequence of this, four hundred of them declined the embarkation, and came on shore again: Thus the Sierra Leone expedition is delayed for the present.¹¹¹

In particular, Gordon had pointed out the nature of the proposed police system and the penal system proposed for the Sierra Leone colony.¹¹² This last included a 'Penitentiary House of Correction, (or French Maison de Force) to be strongly fenced with palisades, ditch, and parapet, on the Duke of Richmond's plan, having all its defences reversed or facing inwards, for the secure confinement of offenders and contumacious persons, to be divided into compartments.'¹¹³

This caused alarm among the potential emigrants and decreased the legitimacy of the scheme. It emerged that the ships being used to transport the black poor were docked at Spithead and under the charge of the same office that was administering convict ships.¹¹⁴ Rumours circulated that the scheme

¹⁰⁹ Watson, *Life*, pp. 105-106.

¹¹⁰ A brilliant account and analysis of this scheme can be found in Stephen J. Braidwood, *Black Poor and White Philanthropists: London's Blacks and the Foundation of the Sierra Leone Settlement 1786-1791* (Liverpool, 1994).

¹¹¹ *The Public Advertiser*, 18th December 1786, p. 4.

¹¹² *Ibid.* Predictably, Gordon also pointed out the money that would be spent on maintaining bishops.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* The 'Maison de Force' referred to is the Parisian debtor's prison.

¹¹⁴ Braidwood, *Black Poor and White Philanthropists*, p. 130.

was suspicious anyway, because a Commercial Treaty was just about to be signed with a country that free black people could not legally enter.¹¹⁵ Gordon was raising a mob against the commercial treaty, exciting popular distrust of the potential cultural imports of the French penal system that the treaty might imply, and stirring up any part of the population that might be volatile, whether that be prisoners or soldiers. Gordon also started dealings with ambassadors to Holland, Venice, Genoa and Bavaria, and in August 1786 went to Charles Raymond, Mr. Thellusson, and Mr. Salomon to persuade them ‘that the commercial treaty which Mr. Eden was negotiating at Paris would not do at all – the preliminary articles being signed, or the definitive treaty being ratified, would make no difference.’¹¹⁶ Gordon was not only using the London mob, but was also trying to further destabilise the already shaky Irish consent to the treaty. On 15th August the Right Boys wrote to him asking for his assistance, and he obliged, writing to various men of influence about the tithes.¹¹⁷ He had written to Thomas Townshend on 30th August 1786 to say that in a meeting with the French ambassador, ‘the connexion of the Queen of France’s Party in the politicks of Ireland was not denied by his excellency’.¹¹⁸ He claimed that the Catholics in Ireland were using the present political moment to organise against Protestants. Gordon had maintained an interest in Ireland ever since his obsession with Dobbs’ pamphlet, and in a letter to Lord Shelburne in February 1783, Gordon had claimed that he received intelligence from Ireland that the Volunteer forces were on the brink of calling in the assistance of France, and that they desired Gordon to let him know that ‘80,000 volunteers are ready to march against any force his Lordship can send’.¹¹⁹ Whether Gordon’s advice to Shelburne ‘not to think of changing the wise maxims of government of these kingdoms’ derived from a desire to create further Irish discontent is, like much of what went on in Gordon’s head, hard to know.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹¹⁶ *The Public Advertiser*, 28th August 1786, p. 4.

¹¹⁷ *The Public Advertiser*, 29th August 1786, p. 3, 12th September, p. 3, 14th September, p. 2, 16th September, p. 3, 20th September, p. 3, 10th October, p. 2.

¹¹⁸ George Gordon to Townshend, August 30th 1786, NLI MS 52, 17, 070 (2), J5.

¹¹⁹ George Gordon to Lord Shelburne, 1782-1783. BL Add MS 88906/3/10, f. 130.

Gordon on Financial Tactics and Kings

After an escape to Amsterdam, a further escape to Birmingham, and a conversion to Judaism, Gordon found himself imprisoned in the same gaol he had tried to organise, Newgate, and from here he witnessed the events of the French Revolution. He was more enthusiastic about the situation in France than the one in Britain, since he thought that Paineite declarations of rights in a British context would eat away at the Protestant foundations of liberty.¹²⁰ He wrote to the National Assembly requesting that they arrange for his release, since on his account he had ended up there through French diplomatic action undertaken by the now disgraced Breteuil.¹²¹

The Abbé Gregoire wrote back to him assuring him it was not possible to arrange his release, but a correspondence began between the two men, who shared an interest, among other things, in avoiding the turn to anti-Semitism in revolutionary France.¹²² And so the two men wrote to each other, the one in jail after a lifetime of anti-Catholic sectarianism, the other a republican bishop under a revolutionary government. Their interests were strikingly similar. Both were engaged in projects to emancipate black people that went beyond abolitionism and instead tried to deal with racialised colonialism. In the last few months of his life, Gordon was still writing to Thomas Walker from Newgate asking what he should communicate to the ‘mulattoes and black people in the West Indies.’¹²³ The day before he had written to the House of Commons deploring their intention to abolish the slave trade while maintaining the existence of slavery in Jamaica.¹²⁴

Gordon took the opportunity in August 1791 to explain to Gregoire his views on the Commercial Treaty, which remained in operation until the beginning of the war in 1793. Gordon said that the treaty was greatly in favour of England when seen from a commercial perspective, but that the French had agreed to it out of a desire to propagate their principles and politics of arbitrary government (for instance by meddling in British affairs and having Gordon arrested). The intention on the part of the

¹²⁰ George Gordon, *A Letter from Lord George Gordon in Newgate, to Baron de Ahvensleben* (London, 1792), pp. 3-5.

¹²¹ Watson, *Life*, p. 91.

¹²² The letter can be found in *The Public Advertiser*, 8th April, 1790, p. 2.

¹²³ Lord George Gordon to Thomas Walker, 27th April 1792, BL Add MS 88955 f. 228.

¹²⁴ George Gordon, *House of Commons! Extract of a letter from George Gordon to Henry Addington* (London, 1792).

French had been to ‘import an immense number of foreigners [...] to incorporate their arbitrary principles by law, as they do at this day.’¹²⁵ For Gordon, the idea that peace would be ensured by developing relations of commerce with former enemies was clearly absurd. War was promoted by the system of public debt, operating precariously through paper currency. The move that would stop war was to *destroy* the monetary system, not bolster it.¹²⁶ In late 1782, Gordon had visited Paris and been horrified by the effects of arbitrary power and war, which had created luxury in one class and misery in the other.¹²⁷ For Gordon, the health of commerce and finance was directly linked to the level of republicanism in the state. Sometimes he expressed this in religious terms. In his Newgate prisoners petition he said that ‘God is just in all the... dearness of provisions, loss of trade, grievous taxes etc’.¹²⁸ These ill-effects arose when the King and Government despised God in their laws and acted through corruption. Gordon believed that Poland’s 1791 constitution was undermined by the increase of Kingly prerogative it engendered, which meant that the Dutch would not advance them a loan – to recover financially they would have to make liberty more than a pretence, something which Gordon urged the King of Poland (his cousin) to rectify.¹²⁹ In a similar vein, Gordon wrote to Gregoire that corn, oil, wine and salt had become cheap under the French Revolutionary government, but that ‘scarcity and intolerable *taxes*’ would return if the King’s dominion of pride were established again.¹³⁰ Gordon and Cagliostro were both conscious of the power of creditors, financiers, and bankers. Cagliostro, who was obviously accused of making money through fraud, protested that as soon as he set foot in any country, he would find a banker there who would supply him with everything he wanted.¹³¹ Gordon seemed to take this advice on board. He wrote papers on finance that he distributed

¹²⁵ *Watson, Life*, p. 120. This concern was echoed by the author of *A Series of Letters on the Commercial Treaty with France*, who was concerned about ‘the effect so close a connection between the two countries, may have on the character, habits, and manners, of our own’ (p. iv). An explicit move towards greater cultural exchange was made by the propagators of a new newspaper, *The European Gazette*, who wished to explore the prospects the Treaty offered for ‘opening a variety of channels of commerce and communication hitherto unknown or untried.’ *To the public*. [European Gazette advertisement] (London, 1787).

¹²⁶ *Watson, Life*, pp. 75-76.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹²⁸ *Appendix to the Trials of George Gordon* [etc.], p. 32.

¹²⁹ George Gordon, *To W. Smith, Esq. MP. Chairman of the meeting in support of the people of Poland* (London, 1792), p. 2.

¹³⁰ *Watson, Life*, pp. 117-118.

¹³¹ Cagliostro, *Memorial, or Brief, for the Comte de Cagliostro* (London, J. Debrett, 1786), pp. 60-61.

among Jewish financiers in England and Holland, arguing that the amount of paper money in circulation meant that governments were on the verge of bankruptcy, so the financiers should withdraw credit to end wars.¹³² Watson represented Gordon's connection to Cagliostro as having been directly linked to the nature of public finance. Cagliostro had been caught up in French politics because Marie Antoinette had acted according to the passions of the luxurious court maintained in France and had tried to gain money through the mechanisms of debt and borrowing.¹³³ This system of finance could not last long, said Watson, since it so clearly showed the people that their interest was separate to that of the crown and the monied interest.¹³⁴ Marsha Schuchard claims that Gordon was also involved in secret financial schemes during the Regency Crisis that would have tied the Prince of Wales into his circle of radical lenders.¹³⁵ Gaining traction with Royalty by whatever means necessary was always part of Gordon's political strategy. As we saw earlier, back before the riots he had used his right as a noble to have an audience with George III to criticise the King's part in the Catholic Relief Act. The King rejoindered that he had nothing to do with it, but Gordon insisted that he had given royal assent, and that kingly prerogative mattered. Gordon described in a pamphlet how he tried to use his access to the sovereign wisely, explaining that he followed court ceremonies as far as possible, and also tried 'some of the modern manners' in addressing George III in case those were agreeable to his majesty.¹³⁶ He argued that courtly manners and refined language were important when addressing monarchs, just as Moses had adopted a spirit of refinement to deal with the Pharaoh, and he never lost hope that he might directly influence the King even after his role in the riots. In September 1781 we find a curt note from Lord North to Gordon. 'If his lordship has any book to present to the King', it reads, 'he must present it at the Levee.'¹³⁷

¹³² Watson, *Life*, p. 75.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 69.

¹³⁵ Marsha Keith Schuchard, 'Lord George Gordon and Cabalistic Freemasonry: Beating Jacobite Swords into Jacobin Ploughshares' in Martin Mulson and Richard Popkin, *Secret Conversions to Judaism in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden, 2003), p. 229.

¹³⁶ George Gordon, *Innocence Vindicated, Part 2*, (London, R. Denham, 2nd edition, 1783), p. 17.

¹³⁷ Lord North to George Gordon, 8th September, 1781, BL Add MS 37835, f. 196.

Gordon knew that radicals had to be careful with kings. When the Abbé Gregoire wrote with news of Louis XVI's capture at Varennes, Gordon replied that the incident was like the abdication of James II but that the actions of the revolutionaries had turned the situation into that of Charles I. 'The arrestation of a King is no children's play', he warned Gregoire, 'and so you will find it, if you do not immediately justify yourselves in the eyes of the world.'¹³⁸ He cautioned that those who had arrested Charles I were executed in the Restoration, so Gregoire, Robespierre, Condorcet and the others were risking their lives. The rule of thumb, said Gordon, was 'If you do not kill them, they will kill you.'¹³⁹ It was also simply inconsistent with de Lolme's idea of freedom as equal application of the law if the assembly did not try the King for treason.¹⁴⁰ Gordon's correspondents voted for the immediate trial of the king, though they lost the ballot. After Gordon died, his cousin, Lord Buchan, and his secretary, Robert Watson, tried to carry on playing Gordon's hand in this game of kings.

Lord George Gordon was not the greatest tactician, but he certainly thought a lot about tactics, and became skilled in the art of obstruction. The Gordon Riots and Gordon's subsequent adventures in mob-raising and advice-giving show how commerce, luxury, and trade were linked to the political practice of radicals in the 1780s and 1790s. Gordon's story gives a sense of how the debate around the Commercial Treaty might have coloured the French Revolution debate that immediately followed it. And Gordon's idea that the inactive part of the constitution, the monarch, needed to be shocked back into action by an organised body of the people was often echoed by his contemporaries. Gordon did not leave Newgate Gaol until his death in November 1793, though he was visited by many friends, including the Duke of York.¹⁴¹ Watson said that he died singing Ça Ira.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Watson, *Life*, p. 115.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹⁴¹ 'Notice of the Duke of York's visit to Lord George Gordon at Newgate', *Original Contributions to the Public Advertiser*, BL Add MS 27777 f. 21.

¹⁴² Watson, *Life*, p. 137.

Chapter VI: Lord Buchan and History

The Whig Secession and Christopher Wyvill

Christopher Wyvill had been the figure in the English reform movement most sceptical about the potential contained in the Irish Volunteers. His tactics were for the most part conservative and realist, designed to garner the support of country gentlemen through widespread petitions and meetings.¹ His political engagement did not cease with the dismantling of the Yorkshire Association, but he progressively lost confidence in the convention tactic, which had by the 1790s deviated too far from his preferred form. At the end of a decade of falling foul of Pitt and promoting cautious reform, Wyvill's sympathies shifted behind Fox's radical Whig rump.

Fox and his allies had reached a strategic deadlock. Secession of the Whig politicians from parliament was the favoured policy, but secession as end rather than means, as an expression of despair rather than of contempt.² It was not a hugely successful tactic. John Dinwiddy observed that 'perhaps it was not to be expected that the mere withdrawal of the Whigs to their country homes would produce a strong movement of opinion against the government.'³ In the past Wyvill would not have condoned such measures. He had deplored any move that seemed to suggest a state of emergency, since these tactics alienated the moderate gentry and opened the gates to the breakdown of the polity. But in 1799 Wyvill published a pamphlet titled *The Secession from Parliament Vindicated* in which he aimed to defend the Whigs against charges that 'Secession is always a dereliction of Public Duty; it is alike inconsistent with the principles of the Constitution, and injurious to the welfare of the Community.'⁴

¹ The tactics of the Yorkshiremen have been explored by Ian Christie in 'The Yorkshire Association, 1780-4: A Study in Political Organization', *The Historical Journal*, 3: 2 (1960), pp. 144-161 and in *Wilkes, Wyvill and Reform: the Parliamentary Reform Movement in British Politics, 1760-1785* (London, 1962). Christie points out that the Wilkesite agitations in the early 70s were London-centric and organisationally less innovative than Wyvill's 80s strategies. Wyvill established a large body with a small 'head' who could meet regularly, created a salaried organiser of the association, and used the press to his advantage ('The Yorkshire Association', p. 150).

² A study of the policy of secession can be found in L.G. Mitchell in *Charles James Fox* (Oxford, 1992), Chapter 7.

³ J.R. Dinwiddy, 'Charles James Fox and the People' in *Radicalism and Reform in Britain, 1780-1850* (London, 1992), p. 3.

⁴ Christopher Wyvill, *The Secession from Parliament Vindicated* (York, L. Lund, second edition, 1799), p. 6.

Wyvill argued that under normal circumstances, attendance in parliament was requisite for political representation. But the constitution was a system of balances, and it contained provision for imbalance and disruption. Thus

when dangerous disputes have arisen between the Executive Power and the Parliament, the PEOPLE are the UMPIRE to whose judgement alone they can be referred, and by whose decision they can be happily adjusted. On such emergencies, the Crown may dissolve the Parliament, in order that the sense of the People upon the disputed points may be authentically declared by a new choice of Representatives.⁵

As straightforward as this sounded, a further complication might arise if a majority in parliament were ‘corruptly leagued with the Crown’, in which case there could be no power of appeal to the Crown.⁶ The possibility of this circumstance meant that secession *must* be acceptable, being ‘the appeal of a minority in Parliament, against the obstinacy, the infatuation, or the treachery of a majority.’⁷ Wyvill concluded that such a measure would not cause revolution; instead it would warn the gentry without inflaming the lower classes.⁸ Cartwright, who had once joined Wyvill in promoting the practice of association, thought the secession tactic to be short-sighted, because he believed that parliamentary debates were a crucial method of propaganda.⁹

Wyvill’s shift in tactics seems to have been provoked by his friends, whose influence can be discerned in the pro-secession pamphlet. In a long note, Wyvill decried the state of representation in Scotland, as it had been described by the Scottish Society of the Friends of the People. Wyvill said that it would seem to an outside observer that Scotland was a country that wholeheartedly supported Pitt, even though ‘many of the other Scotch Gentlemen are firm and enlightened Friends to Liberty’.¹⁰ The Scotch gentlemen Wyvill had in mind were those he had met through his long-time correspondent, Lord Buchan. Buchan’s perspective on what was to be done profoundly influenced Wyvill during the 1790s. Buchan’s political philosophy recognised the lack of any prospect of parliamentary reform

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁹ John Cartwright, *Life and Correspondence of Major Cartwright, Vol. 1*, ed. Frances Dorothy Cartwright (London, Colburn, 1826), p. 279.

¹⁰ Wyvill, *Secession from Parliament Vindicated*, p. 41.

when an oligarchy held power in parliament, and was reflected in Wyvill's loss of faith in gradual reform.

Buchan first contacted the Yorkshire Association when it was at its zenith in 1781. In a letter to its secretary William Gray (one of Wyvill's strategic innovations was to create permanent posts of this kind), Buchan declared his distaste for the belief that political activity should be confined to the site of parliament. Buchan wrote that,

It is a maxim of mine, which I hope I shall retain while I exist, that our duties towards the common-wealth are not to be relinquished on account of the faults or errors of those whom the Executive Power has thought fit to invest with his active powers in that common-wealth. Were it not from the influence of this maxim, I might plead exemption from political energy, since I belong to an order of men who stand distinguished from the rest of the community at large, by having long since surrendered their political liberty, and consented to permit the Minister, for the time being, to nominate their representatives.¹¹

Thus Buchan approved of extra-parliamentary activism, and he said that it was not possible to fix a diseased constitution by tinkering with its component parts.¹² He agreed in principle with the Yorkshire Association that the only viable method for reform was 'virtuous combination', which would both produce the force required to rework the constitution, and tackle the vice of the people which both produced the constitutional defects and was produced by it.¹³

Wyvill and Buchan's mutual friend, the journalist and historian Gilbert Stuart, brought them closer together, and in December 1782, Buchan wrote to Wyvill with the good news that 'the people of Scotland are now awaking from the lethargy of a century.'¹⁴ Wyvill was a wholly appropriate ally for Buchan since they shared an understanding of corruption and an unease about the lack of tactical direction in the reform movement.¹⁵ Buchan pledged himself to the cause of liberty (for which, he said, he was willing to die), and agreed to send Wyvill the reports of the Scottish committees for

¹¹ Lord Buchan to William Gray, April 20th 1781, Paper VI in Wyvill, *Political Papers*, Vol. 1, pp. 323-324.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 326-327.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 327.

¹⁴ Gilbert Stuart to the Earl of Buchan, 1782, Laing II/588; Earl of Buchan to Christopher Wyvill, No. 42, Paper 1, in Wyvill, *Political Papers*, Vol. 4 (York, L. Lund, 1794-1802), p. 523.

¹⁵ Wyvill's relationship to the 'civic humanist' tradition is explored in Iain Hampsher-Monk, 'Civic Humanism and Parliamentary Reform: The Case of the Society of the Friends of the People', *Journal of British Studies*, Spring 1979, 18:2, pp. 77-89.

constitutional reform.¹⁶ The two kept up a correspondence despite the collapse of Wyvill's reform movement, and in 1793 Buchan wrote to Wyvill lamenting the lack of power behind reform projects, but reasserting his commitment to political action despite this, since he had always 'seen the necessity of *something being quickly done* to put something in train for restoring the integrity of the Legislative Body, and the confidence of the People.'¹⁷

Buchan's declarations in favour of imminent action were characteristically at odds with his actual situation. His family's political ambitions, marred by their associations with an anti-Union covenanting tradition and later Jacobitism, had been quashed by his youthful failure to enter politics when he attempted to wield influence among Scotland's aristocracy. His next move had been to publicly flaunt his literary ambitions by founding the Scottish Society of Antiquaries, which the Edinburgh establishment suppressed to the best of its ability. After this, Buchan retired from public life altogether, and dedicated himself to managing his estates and maintaining the ancient ruins of Dryburgh Abbey. Thereafter his political activity was confined to private correspondence. It was to Wyvill that Buchan in 1797 explained his efforts at Dryburgh to build an ark for him and his family.¹⁸ He had, he said, predicted the French Revolution well in advance, and realised that the monarchy of Britain could only be saved by a 'radical Reform of Parliament'.¹⁹ Since the 'Court' in Britain intended to destroy the French Republic, Buchan was pleased that the Society of the Friends of the People was formed 'for minutely examining the Fortress of Corruption in the Oligarchy of Britain.'²⁰ His brother Thomas Erskine had put his name down as one of the members, but he withdrew it because 'the posture of affairs' and the 'remedies they held out for the cure of the great National Disease', which amounted to an 'inadequate change of system' made the whole scheme ineffectual.²¹

¹⁶ Earl of Buchan to Christopher Wyvill, No. 42, Paper 1, in Wyvill, *Political Papers*, Vol. 4., p. 524.

¹⁷ Earl of Buchan to Christopher Wyvill, June 9th, 1793, Letter 2 in Wyvill, *Political Papers*, Vol. 6 (York, L. Lund, 1794-1802), p. 283.

¹⁸ Lord Buchan to Christopher Wyvill, May 29th, 1797, in *Political Papers*, Vol. 6, p. 285.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 288-289.

At this point, according to his own account, Buchan began to float the idea of secession from parliament. He explained afterwards that he had written to Charles Grey, recommending that

if the discussion of the Report and Petition of the Friends of the People was not referred to a Committee of the House of Commons, a complete Secession from Parliament, and a remonstrance submitted to the view of the public at large, ought to follow immediately, as the best mode of exhibiting to the Throne and to the Oligarchy the danger of the crisis.²²

His advice had not been followed, but his convictions remained the same:

The conclusion of my whole sentiment is this: If the Oligarchy is too strongly impressed with the belief that in alliance with the Crown it can continue to govern the Country as it has done heretofore, we must have a Civil War, ending either in an absolute Military Monarchy, like that of Augustus, with the interposition of a venal Senate; or we must have a fac simile of the French Republic.

If, on the other hand, the Oligarchy and the Family of Hanover are impressed with a sense of danger to the Monarchy itself, from the doubt that may have gained access from the founding of the Navy and Army, the grand stroke of policy to preserve the Monarchy in union with a Popular Government would be for them to yield to a complete Reform of the House of Commons, as It is now proposed.²³

Wyvill was wary of Buchan's ambitions for changing the system. He wrote to Buchan that reform had to be undertaken 'gradually and pacifically' to achieve constitutional perfection.²⁴ Buchan responded early in 1798 that it was strange to imagine that the House of Commons would 'reform itself from within, to the total annihilation of its influence and power'.²⁵ Wyvill was familiar with this argument and had indeed made it himself. He had written to the Irish Volunteers in 1783 that 'Self-Reformation is an odious task to Corrupt Assemblies of Men [...]. A Degenerate Parliament will never seriously engage in that business, but from the impulse of the people.'²⁶ Buchan said that the efforts of Wyvill and his friends in Yorkshire seemed to be failing to gather the requisite support from freeholders to justify their tactics.²⁷ 'I greatly fear', said Buchan, 'that the Minister, and the Oligarchy whom he

²² *Ibid.*, p. 289.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

²⁴ Christopher Wyvill to Lord Buchan, June 17th 1797, Letter V, in *Political Papers, Vol. 6*, p. 294. When Wyvill edited his correspondence, he added that it remained his hope 'that every thing may be gained for the Community which can enable it to attain the highest felicity, without those hazards to which bolder measures in pursuit of theoretical refinements would be too likely to expose the nation.'

²⁵ Lord Buchan to Christopher Wyvill, February 16th, 1798, Letter 7, in *Political Papers, Vol. 6*, p. 300.

²⁶ Wyvill, *A Collection of Letters on the Proposed Reformation of the Parliament of Ireland* (York, W. Blanchard, 1783), p. 21.

²⁷ Buchan to Wyvill, Feb 16th 1798, p. 300.

represents, have passed the Rubicon, and will not recede.²⁸ He promised to transmit further political advice to Wyvill, and duly sent a document entitled ‘The Political Testament of the Earl of Buchan’. The testament argued that the King and the majority of Freeholders could band together to dissolve Parliament and call new elections, a move necessary for the safety of the country.²⁹ This was of course similar to the demands from David Williams and from George Gordon. Despite Wyvill’s previous reluctance to assent to extreme measures, Buchan wrote at the end of his testament that he nominated Wyvill and his successors as the ‘administrators’ of this ‘last Political Will and Testament’.³⁰

This alarmed Wyvill. It was possible, he said, that ‘the obstinacy of the Oligarchy may render some such measure necessary’ but they could not claim the necessity for it until the ‘sense of the nation, unequivocally expressed to Parliament, has failed to produce the desired Reform.’³¹ Were the reformers to obtain the concurrence of the ‘major part of the Constituent Body’, it seemed likely, said Wyvill, that they would then be in a position to negotiate, and further measures need not be taken. The work had to be put in to establish such a collective voice, since Buchan’s proposal was suitable only for crisis, and ‘surely I may say’, said Wyvill, ‘*cuncta prius tentanda* [we must try everything else first].’³² An irregular measure like Buchan’s could only be attempted once all regular measures had been tried; ‘we in Yorkshire’, said Wyvill, ‘have declared for legal means, and *for those means only*. I trust your Lordship will join us in the wish that those means may succeed, and that the advice you have bequeathed us, may thus become a *lapsed legacy*.’³³

Buchan’s reply was to the point. He had considered Wyvill’s objections, he said, but the situation of necessity was indeed upon them. He felt he was entitled to voice his opinion because of his civic position and lineage, and he had always done so. ‘*It is therefore for the Gentlemen of the County of York, and of the Country at large,*’ he said, ‘to consider how they are to comport themselves’, and it would not be

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Paper 1, ‘The Political Testament of the Earl of Buchan’ in *Political Papers*, Vol. 6, pp. 305-306.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

³¹ Christopher Wyvill to Lord Buchan, *Political Papers*, Vol. 6, p. 308.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 309.

³³ *Ibid.*

long before Wyvill would ‘regret *that feebleness of resolve* which prevents the State from being aware of its danger until it is too late to be obviated.’³⁴ He recommended that Wyvill host a meeting where Buchan could discuss his proposals with the North of England gentry.

Wyvill fell back on what was by now a well-worn distinction between theory and practice to decline Buchan’s proposals one final time. ‘I will only now say,’ he said,

it is a subject which the state of public affairs forces upon my daily meditation; yet, agreeing with your doctrine in speculation, admitting the measures you have suggested to be defensible in theory, still I greatly doubt their expedience, or even their practicability, with any prospect of a good effect.³⁵

He re-stated his position that in Yorkshire they avoided irregular measures, because even with their *current* level of carefulness the respectable gentry remained unreconciled to the reform movement.³⁶

But he conceded that his stance may be due to this fear of alienating his support.³⁷

The next year, in 1799, Wyvill published the pro-secession pamphlet, which was checked before publication by Buchan’s brother, Thomas Erskine, in case anything in it might be thought to be illegal.³⁸ The pamphlet deployed many of the arguments for the state of necessity and the appeals to the Crown and People that Buchan had presented to him over the course of their correspondence. Wyvill wrote to John Millar about the secession argument in July 1800, saying that he agreed with Millar on ‘the propriety of inaction’ and that he wondered if Millar might help circulate his secession pamphlet so as to better prepare the public for a time when calamity would provoke a resumption of political action.³⁹ Millar agreed that ‘the People should be impressed with the extent of that corrupt influence which pervades our Great Counsels, and that they should see in a proper light the Secession of Mr. Fox and his Friends’, but he also tried to lower Wyvill’s expectations for circulation in Scotland – he thought that Wyvill should only send up about 200 copies.⁴⁰ Buchan was pleased with the

³⁴ Lord Buchan to Christopher Wyvill, Letter X, *Political Papers, Vol. 6*, p. 311.

³⁵ Christopher Wyvill to Lord Buchan, May 18th 1798, Letter 12, *Political Papers, Vol. 6*, p. 315.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Christopher Wyvill to Lord Buchan, Feb 27th, 1799, Letter XIV, *Political Papers, Vol. 6*, p. 318.

³⁹ Christopher Wyvill to John Millar, July 27th 1800, Letter I, *Political Papers, Vol. 6*, p. 95.

⁴⁰ John Millar to Christopher Wyvill, 4th August, 1800, Letter 2, *Political Papers, Vol. 6*, pp. 98-99.

pamphlet, though he thought that the publication of opinions at this stage had little effect on history, since ‘a great problem on the surface of our planet is in the course of solution, and will be solved in spite of every contrivance of human artifice.’⁴¹ Even ‘if I had a vantage ground,’ said Buchan,

and a voice loud enough and powerful enough in eloquence to reach the extent of the whole British Empire, I should despair of showing my Countrymen the fallacy to which they are not unfortunately exposed; nor do I see any alternative but that of waiting in awful suspense for the gradual unfolding of the fatal roll of Providence.⁴²

At Dryburgh, in 1801, Buchan introduced Wyvill to two of his closest friends, Dr Anderson (editor of *The Bee*) and Colin Maclaurin.⁴³ Wyvill corresponded with them and committed himself to the cause of liberty in Scotland. His letters to Maclaurin demonstrate his continued tactical disagreements with Buchan, and their arguments about the best way to restore liberty, but they also show how much he respected the Earl. Buchan continued to supervise Wyvill’s political activity with great interest, trying to steer him away from the course of gradual reform to which he was so committed.⁴⁴

The Earl of Buchan and the Tactic of History

Buchan and Wyvill’s disagreements contain the familiar rift between gradualism and system-change, where both parties wanted to avoid revolution or civil war. Wyvill never lost his faith in popular representations, believing that reform movements should gather the will of the people and present it to parliament as an undeniable force, while Buchan preferred using whatever combination of King, Lords, Commons, party or people could wield enough power to paralyse Pitt’s oligarchy. Running through all their disagreements was the question of how to use the idea of emergency. Declaring an emergency opened the door to a new raft of tactics, but also promoted a breakdown in social order such that reformers could not manipulate the material of the populace so effectively. Like Buchan’s brother, Thomas Erskine, who argued in the trials of radicals that their activity was part of the normal operation of the constitution rather than anything exceptional, Wyvill was conscious of how a state of

⁴¹ Lord Buchan to Christopher Wyvill, Letter 13, *Political Papers Vol. 6*, p. 316.

⁴² Christopher Wyvill to Lord Buchan, June 10th 1801, *Political Papers, Vol. 6*, p. 326.

⁴³ Christopher Wyvill to Colin MacLaurin, August 5th 1805, *Political Papers, Vol. 6*, p. 207.

⁴⁴ Christopher Wyvill to Colin MacLaurin, August 25th, 1801, Letter XI, *Political Papers, Vol. 6*, p. 209 Wyvill refers to Buchan in this letter using the letters A.B.

emergency could operate in Pitt's favour, allowing a clampdown on all political activity. For Buchan, the worst situation this could provoke was an acceleration of a course of events that would happen anyway, sooner or later: the start of a political deluge whereupon Buchan and his radical friends would board their Berwickshire ark.

Buchan's perspective was eccentric and Scottish. His ideas about political action were relatively unhampered by the 1780s fashion for association and petition and besides his contact with Wyvill were mostly circulating among a close group of Scottish literati that included John Millar, William Ogilvie, and Lord George Gordon's secretary and biographer, Robert Watson. Those figures of the Edinburgh establishment who wanted to lay claim to the ideas and fame of David Hume and Adam Smith were however committed to extirpating Buchan's ideas from Scottish polite society and Scottish political philosophy. It was in the 1780s that the contest between Buchan's set and the powerful group of Edinburgh University professors reached its peak.

Buchan had wanted to have political influence through his title in Scotland, and when that had failed he had tried to become an MP.⁴⁵ But it turned out that the most disruptive act in his lifetime was the establishment of a new learned society in Edinburgh. He had been active in the Belles Lettres Society in the 1760s, delivering discourses on law, manners, the arts, and women's education.⁴⁶ From 1778 Buchan began floating the idea of establishing a Society for the Antiquaries of Scotland (SAS). Eventually established in 1780, the SAS was seen as a challenge to the intellectual hegemony of Edinburgh University and a way to boost the reputations of individuals such as William Smellie, its co-founder, who had been refused posts at the university.⁴⁷ Opposition to the SAS reached a height when it emerged that Buchan was applying for incorporation by royal charter, whereupon the principal of Edinburgh University, William Robertson, and a group of other Edinburgh professors attempted

⁴⁵ Buchan to the Duke of Newcastle, BL Add MS 32983 f. 337.

⁴⁶ James Gordon Lamb, 'David Steuart Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan: A Study of his Life and Correspondence', (PhD Thesis, University of St Andrews, 1963), pp. 19-21.

⁴⁷ For this dispute see for instance NLS MS 3873, 201, a letter from James Cummying to Buchan saying that Sir James Grant is conflicted about joining the antiquaries since he wants to send his children to Edinburgh University and does not see his membership as compatible with that. Grant ended up favouring his family over other loyalties, becoming a co-founder of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1783.

to obstruct the application. The Senate of the university wrote to Henry Dundas, who was at that time the Lord Advocate, stating their objection, and a counter-application was formed which involved collapsing the Philosophical Society into the new 'Royal Society of Edinburgh'. Buchan was forced to resign from the Philosophical Society and said in a letter to Smellie that his opponents were 'men who will blush, and whose Children will blush hereafter on account of the phenomenon of these days.'⁴⁸

The SAS pursued history in a far more political manner than might be expected of an antiquarian society. In this respect the Edinburgh University set's suspicions were justified. In 1782, Alexander Wight submitted an essay to the society on 'the Origin and First Constitution of Parliament in Scotland', which traced the origin of the use of the word parliament in Scottish statutes to the marriage contract between Margaret, the Maid of Norway, and Edward II, but considered that forms of popular governance were in effect before the use of the word.⁴⁹ This kind of consideration would become popular again ten years later, when the Scottish Society of the Friends of the People sought to establish Scotland's past constitutional forms, making ample use of the thought of Lord Kames, whom Buchan greatly admired. This kind of study was well within the stated objects of the society. In Buchan's opening address in 1780 he said that the SAS should investigate the history of 'The Privileges of the People', 'The King – His prerogative, court, great offices of state', and 'The assemblies of the great barons, afterwards called parliaments.'⁵⁰

On 15th November, 1784, with the SAS haemorrhaging money due to lack of support from Scotland's aristocracy, Buchan decided to come clean about the society's aims.⁵¹ When he had set up the society, said Buchan, 'I had greater views and stronger motives to incite one than I thought it necessary at that time to declare'.⁵² He had considered Scotland to be a 'rude but noble medallion of antient sculpture', which ought not to be forgotten simply because of the size and elegance of its neighbouring nation.⁵³

⁴⁸ Lord Buchan to William Smellie, 12th February 1783, NMS, MS 593 no. 68.

⁴⁹ NMS, Communications to the Society of Antiquaries, 1780-1784, p. 113.

⁵⁰ NMS, Minutes of the SAS, 1780-84, p. 13.

⁵¹ NLS Advocates Library 'Society of the Antiquaries of Scotland, Anniversary Discourse, Nov. 15th, 1794, No. 76.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

As a man, said Buchan, he was a citizen of the world, and as a friend to peace and liberty he was an inhabitant of a united kingdom.⁵⁴ ‘But as a citizen’, said Buchan, ‘I could not help remembering that I was a Scot.’⁵⁵

The English were patriotic (‘and I wish to God they had more cause’), but they should not scorn Scots for being patriots themselves. Buchan said that to create this patriotic spirit, Scots had to be able to ‘read and to understand the unsullied and authentic history of their country’, but this was difficult since ‘the Metropolis of England not only drains it of all its money and natural patrons, but of its archives, MSS, books, and monuments of ancient greatness’ thus ‘fulfilling by a political fatality the intentions which were ascribed to their first Edward when he conquered Wales and distained possession of Scotland by the treachery of its nobility.’⁵⁶

J.G.A. Pocock has written about this link between political ability and the ability to keep historical records:

The English were both making and writing their history; it was a cause as well as a consequence of the Scottish inability to make theirs that they were ill-placed to write it either. And should it be objected that Cromwell carried off many of the records of medieval Scotland and that a ship bringing them back was wrecked on a sandbar in 1660, this misfortune — like the loss of the Irish records in the Four Courts explosion of 1922 — may be considered an illustration of the parable of the talents. The guardianship of one's past is power; the court of record is the kernel of English government; and from the political culture which has not enough self-determined and self-preserved history shall be taken away even that which it hath.⁵⁷

Pocock’s formulation tracks very closely what Buchan wanted to do with his Society of Antiquaries. He wanted to create the kind of authoritative style of historical writing that Scotland *would* have had if it had been governed well. Pocock again:

A highly governed society is a highly literate society; in a multitude of forms from court records to history books, it puts forth articulations, linguistic and mental structures, which are — along a scale varying from official to unofficial, public to private, conscious to unconscious — highly paradigmatic, in the sense that they authoritatively determine the patterns in which men think and that the authority they

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ J.G.A. Pocock, ‘British History, a Plea for a New Subject’, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Dec., 1975), p. 611.

exercise can be replaced only when there are found alternatives to it. Among these paradigmatic structures will be found a style of narrating, studying and criticizing history, with the result that a highly governed and literate society's consciousness of its own history will be of a different order — both more authoritative and, quite possibly, more self-critical — from that possessed by a society less centrally and bureaucratically organized. When a society of the first kind expands at the expense of societies of the second, the paradigmatic command of self which is one source of its power becomes a means by which it exerts power over others.⁵⁸

Buchan was aware, he said, 'when I gave [the SAS] the name it now bears', that those who only looked at the title of the society 'would consider me as deserted from the Philosophical Band and a beater up of recruits to collect old rusty remains of the Romans, Swords shields and helmets of our ancestors, or Butter Butterflies and gnats which had the honour to breathe our nature ain.'⁵⁹ But that suited him, for the name was patriotic and would put people off the scent of their real endeavour.⁶⁰ Their aim was to 'discover the natural bent of social man' by looking at authentic historical records, and then to do what no government had ever attempted to do: to legislate for men as they are, not as they should be, based on 'the radical principles of man's nature.'⁶¹ The study of antiquaries was therefore the study of man, in his 'littleness' as well as his greatness.⁶² The promotion of this study by the society was also intended to actively contribute to Scottish virtue, since the study of antiquaries was a leisure activity which would draw Scots away from money and luxury.⁶³ Buchan wrote to the 2nd Lord Hardwicke in 1781 asking for money, and recommending the society saying, 'by means also my lord of this new society on so enlarged a plan, many useful hours are snatched from Cards, and dice, or the effeminate and lounging coffee house, a thing highly desirable in this age and country.'⁶⁴ Where the Irish escaped the commercial vices of political apathy through their militia, Buchan thought the Scots should do the same through their hobbies. The aspiration to antiquaries was mirrored in Ireland by Henry Flood who when he died left money to Trinity College to pursue Irish Antiquaries, and to represent to Irish people the time when England was 'in a rude state' and Ireland 'enjoyed the elements of civility.'⁶⁵

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 611-612.

⁵⁹ Adv. 'Anniversary Discourse'.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Lord Buchan to the 2nd Lord Hardwicke, 1781, BL Add MS 35618 f. 96.

⁶⁵ Henry Flood, *Observations on the Bequest of Henry Flood Esq. to Trinity College* (Dublin, Bonham, 1795), p. 58.

Like Buchan, Flood also encouraged an engagement in national biography, since ‘nothing stimulates to great deeds more strongly than great examples.’⁶⁶

So why was the SAS required for this pursuit, when by all accounts Scotland had in the past few decades climbed to the heights of literary prowess? Why had the philosophy of Hutcheson and Smith not played this role, and why had the histories of Hume and Robertson not provided the material from which ideal governance could be derived? The network around Buchan felt that mainstream Scottish history and philosophy were inadequate to the political problems they faced. Their articulations were scant, and often unpublished. Hume and then Robertson’s set were tyrannical in controlling intellectual discourse, and their opponents tended to be poor at launching counter-offensives.

Buchan’s oldest ally in his disapproval of Adam Smith was his Glasgow University tutor James Buchanan. Buchan had a lifetime obsession with Buchanan’s ancestor George Buchanan, and while there is little surviving evidence of James Buchanan’s writings, Buchan took care to preserve an essay that Buchanan had written on Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.⁶⁷ In this essay, Buchanan argued that when it came to moral philosophy it was important to concentrate not on what seemed empirically true, but on the effect that the moral system had on its holder:

For the philosophy which teaches that there are good dispositions and kind affections toward others implanted in the Heart of Man; gives so amicable a representation of Human Nature and places it in so beautifull a light, that the contemplation of it fills us with delight. The emotions which such a picture excites within us are so pleasant that we cannot forbear wishing the representation to be Just, and true copy of the original. But how differently are we affected by these views of human nature, which strip it of every thing gen’rous and represent Man, as a selfish solitary being; concerned only about himself, unaffected with the happiness or misery of others, except so far as his own happiness is interested in the case. Such a picture must give pain to ev’ry ingenious mind nor can we imagine, that any one who thinks the picture truly drawn can consider the frame and constitution of his Mind with any degree of complacency nor even without disapprobation.⁶⁸

Buchanan went on to transfer the abstract attack to a personal one:

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁶⁷ ‘Essay of James Buchanan’, NLS Acc. 6778.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

the pleasure then which some men have taken to degrade human nature; to shew that there is no such thing in it as kind benevolent affections toward others must appear very unnaturall and that pride to be very preposterous, which is founded on endeavouring to prove that there is nothing amicable, great, or noble, in the human constitution.⁶⁹

The essay compared what was true and what was good, arguing that the truth of moral philosophy might be derived from ‘the different manner in which these representations of human nature affect us’ rather than from empirical observation.⁷⁰ By turning the tables in this way, Buchanan overcame what he saw as a pretended refinement of the ‘selfish system’ effected by Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith.⁷¹

Buchan followed his tutor in challenging the reception of Smith. He promoted an alternative interpretation of Smith throughout the 1790s, presenting him as a republican at heart, who ‘considered a commonwealth as the platform for a monarchy, hereditary succession in the chief magistrate being necessary only to prevent the commonwealth from being shaken by ambition, or absolute dominion introduced by the consequences of contending factions.’⁷² Smith was weak to flattery and political courtship, and though he had gone to London ‘a Whig and a Foxite’, through the machinations of Pitt and Dundas he had returned ‘a Tory and a Pittite’.⁷³ In June 1792 Buchan wrote a further article in *The Bee* remarking on the controversy over Smith’s plagiarism in the *Wealth of Nations*. Buchan said that the plagiarism debate served to obscure discussion on some of the problems with the principles of the book.⁷⁴ Buchan felt that the starting point of commerce was a dangerous one for considering governance; he wanted theories of government to consider the happiness of nations rather than their

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ The critique of the selfish system became a running joke between Buchan and Buchanan. Buchanan wrote to Buchan from Glasgow in 1761 saying that he was pleased despite himself that Buchan had received a military post that would mean he would come to live near Buchanan (Buchan had hoped to engage in literary pursuits), since though ‘the selfish system of philosophy is not my favourite one and I would fain persuade myself that men are sometimes actuated by more noble and generous motives yet I believe it is apt to insinuate itself where we least suspect it.’ Laing II/588, f. 2 Item 1.

⁷² ‘On Dr. Adam Smith’, *The Bee*, June 8th 1791, Vol. 3, p. 165 – The draft version of this letter to *The Bee* can be found in GUA, Murray 336, where Buchan’s multiple scorings out demonstrate his struggle to articulate his perception of the distance between Smith’s professed philosophy and his actual opinions.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ ‘Gleanings of Literature’, *The Bee*, June 27th, 1792, Vol. 9, p. 299.

wealth.⁷⁵ Such a study, said Buchan, ‘would embrace, in its scope and argument, the health, morals, education, industry, good order, and political sentiments of the people.’⁷⁶ Echoing the arguments made by the Volunteers in 1780, and those made during the 1786 debate on the Commercial Treaty, Buchan argued that considerations of revenue should never trump considerations of the effects of commodities on the people who consumed them. Buchan’s system would treat certain commodities with great caution, such as tea, tobacco and alcohol and ‘would proscribe every branch of business that had a tendency to pervert the morals, or corrupt the heart of the people.’⁷⁷ National virtue was far more valuable than national wealth.

Buchan criticised Scottish philosophy for giving virtue only a minor role, and for eschewing political conviction. His solution to this was almost entirely historical, for it was history rather than pure theory that would provide true knowledge of man, of Scotland’s political character, and of the figures fit for emulation. But the practice of history in Buchan’s lifetime was tightly controlled by William Robertson. Robertson held the title of the ‘Historiographer Royal’ for Scotland, a post that had been revived by Bute. Denys Hay argued that this move on Bute’s part was an attempt to solidify his power through patronage. Bute wrote that ‘most of our best authors are wholly devoted to me, and I have laid the foundation for gaining Robertson.’⁷⁸ No wonder, then, that Buchan despised Robertson for his place in the ‘oligarchy’. Robertson’s main opponent, whom Buchan supported to the best of his ability, was the historian Gilbert Stuart.

Gilbert Stuart was the initial go-between for Buchan and Wyvill, and seems to have been partly responsible for Buchan’s re-introduction to politics in the 1780s, though it should be noted that Buchan’s relationship to Lord George Gordon remains unclear: Buchan’s chaplain Herbert Jones was

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 300. This interpretation of political economy as a ‘dismal science’ was therefore not confined to ‘loyalist’ ideas such as those outlined by Jennifer Mori in *Britain in the Age of the French Revolution* (London, 2014), p. 46. Rothschild makes the point in *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), p. 50, that Adam Smith’s political economy was a less dismal science than the 19th century version of political economy – however Buchan does not seem to have recognised such moral depths in Smith’s ideas.

⁷⁶ ‘Gleanings of Literature’, p. 300.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Denys Hay, ‘The Historiographers Royal in England and Scotland’, *The Scottish Historical Review*, Vol. 30, No. 109, Part 1 (April 1951), p. 26.

a signatory to the Protestant Association petition, Gordon's secretary Watson seems to have been very familiar with Buchan's writing, Buchan's brother defended Gordon at his first trial, and it is possible that Buchan may have met both Gordon and Watson in Aberdeen.⁷⁹ Gilbert Stuart had persuaded Buchan that his partnership with the English reformers would be a mutually beneficial one in terms of Scottish politics. The Yorkshire Association would publicly point out the shocking state of Scottish representation, and Buchan and Stuart would be able to target that 'inclement faction of men who are enemies to the freedom of our constitution, and who would gladly seek for the true order of government in the dead calm of Despotism.'⁸⁰ Buchan later promoted Stuart's 1779 *History of Scotland* to the Society for the Antiquaries of Scotland, and Stuart kept Buchan updated on the book's reception. Particularly contentious was Stuart's refutation of Robertson's view of Mary, Queen of Scots. Robertson had argued that Mary was guilty of murdering Darnley, which Stuart denied. Stuart wrote to Buchan that Robertson had refused to respond to the academic challenge and had instead engaged in slander:

a party was formed against [my book] at Edinburgh, whose declamations were violent in no common degree. Tis known, over Scotland, that our Historiographer has been zealous to erect a sort of literary despotism, and that in this attempt he has been assiduously assisted by numerous confederates. This chosen band, smiling to one another, and calling themselves men of letters, decide magisterially upon writings and compositions of every kind.⁸¹

To Stuart, Robertson's party 'seemed like gladiators surrounding the throne of a despot', and he hoped that he might be able to overcome them, since 'letters cannot flourish long but under the form of a republic'.⁸² He was hopeful, because his defence of Mary had been well-received, particularly by women who 'have been convinced by me of her innocence, and have resolved her misfortunes in my narration of them, with anguish and tears.'⁸³

⁷⁹ For the Herbert Jones connection see John Seed, 'The Fall of Romish Babylon anticipated': Plebeian Dissenters and anti-papery in the Gordon Riots' in Ian Haywood and John Seed eds. *The Gordon Riots: Politics, Culture and Insurrection in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 74.

⁸⁰ Gilbert Stuart to Lord Buchan, 1782, EUL Laing II/588.

⁸¹ Gilbert Stuart to Lord Buchan, 1783, EUL Laing II/588.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

Gilbert Stuart's fury at Robertson infected his father George, who wrote to Buchan in 1783 that

The puffing band, those pretenders to literature, those enemies of liberty and sticklers for prerogative who would engross everything to themselves to the disgrace of the country, have done everything in their power to crush the reputation of a young man who justly holds them all in sovereign contempt and who will continue under the auspices of your lordship to brand them with those marks by which they will in a short time be distinguished.⁸⁴

Gilbert Stuart wanted Buchan to write a public letter hinting that 'the favour shown to my performance by yourself and the Scottish antiquaries was one of the causes of the present opposition to the society [of antiquaries]'.⁸⁵ Buchan, already licking his wounds from his own spat with Robertson over the royal charter, and aware of how self-interested Stuart's protestations looked, was not eager to enter into public debate, saying that 'stunned by the sudden accounts of the insidious and unfriendly opposition made by a Historian to the legal requests of a Society instituted for the purposes of exploring the materials of history, I uttered more in publick than my heart now suffers me to approve.'⁸⁶ But he replied to Stuart in April 1783, concurring with the importance that he placed on history, since

On the faithfull page of History the final doom of Mankind, so far as the world can award, is determined. And there is no wonder if Men anxiously enquire, concerning the fidelity and impartiality of their judges and the veracity of the evidence on which the awfull judgement has been founded and pronounced.

You sir, animated by these motives, have happily snatched a beautiful and injured Queen, from the Radamanthean Tribunal of her partial judges, and you have appealed to the publick, for a reversal of the cruel sentences which had been pronounced against her.⁸⁷

Buchan attributed Robertson's deliberate overlooking of the evidence for Mary's innocence to his 'fear of offending the high Presbyterian Party' and his desire to please the English by extenuating Elizabeth and affecting impartiality when considering their crimes.⁸⁸ For Buchan, the Marian controversy was an example of Scottish history being pieced together with unreliable manuscripts, particularly manuscripts that had been tampered with by the English. Buchan saw that Marian

⁸⁴ George Stuart to Lord Buchan, 1782, EUL Laing II/588.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Earl of Buchan to Gilbert Stuart, 18th April 1783, Laing II/588.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

narratives were written with an eye to English approval, and that Robertson's set wanted to have the last word on Mary.⁸⁹ This could not be allowed to happen. Mary was the last instance of an independent Scottish monarch, and understanding her history was key to understanding and developing Scottish political identity. The Scottish response to Mary's rule needed to be assessed as a Buchananite attempt to reassert popular liberty within the Scottish resistance tradition, one that failed to complete its task because of the interference of the English.

Gilbert Stuart died in 1786 at the age of 44. Upon his death, the newspaper he had edited, the *Political Herald*, ran an article discrediting his character, written by the new editor, William Godwin. It was a complicated affair. Buchan had, in attempting to praise Stuart, made excuses for his having sunk so low as to edit the *Herald*. This prompted Godwin into a satirical attack.⁹⁰ William Thomson, the author of *The Man in the Moon*, had written many articles in the *Herald* when it had been under Stuart's stewardship (though he was not so firmly opposed to Pitt's ministry as Stuart was, being less enamoured with the opposition). He wrote to Buchan in November 1786 deploring Godwin's character assassination of Stuart.⁹¹ Stuart became a martyr for Buchan and the antiquaries. Like Smellie, the co-founder of the society, Stuart had been refused a post at Edinburgh University. Like Buchan and many members of the society, Stuart wanted to practice politics through writing history.⁹² Buchan gave an address to the society about Stuart's death, in which he demonstrated a renewed willingness to publicly oppose Robertson, whose set, he said, 'had contrived to damn every man of letters who was not willing to range himself under their banners. These men bore down everything before them and forced their enemies to leave the country or to submit to be pointed at in the streets'.⁹³ Robertson had claimed to have the last word on Mary, said Buchan, but Stuart's 'reception by the world after men were supposed to have made up their minds about that period of our history and the guilt of the queen and after that superficial readers were satisfied with Dr. Robertson's history, are

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ A description can be found in Bill Zachs, *Without Regard to Good Manners: A Biography of Gilbert Stuart 1743-1786* (Edinburgh, 1992), pp. 182-183.

⁹¹ William Thomson to Lord Buchan, 14th November 1786, Laing, 588/11/f. 5/Item 34.

⁹² Gilbert Stuart to the 1st Earl of Liverpool, 23rd January 1778, BL Add MS 38209, f. 259.

⁹³ 'Address on the death of Gilbert Stuart', SAS Communications 1784-1805, NMS, 85.

sufficient proofs of the merit of Dr. Stuart.⁹⁴ Buchan said that Stuart had begun to write the lives of John Knox, George Buchanan, and Thomas Craig, but had been diverted by the necessity to oppose Dundas, ‘a man whom he considered as the chief advocate for absolute power in this country, and nation’.⁹⁵

Stuart’s death was a blow for Buchan and his friends’ historical aspirations, but the SAS continued to unearth the Scottish past. Buchan agreed with his friend Colin MacLaurin when he said in a lecture that humanity advances in knowledge slowly, and we are not aware of the necessity or importance of this gradual revelation.⁹⁶ ‘New knowledge’, MacLaurin had said, ‘does not consist so much in our having access to a new object, as in comparing it with others already known; observing its relations to them, and wherein their disparity consists.’⁹⁷ As Buchan said in his 1784 address, Scotland could have no politics without a history, and its history had been deliberately obscured, whether by the English or by the strategies of the Robertson set. Buchan tracked down records relating to Scotland’s past, particularly its Catholic past which had been lost both in the reformation and following the Stuart abdication.⁹⁸ Buchan also set his friends to making copies of documents in the Advocates Library, and organised with his cousin, a cardinal in Rome who had been educated by Henry Benedict Stuart, the younger son of the Old Pretender, to access materials pertaining to Scottish history in the Vatican’s secret archives.⁹⁹ John McOmie wrote to Buchan in 1785, enthusing, ‘to retrieve from the ruins of time the archives of Scotland, what would not every Caledonian give!’¹⁰⁰ Buchan knew that some records important for reconstructing Scotland’s history were lost because Scotland had not maintained the necessary political administration to collect and hold manuscripts. But he also believed that there

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* Buchan pointed out that unlike other Scottish histories of Mary, a German edition of Stuart’s history was being produced at Hamburg. The Marian controversy continued in Scottish society throughout the 1790s. See for instance the debate on ‘Whether Mary Queen of Scots Conduct can be Justified or Not’, 1796, ‘Minutes and Proceedings of the Disputing Society held in the Marischal college Aberdeen’, Box 1, File 2, Strachan Collection, F2021 p. 44 .

⁹⁵ ‘Address on the death of Gilbert Stuart’.

⁹⁶ ‘On Female Education’, *The Bee*, July 20th, 1791, Vol. 4, p. 54.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ The relationship between the SAS and Catholicism has been explored by Mark Goldie in ‘The Scottish Catholic Enlightenment’, *Journal of British Studies*, Jan., 1991, 30:1, Part VI, pp. 49-52.

⁹⁹ See NLS MS 3873, item 191, James Cummying to Buchan, 9th March 1791. Cummying was informed that the Advocates library papers ‘were ordered not to be lent out. With proper application however this act might possibly be got the better of.’ For the Vatican plans see NLS Adv. No. 81 ‘Extract of a Discourse Delivered to the SAS, 14th November 1787’.

¹⁰⁰ John McOmie to Lord Buchan, 30th November 1785, Laing II/588 f. 5 Item 17.

were records still in existence that were being obscured from public view, or being wilfully destroyed or lost, by those who wanted to control Scotland's history. In 1783 the SAS started an argument in the pages of the *Caledonian Mercury*, in which they accused the university of selling the collection of the late Professor of Natural History, Robert Ramsay.¹⁰¹ An angry reply was published on 14th June 1783, saying that this was untrue, that Ramsay's executors had sold Ramsay's estate without consulting the university, and that there had been very little of interest or value in the collection.¹⁰² The SAS gamely reproduced a letter from Ramsay saying that his collection contained expensive and important objects that he wished to be displayed in a museum. Against the claims of university innocence, the SAS pointed out that Ramsay had written 'the boxes will all be directed to Principal Robertson'.¹⁰³

Throughout his life Buchan kept up a rich correspondence with Scottish antiquarians, in which he discussed the reliability and provenance of documents like the *Regiam Majestatem*, Melville's *Memoirs*, and manuscripts relating to the Gowrie Conspiracy.¹⁰⁴ He rescued manuscripts from destruction by disinterested relatives of deceased collectors, placing them in the Advocates Library.¹⁰⁵ With David Dalrymple, Buchan discussed which Scottish figures they should immortalise in biography, and he wrote political biographies of Andrew Fletcher, the poet Thomson, and John Napier of Merchiston.¹⁰⁶ To further promote his selected figures, Buchan established the 'Temple of Caledonian Fame', a hall of portraits first held by the SAS, and then held privately at Dryburgh. The intent was to promote the virtues of good Scots, to inspire those who gazed upon them to 'make mankind happier and better.'¹⁰⁷ Buchan also attempted to penetrate English ideas of history, giving an address in London in 1786 to

¹⁰¹ NMS, Minutes of the SAS, 1780-84, p. 334.

¹⁰² Copy of letter to the editor of the *Caledonian Mercury*, Edinburgh 14th June 1783, *Ibid.* p. 334.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* pp. 339-341.

¹⁰⁴ See Laing II/588 f. 2, Letter from William Guthrie Sept 12th 1767, David Dalrymple to Lord Buchan, 1782, Laing II/588 f.4, 17; Horace Walpole to Lord Buchan, November 5th 1782, Laing II/588 f. 4, f. 5, no. 1, Letter from Lord Hailes, 1783.

¹⁰⁵ See Laing II/588 f. 4, nos. 19 and 20, regarding copying, buying, and depositing the antiquary Walter Macfarlane's mss collection. See also Horace Walpole to Lord Buchan, November 5th 1782, Laing II/588 f. 4, regarding Buchan's collection of mss from Drummond of Hawthornden, Ben Johnson, Drayton, and new material on the Gowrie conspiracy.

¹⁰⁶ David Dalrymple to Lord Buchan, 1782, Laing II/588 f.4, 17. See f. 5, no. 19-21 for letters from Walter Minto concerning information on Napier of Merchiston, and how his logarithms can be transformed into 'political arithmetic.'

¹⁰⁷ NMS, Minutes of the SAS, 1780-84, p. 195 For another description of the function of the Temple see 'Letter Third, Albanicus to his Friend Hortus', Lord Buchan, *Anonymous and Fugitive Essays of the Earl of Buchan, Vol. 1* (Edinburgh, Ruthven, 1812), p. 97.

the Royal and Antiquary Society. He argued that good government could only be enacted with an eye to history, yet nobody wanted to do the necessary historical work since ‘the materials for history are scattered over the world, they lurk among the mss of dusty libraries which have perhaps not been explored or [...] in the repositories of those who inherit the papers of their illustrious kinsmen who have recently held the reins of government.’¹⁰⁸ But not many people attended the address, and for those who did, ‘the very intention of emancipating useful learning from Literary Boroughs or Chartered Societies and from Booksellers gave alarm to the Aristocrats of Literature.’¹⁰⁹

Buchan used the SAS wherever he could to elevate individuals who had been obscured by the prevailing politics of the late eighteenth century in Scotland. He delivered a discourse on his uncle, James Steuart, who had been compelled to live a quiet existence in Scotland after his eventual pardon more than twenty years after his participation in the 1745 Rising. Buchan said that Steuart had understood how to apply political remedies derived from the arts and sciences, and claimed that

there has never been a moment, since the Page of History began to inform us of the plight of ages so emphatically proper for any radical change on the principles of the art, I wish I could call it the science, of government, or of internal regulation, as that which now passes so awfully and forebodingly before our eyes.¹¹⁰

Philosophers had always known that Britain’s constitution was not sound or lasting, but there had been aspects of the nation – manners, justice, humanity – that deserved the approbation of God.¹¹¹ Those days were no more, said Buchan, and ‘we shall tread for a few years the eventful theatre of men.’¹¹² Buchan expected great changes to happen and new nations to be formed, and he only hoped that radical changes in the structure of government and police might ‘render the happiness and prosperity of nations much less subject to mutation.’¹¹³ Buchan’s historical focus was steeped in practicality when it came to political thought. He wanted to gather material in order to make compelling historical arguments for ways to govern, and he openly admitted to friends that history

¹⁰⁸ Laing II/588 f. 3 Item 26 ‘Novum Organum Literarium, A New Plan for the Advancement of Learning’.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ NMS, Minutes of the SAS, 1780-84, p. 143.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

was a kind of propaganda. In his project of national biography, he schemed with David Dalrymple that they would affect pure scholarly interest in historical figures, when their real aim was to provide examples for emulation and incitement to action.¹¹⁴ Buchan presented himself as an ‘antiquarian’ so that he could get away with expressing tactical opinions. He declared his desire to legislate for men as they are rather than as they should be, one of the purposes to his historical enquiry into the nature of man.¹¹⁵

For Buchan, as for many of his contemporaries, national virtue was reliant on the virtues of women.

In 1791, writing pseudonymously as a woman, Buchan wrote

The rights of men begin now to be every where felt, understood, and vindicated; by and by, I would fain hope, the rights of our sex will be equally understood, and established upon the basis of a new code of education suited to the dignity and importance of our situation in society. And it is hard to say, whether the general welfare of the community will not be as much promoted by this last revolution as by the first.¹¹⁶

Buchan said that he hoped that female professors such as Laura Bassi in Bologna would become commonplace, and that female writers would not be ‘stared at as wonders, or envied by the ladies and laughed at by the gentlemen.’¹¹⁷ He hoped that women would be educated in trades – like haberdashery, grocery, shop-keeping and watch-making. They should also be educated in true philosophy – they were merely ‘automatons’ if they did not understand first principles.¹¹⁸ ‘You know very well,’ Buchan wrote, drawing on Millar and Rousseau,

that the foibles which we men ascribe to the sex are not inherent but artificial; they have sprung from the vicious nature of civil government, from our jealousies, and from our carelessness to remove them; I might say, from our disposition to foster and increase them for our glory and your [women’s] abasement.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ David Dalrymple to Lord Buchan, 26th April, 1787, transcribed in Buchan’s 1791 commonplace book 502/74 GUL ‘It seems to me that by perseverance our countrymen will be roused to the work of National Biography. Your happy idea of recommending men by furnishing the public with their portraits and Picture must at length succeed. Purchasers like children will like the book for the sake of the pictures. In the West Indies, he who bought a bible had a pack of cards into the bargain. But we must not disclose the secrets of our new profession? For another example of history/biography as propaganda rather than record see Laing II/588 f.4 Item 17, 1782 Letter from David Dalrymple to Lord Buchan, in which Hailes says they should not carry out the biographies alphabetically as that would impede them in doing what they want to do.

¹¹⁵ Buchan, ‘Novum Organum Literarium, A New Plan for the Advancement of Learning’.

¹¹⁶ ‘Sophia on the Education of Young Ladies’, *The Bee*, June 22nd, 1791, Vol. 3, p. 228.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

¹¹⁹ ‘Sophia on Female Education’, *The Bee*, June 29th, 1791, Vol. 3, p. 264.

Women's education should follow a plan of practicality and natural curiosity.¹²⁰ Girls should be taught to work and be independent, and should wear a uniform rather than fashionable dress, allowed to be altered only through their own handiwork.¹²¹ They should avoid anything imitative or artificial, instead learning science, nature, and true sentiment. Given Buchan's ideas, we might well wonder whether he knew the true identity of the Irishman James Barry, protégé of the Venezuelan revolutionary General Francisco de Miranda. Buchan and Anderson masterminded Barry's medical education in Edinburgh, and Buchan hosted and financially supported Barry, who upon his death was revealed to be female.¹²² The only possible objection to his educational recommendations, said Buchan, was

the old adage of 'Let us hear of no projects, no changes' *Why should we know more than our worthy grandmothers and aunts?* The British constitution of government is perfect; it must be perfect, because Mr Burke has shewn the impossibility of altering it. The British constitution of the education of women must therefore be perfect, as part of the wonderful whole.¹²³

Buchan felt the time was right for sweeping changes. There was the concurrence of an oligarchy, a spirit of learning, and a diffusion of a sense of power among the 'lower orders': 'Men have become acquainted with their own rights,' he said, 'and have been enabled to associate, for their defence, or for acquiring that to which they are entitled.'¹²⁴ The French Revolution served as a beautiful example of the potential for political action:

we have seen the great nation of France, dissolving altogether, and in one moment, a fabric of preposterous government, that had been erected for three centuries, and replacing it, by a grand and beautiful structure, erected on the basis of general and equal liberty, which I trust will withstand the shock of ages, unhurt by the subtilty of princes, or the imprudence of the people.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

¹²¹ 'On the Education of Young Ladies', p. 228.

¹²² James Buchanan to Lord Buchan, Laing II/588, f. 2 item 1.

¹²³ 'On Female Education', August 25th 1791, in Buchan, *Anonymous and Fugitive* Essays, p. 66.

¹²⁴ 'Novum Organum Politicum', *The Bee*, Feb 29th, 1792, Vol. 7, p. 314.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* The editor of *The Bee*, Buchan's friend James Anderson, felt the need to moderate the tone of this proclamation, adding that experience should guide political action rather than hypotheticals, and that people should be wary of innovations tending to alter the form of fixed governments.

Till then, a wise man will look upon the whole as hypothetical reasoning, in similar cases. Those who are mere lookers on, may be deemed peculiarly fortunate, as, if they have patience, they will have the benefit of deriving instruction from the experiment, without running the risk of the derangements that must be felt by those who try the experiment themselves. (p. 320).

Buchan followed the course of British politics during the French Revolution closely, particularly the activities of the Dundee Whig Club.¹²⁶ He copied into his Commonplace book a letter from his sister, Lady Glencairn, who wrote in May 1794 that she had visited Forton Prison to see 1900 French prisoners, who

made the air resound with their Republican Songs and what makes it more offensive [...] is that their airing ground filled with different circles for gaming is divided from the walking ground [...] only by a very open and slight railing though which the prisoners converse and infuse their principles to all who think proper to attend when they frequently have the pleasure of singing their liberty songs to about 4000 people gathered around who generously frequent here on Sunday. This is thought to have a great [...] effect on the sentiments of the common sort of people in this part of England.¹²⁷

Buchan was familiar with those at the centre of radicalism in Britain. He was connected to the heart of the London Corresponding Society and the radical Whigs by his brothers. Since his youth he had been influenced by the ideas of Joseph Priestley, keeping up a correspondence with him discussing the development of his political philosophy. At Catherine Macaulay's salons Buchan had met Thomas Hollis, Benjamin Franklin, and Richard Price, and he corresponded with Anna Letitia Barbauld and Mary Wollstonecraft.¹²⁸ But the French Revolution was only a sign of the times to Buchan, and he believed that the great spur to political action in Scotland should be the 'oligarchy', a far-reaching concept that encompassed the politically-charged distribution of posts at Edinburgh University, the sorry state of Scottish political representation, the power of the Prime Minister (that he continually compared to a Roman emperor's), the existence of 'party and party politics' and the relationship between king and minister.¹²⁹ The class of men that formed this oligarchy was homogenous – they went to expensive schools, then went on grand tours, came home to join their father's club;

Then they are brought into parliament, to decide on the great and *intricate interests* of the nation; or they go down to papa's family mansion, to surprise the girls at country hunts and assemblies, and to follow a glorious pack of beagles, or fox-hounds, to

¹²⁶ George Dempster to Buchan, 1790 'I hope your lordship was not displeased with the tenor of our Whig club address to the national assembly.' NLS Acc. 9839.

¹²⁷ Buchan Commonplace Book entry for June 3rd, 1794, GUL 502/75.

¹²⁸ Note on Catherine Macaulay, Laing II/588 f. 2.

¹²⁹ For comparisons to Rome see Buchan's series of fictional Roman Letters in *The Bee*, particularly *Letter Fourth*, September 7th 1791; for Buchan's views on party see Lord Buchan to Alexander Fraser, AUL MS 3004/461.

which they are gradually assimilated, as they had been formerly to the other *dramatis personae* at Eton, or Westminster.¹³⁰

Buchan and Kings

Buchan's dislike of high society translated into a Rousseauian melancholy which centred on the conflict he felt between the drive to political action and his horror at engaging in corrupt society. As we saw earlier, Buchan thought that the true virtuous life consisted of militia service and national pride, or contemplation in places far away from cities. In an essay purportedly 'On Spring', published in *The Bee* in 1793, Buchan wrote

You have never been at this place. This place of remote and profound retirement, which I chose for myself in a foreboding moment, that I might remove myself from public and general insanity, from the close and immediate view of the return of those miserable times, when it was dangerous to be virtuous, dangerous to express the noblest emotions of the soul, dangerous to seem happy, criminal to be sad; when true philosophy was set down for atheism, true religion for fanaticism, and wit for treason; when the writings, nay, the words and looks of the innocent, were marked and set down by spies and informers, for the direction of future persecution and proscription; and when all this was done under the pretence and shelter of avowed loyalty to the state and commonwealth.¹³¹

But at other points in his life, Buchan suggested how the problem of oligarchy might be overcome. His starting point was that no great faith should be placed in the British constitution *per se*, which in any case was corrupted from 1689 and required a complete redesign. In 1790, James Anderson wrote to Buchan saying 'I think of making out a short historical sketch of the British constitution – not in the hackneyed sing-song stile borrowed from common writers'.¹³² Anderson said he had come to an idea of each part of the constitution, and should be able to give a sweeping sense of its whole history. He wanted to conclude by giving 'a view of the real ruling powers that be, as opposed to those that only seem to be the strings of government'.¹³³ In Buchan's preface to his *Essays on Fletcher* in 1791, he wrote that in Scotland, James I took the first steps towards popular government, by elevating the nobility, which produced the problem of oligarchy, in response to which the king elevated the barons, creating a third estate. During the reformation, the people of Scotland had learned both religious and

¹³⁰ 'On Foreign Travel' *The Bee*, March 27th 1792, Vol. 14, p. 260.

¹³¹ 'On Spring', *The Bee*, April 17th, 1793, Vol. 14, p. 238.

¹³² James Anderson to Lord Buchan, 27th September 1790, Laing II/588 f.6, 34.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

political liberty, whereupon '[George] Buchanan arose in Scotland like the morning star, to announce the approach of philosophical day. He was the father of whiggery *as a system* in Britain, if not in Europe.' Buchanan had shown how the people should control the king, determining who should reign by 'changing the order of succession, and attaining their sovereigns for treason against the rights of the people.'¹³⁴ Buchan thought that Buchanan was the most important thinker that Scotland had ever produced, and he was zealous in trying to restore him to popular knowledge. He recounted many anecdotes about Buchanan in *The Bee*. In one, the young James VI learned a fable where rats 'combined' to put a bell on a cat so that they would be able to anticipate its arrival and live in safety. But none of the rats was willing to put himself forward to put the bell on the cat. James was pleased with this, and mocked Buchanan saying, 'I would fain see who would bell the cat'.¹³⁵ Buchanan took up the challenge and whipped him. In 1809 Buchan even managed to obtain some hitherto unknown fragments of George Buchanan's 'maxims' for the instruction of James VI, which had been in England.¹³⁶ Buchan contextualised his complaints about the oligarchy with a prophetic interpretation of the history of Scottish political thought. Buchanan had, Buchan claimed, established a system that would one day abolish kings and priestcraft.¹³⁷ Buchanan's work was unfolding before Buchan's eyes: the French Revolution had arisen from Buchanan's ideas, because Buchanan's writings had been adapted by Raymonde de Sebonde in his *Lettre sur la Servitude Volontaire*, which had been published alongside Montaigne's essays in France – every French person, then, had effectively read Buchanan.¹³⁸

To unravel this claim, obviously Raymonde de Sebonde did not write the *Discourse de la Servitude Volontaire*, which was written by La Boetie. But La Boetie did study at Bordeaux, alongside Montaigne, when Buchanan was there in 1539. It's possible that the *Discourse* was in fact Buchananite, and that it

¹³⁴ David Steuart Erskine, Earl of Buchan, *Essays on the Lives and Writings of Fletcher of Saltoun and the Poet Thomson* (London, J. Debrett, 1792), p. 33.

¹³⁵ 'Life of John, Earl of Marr', *The Bee*, January 4th, 1792, Vol. 7, p. 3.

¹³⁶ NLS Buchan Papers (Advocates Library) Item 66, Letter to Buchan 29th March 1809. He wanted to understand how they had come to be removed from Scotland and was informed by a clerk called Reid that they had been found among the writings of the late Duke of Richmond, and had only returned to Scottish knowledge by chance because the clerk had made a copy for his own interest. In the above article on Marr, Buchan also recorded that he had found in a bundle of old papers 'some of the *primae curae* of Buchanan's satires, which had been transcribed by Lord Innerteil, or some of his acquaintance, and differ considerably from Buchanan's printed works' (p. 5).

¹³⁷ Buchan, *Essays on Fletcher*, p. 33.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

was Buchanan's ideas that, as Buchan proudly wrote, 'kept up the sacred fire of freedom in France, in the midst of folly and despotism, till the progress of commerce, printing, philosophy, and literature opened the eyes of Frenchmen everywhere to discover that they were men, and ought to be citizens.'¹³⁹ These principles of Buchanan and Fletcher were ahead of their time, but were now 'acknowledged almost every where, except in Spain, Germany and England.'¹⁴⁰ Britain was in an uncommonly unfortunate situation, then, to not be benefiting from Buchanan and Fletcher's principles of freedom. The problem was that the 1688 revolution had established a deficient political system by poorly patching the old system since the revolutionaries did not have the luxury of re-imagining the constitution anew. Britain's customary forms of constitutional renovation, its constant repairing and modifying, did not allow Britons to erect a constitution 'from the first foundations of jurisprudence' as the French and Americans had been able to do.¹⁴¹

The Scottish system of controlling the prerogative of the king had been ruined by the Union of the Crowns, which had introduced the idea of absolute monarchy through the laws and political values of Elizabeth. This was an argument of Hume's.¹⁴² Before this point, said Buchan, Scotland had had the most limited monarchy in Europe, and it was very common for the Scots to dethrone a monarch for attacking the liberties of the people.¹⁴³ The Scottish principles of popular jealousy of kings, and the restriction of their ability to create oligarchy through filling the lords and commons with their own servants, had been promoted by Andrew Fletcher one hundred years later, but given the patched 1689 constitutional settlement it was already too late. Buchan, always keen to stress Scottish distinctiveness, but also (perhaps unwittingly) mirroring the arguments of David Williams, wrote 'as to the idea of a perfect constitution being to consist of three parts, this was a trinity in which the Scots did not believe; and the satisfied themselves with holding the doctrine of the unity, the majesty, and uncontrollable

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

power of the legislative authority.¹⁴⁴ Buchan believed that the Scots had lost their political liberty by being deprived of their history and, relatedly, knowledge of how to control the king.

He struggled to see what was to be done in his own time. In his diary entry on the day he sent his *Essays on Fletcher* to the bookseller he wrote that ‘the people of estate and wealth’ were about to institute an absolute monarchy to avoid giving liberty to the commons.¹⁴⁵ The purpose of his publication was to ‘monument’ his perseverance in these dark days, against almost everyone else.¹⁴⁶ Few had been willing to help him in seeking down the manuscripts relating to Fletcher since ‘almost every man of degree had now arranged themselves with the court’.¹⁴⁷ But Buchan was canny to the tricks of monarchs, and he had hope in Scottish guile. ‘The best sailors,’ he wrote in *The Bee*, ‘are made on the rockiest shores, and the faculties of men are best improved by frequent danger. The fox hath become the most cunning of animals, as being continually exposed to the greatest number of enemies.’¹⁴⁸ When advising Wyvill, Buchan had insisted that the people could unite with the king against the oligarchy. One of Buchan’s favourite political tricks was to try to utilise the king to the advantage of the people. When he was younger and had visited London, he wrote to Pitt saying that he saw no point in courting him because he had ‘nothing to ask of you but what I could ask from the King without your intervention.’¹⁴⁹ Buchan’s attitude mirror’s George Gordon’s: both men sought to use their titles to directly influence the monarchy on behalf of the people. Buchan seemed to gain a reputation for this, since Horace Walpole criticised him in the same manner he did George Gordon, saying that ‘Lord Buchan, under the mask of whiggery, is the king's correspondent for Scotch affairs!’¹⁵⁰ Buchan thought he had some power over kings. In his biography of Napier, he said ‘I have dedicated this biographical tract to the king, not because he is a king, or because the deathless fame of Napier requires the patronage of kings, but because his majesty, as patron of this society [the SAS], and a promoter of the

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁴⁵ GUL 502/74, Commonplace Book 1791.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Buchan, ‘Fragments of Bacon’ in *Anonymous and Fugitive Essays*, p. 138.

¹⁴⁹ Lamb, *David Steuart Erskine*, p. 49.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

sciences chiefly indebted to Napier's discovery, has the best right to such a dedication.¹⁵¹ When the Royal Society of Edinburgh had tried to block the SAS's incorporation, they had failed, said Buchan, because he knew the king personally. He kept in touch with the royal family, noting family squabbles between the sons of George III. On the back of a letter from the Duke of Kent which accused his brother the Prince Regent of a 'gross breach of friendship towards me', Buchan scribbled dramatically 'So the royal family falls in pieces again. A family against itself cannot stand.'¹⁵² There was certainly reason to believe in the 1790s that the royals might aid the radical cause. The Prince Regent was a friend to the Whigs and a believer in Irish reform, the Duke of York was fascinated by Gordon, and the Duke of Kent was writing to Buchan. French republicanism was a millstone round the neck of the British reform movement in more ways than one.

¹⁵¹ 'Extract of the Discourse delivered to the SAS, 14th November 1787', Buchan papers, Advocates Library, No. 81.

¹⁵² Duke of Kent to Lord Buchan, 30th April 1812, BL Add MS 22488, f. 114.

Conclusion: Robert Watson

In September 1764 the Jacobite George Keith, 10th Earl Marischal, wrote to Jean-Jacques Rousseau imploring him to edit and write an introduction to the works of Andrew Fletcher. Rousseau, enamoured with Keith, had suggested writing a history of Keith's family, but Fletcher, Keith insisted, provided a better subject of study.

[Y]ou must employ your pen to something that is better suited to you: the spirit of liberty, the manly virtue of Fletcher, is a subject worthy of you, you will be animated, you will be warmed, you will have the pleasure of celebrating such a man. There is only one thing that holds me back, namely, that those who do not know of Fletcher could believe that you are writing your own life under his name, for the resemblance is very great, you are similar figures, though you are better than he... His virtues, brought to the light of day by your enflamed spirit of the same sentiments, will enflame others, at least thus I wish to flatter myself, and the work will be useful to the human race, or at least to some of the species.¹

In particular, said Keith, Fletcher's writings on the militia question in Scotland were worthy of Rousseau's attention, and if published with an introduction from Rousseau would have great effect because 'the spirit of freedom is deeply engraved in all hearts and never fades. In short, you will judge better than myself of the merit of my friend, who was once dead, but resuscitated in part by Jean Jacques, who has come to replace him.'² Keith went on to praise the '45 Jacobites and urged Rousseau to write reflections that would 'make the eye see the happiness of having a nation or part of a nation full of a warlike spirit.'³ He lamented that the recent loss of militia-based liberty would make anyone want to go and live in the woods.

Accordingly, manuscripts relating to Fletcher were arduously delivered by James Boswell to Rousseau, who promptly lost them. He did not seem to begin studying the life of the man Keith had promised him was his soulmate. In 1798, however, Rousseau's abandoned project was taken up by Robert Watson, graduate of Aberdeen University, secretary to Lord George Gordon and an organiser in the

¹ George Keith, 10th Earl Marischal. 'George Keith, 10th Earl Marischal to Jean Jacques Rousseau: between 20 September & 20 October 1764.' *Electronic Enlightenment Scholarly Edition of Correspondence*, ed. Robert McNamee et al. Vers. 3.0. University of Oxford. 2016. My translation.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

London Corresponding Society. Watson published *The Political Works of Andrew Fletcher* after his release from Newgate prison in 1798, having been held there without trial for over two years.⁴ He regretted that Rousseau had not managed to write Fletcher's memoirs, since there were 'none better qualified than Rousseau to do justice to his memory', but clearly found it expedient to take on the project himself in order that he could outline his own interpretation of Fletcher's relevance to his own times.⁵

Watson of course knew that Buchan had contributed to this project before him and he corresponded with Buchan to gain further intelligence on Fletcher's life. Buchan, said Watson, 'is one of the few Scotsmen of fortune who possesses a taste for literature, a love of liberty, and an ardent affection for his native country.'⁶ Watson cried himself an exile, and warned that 'though I am wounded, I am not slain – though forced to retire in disguise, I may return in triumph.'⁷ 'Let tyrants beware', he continued, 'it is dangerous to drive the people to despair – when prayers and intreaties procure no relief, they may have recourse to steel; and the country, which is cursed with a Cesar, may give birth to a Brutus.'⁸

Watson placed the practices of the 1790s radicals in a long historical trajectory, relating the practice of oath-making in the United Irishmen and other radical societies to the oaths taken by Scottish covenanters. 'It is worth remarking,' wrote Watson,

that the Scots, in the neighbourhood of Glasgow, were the first people, who took a secret oath to counteract the encroachments of despotism; and so lasting has been the impression, that their defendants in Ireland and America have copied their example. This mode of opposing tyranny, after making the tour of America and Europe, seems to be revived, with increased enthusiasm, in the very country which gave it birth.⁹

Watson's long view of Scottish history gave him an analysis of the tactics available to radicals and their enemies that paid close attention to the balance of power in a state and the types of prudence and skill that might be developed in leaders and among the people as a whole. The government, he said, would always try to turn one group of the people against another, so that they might not see that they had a

⁴ Malcolm Chase, 'Watson, Robert (1746?–1838), Revolutionary and Adventurer', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004.

⁵ Robert Watson, *The Political Works of Fletcher of Salton* (London, H.D. Symonds, 1798), p. 103.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

common enemy.¹⁰ The Stuart court had driven the covenanters to resistance, ‘before they were properly organized, that they might have a plausible pretext, for establishing a mercenary army’.¹¹ Pitt would do the same. Pitt’s tyranny would increase the number of democrats and cause a revolution, but the radicals must use their power wisely, so that their revolution might come to more than the revolution of the covenanters, who had lacked good political tactics in allowing their enemies too much time to react.¹² While the course of history was to a large degree predetermined in terms of the necessity of reaction to despotism, ‘a wise man, foreseeing the storm, would meet it, and accommodate matters – a fool would obstinately persist in his folly, and provoke a civil war.’¹³ Scots were the best examples of such wise men, and Watson had great hope for the revolutionary potential of Scots, particularly those in Glasgow, Paisley and Perth¹⁴ - ‘Cool and deliberate, they calculate the advantages and disadvantages of a change, and proceed, in the cause of reformation, with a sure and steady pace.’¹⁵ Like Norman MacLeod of the Edinburgh convention, Watson believed that Scotland was a country with a potent combination of an immiseration and education. It had been like this for a long time, but the romanticised typecasting of Jacobitism had led to figures like James Hogg overlooking the radical potential of Scottish culture, believing that incendiary songs were only words and not actions.¹⁶ Watson might have had in mind one of the dialogues written by Andrew Fletcher when he wrote this, which contained an often-quoted line that ‘if a man were permitted to make all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of a nation.’¹⁷

In order to have power in society, people needed to get into the situation that Fletcher had tried to create for them in his Act of Security, which would have armed the people.¹⁸ ‘Is it good policy’ asked Watson, ‘to trust the liberty and property of a nation to the discretion of mercenary soldiers, who have

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.244.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁶ Chevalier De Johnstone, (Robert Watson, ed.) *Memoirs of the Rebellion in 1745 and 1746, 2nd edition* (London, Longman, 1821), p. xli.

¹⁷ Andrew Fletcher, *An Account of a Conversation Concerning a Right Regulation of Governments for the Common Good of Mankind*, in *The Political Works of Andrew Fletcher, Esq.* (London, 1732), p. 372.

¹⁸ Watson, *Political Works of Fletcher*, p. 76.

no interest in the soil, and whose breasts are steeled against every generous sentiment?¹⁹ If this were the situation of Britain, Watson urged that ‘the people ought to form themselves into associations, and learn the use of arms. In the meantime, every individual should procure arms for himself.’²⁰

This idea of the people restoring a balance to political power through force or cunning was to be discovered in the writings of George Buchanan, the ‘father of pure republicanism’,²¹ to whom ‘Europe is indebted for the little liberty she enjoys.’²² Watson compared Buchanan favourably against François Fénelon:

The pious archbishop of Cambray, author of *Telemachus*, lamenting the miseries which kings have brought upon mankind, without pointing out a remedy, has met with much applause, for advising his royal pupil to govern with lenity and moderation. Buchanan, who was likewise the tutor of a king, instructed the people how they could compel their kings to govern with lenity and moderation.²³

As Watson’s use of Fénelon here makes clear, the Xenophonian art of the legislator was being inverted through this formula. Williams, Gordon, Buchan, and Watson, who all believed in popular control of the king, were in Watson’s eyes engaged in a Buchananite tradition.

Watson employed the distinction that Volney and Gerrald had made, and that Muir had been tried for promulgating, between productive and unproductive members of society. Were ‘every individual to perform something useful to society,’ Watson write, ‘it would not require above one hour in the day to produce twice the quantity of wealth, that Britain contains.’²⁴ The proper division of labour among everyone would make work an amusement. Instead the situation was much darker:

Provided man were compelled to labour, from early on Monday morning, till late on Saturday night, in order to procure a scanty subsistence, surely he could not be considered, as the peculiar favourite of heaven; the condition of the horse and the ox would be preferable to his, for they enjoy more ease and perform less labour. Besides, they do not anticipate evil; having no fears about futurity, they are perfectly happy, if the wants of the moment be abundantly supplied. It is not so with man [...]. At first view it appears astonishing, that notwithstanding the various improvements in agriculture and mechanics, during the last 30 years, the price of all the necessaries of

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

life continues to increase, the wages of the poor alone remaining almost stationary [...]. Every thing is revolutionary and subject to change, except their unhappy lot; as if nature had said, no change of circumstances shall ameliorate your condition, whether the earth produces a fruitful or a scanty harvest, your situation shall continue the same. In war and peace, in summer and winter, still you must toil for your superiors.²⁵

The only solution was armed resistance. Watson himself moved into European revolutionary circles, becoming English tutor to Napoleon. There is no evidence that he completed the translation of *De Jure Regni* that he promised to complete, despite having requested at the end of his work on Fletcher that British radicals spend their time collecting material on Buchanan for his use.²⁶ From France, Watson published an address to his former comrades in the *Gazette Nationale, ou le Moniteur Universel*.²⁷ He addressed the English and the Scots separately. He told the English to try to increase the number of friends of liberty in the country. The Scots reformers he thought to be numerically superior (he had advised Napoleon that a Scottish landing would receive more support than an English one).²⁸ In his address to the Scots he asked them to ‘Think of Ireland bleeding before you’ and realise that the same would happen to them if they did not act.²⁹ ‘Did Buchanan and Fletcher write in vain?’, he castigated.³⁰

But, he concluded:

the Scots will be free. Their blood boils with noble resentment at the insults they have endured, and they have sworn with a unanimity worthy of their cause to recover their country’s freedom or to be buried under its smoking ruins. On that great day you will find in the front ranks your exiled friends, proud to sacrifice their lives for the cause of humanity. The battlefield will serve the cause of humanity. For them the battlefield will be a field of victory or a field of death.³¹

To all Britons he addressed his request to

think no longer of reforms or compromise with your tyrants. A reform can only strengthen your chains and any arrangement would be your political death. Avoid most of all partial insurrections, which would only weaken you. They are frequently provoked by your enemies and are always favourable to them, giving them a pretext to eradicate the most virtuous citizens and establish a military regime.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 252. Graham Bain, who has written the most impressive biography of Watson, thought that Watson’s translation was attempted but was thwarted by the Bow Street Runners. Graham Bain, *The Thunderbolt of Reason* (Elgin, Bain, 1996), p. 6.

²⁷ ‘Au Peuple de la Grande-Bretagne’ in *Gazette Nationale, ou le Moniteur Universel*, November 24th, 1798, p. 3. My translation.

²⁸ Bain, *Thunderbolt of Reason*. p. 26.

²⁹ ‘Au Peuple de la Grande-Bretagne’.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

At the given hour, make your insurrection general and make the first day of your liberty the last day for your oppressors.³²

After spending some years in France, during which time he was appointed head of the Scots College, Watson ended up in Rome by 1817. Some information or intuition led him to the lost ‘Stuart Papers’ which were in the possession of a lawyer who had been close to Cardinal York, Charles Edward Stuart’s younger brother. Having followed Buchan’s lead with Fletcher, Watson now found himself pursuing the collection of Scottish manuscripts. Watson purchased the papers.³³ He was enamoured with his acquisition and was pleased to exhibit them to everyone who showed an interest, including Georgiana Cavendish, and John Playfair.³⁴ Unfortunately the British Government got wind of his purchase, and seized the papers from him. Watson was inconsolable.³⁵

Watson returned to Britain and managed to sort out his finances. But in June 1831 we find Watson in Paris again, writing to Prince Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex. He claimed he had fortuitously found ‘a considerable collection of original letters and official documents of an earlier date [than the Stuart Papers in Rome], deposited in the Scots college in Paris.’³⁶ These included, he claimed, letters from Mary Steuart asking the French Government to rescue her from Elizabeth, treaties between Charles I and the French court in which he proposed to govern Britain ‘à la française’, letters of Charles II and James II and VII showing them to be in the pockets of the Jesuits, and potentially even letters between Mary Stuart and Bothwell.³⁷ His claim, then, was that the papers in Paris would resolve almost every major British historiographical dispute on the tyranny of monarchs. It seems unlikely that the Prince forwarded the vast sums of money Watson requested for these possibly imaginary documents.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Robert Watson to Sir W. A’Court, 19th January 1817, BL Add MS 41538, f. 11.

³⁴ ‘Memorial from Robert Watson to the Right Honorable Lord Castlereagh Secretary of State’ concerning the Stewart Papers in Rome’, BL Add MS 78784 A f. 84.

³⁵ Memorial to Lord Castlereagh, 1817, Add MS 41538 f. 12; Robert Watson: Letter to the 2nd Earl of Liverpool: 1820, BL Add MS 38286, f. 336.

³⁶ Robert Watson, to the Duke of Sussex, 10th June 1831, BL Add MS 52236 ff. 112-116b.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

We have met David Williams a few times since he appeared alongside Samuel Parr during the Regency crisis. Like Watson and Buchan, he was unimpressed with the ‘mystery of the three powers’ of the English Constitution. Like them, he preferred the Rousseauian idea that the general will could be expressed through a unitary legislator, who the people would have the means to control. In order to enact this political philosophy, he spent some time courting the Prince Regent, and in 1790 had managed to get him to subscribe to a new charitable body, the Royal Literary Fund. Its purpose was to aid impoverished writers.³⁸

On the 26th June 1836, Watson wrote to the Royal Literary Fund, claiming to be 75, though he was in fact probably in his late 80s. He explained that he was a native of Elgin, a graduate of Aberdeen University, and had been an editor of *Politics for the People* and the London Corresponding Society magazine.³⁹ He said that he had fallen ill in Paris, and that the expenses of his sickness had required him to pawn or sell everything he owned. He had reached London, ‘in a state of bad health, and in the last stage of human misery, without a change of clothing, the common necessities of life, or a bed to lie on.’⁴⁰ But, he said, if he could just have some money from the Fund, he would be able to finish his life of Napoleon. ‘I appeal to your feelings and humanity’, he wrote, ‘and most respectfully and most earnestly entreat you to take my case into consideration, as soon as you conveniently can; for time progresses, and to be, or not to be, is now the question with me.’⁴¹

The committee rejected his application on the basis that he had been one of the speakers at the radical Spa Fields meeting in 1818.⁴² This was of course a misunderstanding, since at that time Watson had been on the continent unhappy about his misadventures with the Stuart Papers. It was another Dr. Watson.⁴³

³⁸A good description of the political character of the RLF at its inception and its relationship to the SCI can be found in Jon Mee, *Print, Publicity, and Popular Radicalism in the 1790s: The Laurel of Liberty* (Cambridge, 2016), p. 75.

³⁹ Robert Watson to the Committee of the Literary Fund, 26th June 1836, BL Loan 96 Royal Literary Fund 1/861/1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² J L Ridgway to Cusack Patrick Roney, 29 Jul 1836, BL Loan 96 Royal Literary Fund 1/861/2.

⁴³ Clipping from the New Times, ‘Meeting near Spafields’ London Tuesday May 5 1818, BL Loan 96 Royal Literary Fund 1/861/3.

In *The Times* two years later, the following notice was printed

On Tuesday, 20th November 1838, an inquest was held at the Blue Anchor Tavern, St Mary-at-Hill, Thames Street, London, on Mr. Robert Watson, aged 88, who had strangled himself the preceding morning when in bed, by twisting his neckcloth with a poker. He had arrived in that tavern in March from Boulogne, and after staying five weeks went to Bath, on his return from which he had an apoplectic fit. He generally lay in bed till two o'clock. The night before his death; he told the landlord that he was secretary to Lord George Gordon in 1780; that he had been the intimate friend of Horne Tooke up to his death; that he had been tried at the Old Bailey for conspiracy, and acquitted; that, at another time, £400 had been offered by government for his apprehension; but he escaped by living in disguise at a lord's house in London, and got away by the interest of Lady McD in a Swedish ship, in which he was nearly taken, on suspicion of being Thomas Hardy

[...]

When he went to Bath, he had with him a box, which he declared contained important papers, and which he left there.⁴⁴

When British reformers in the 1790s are considered in terms of their ideas about the practice of politics rather than their sketches of an ideal society, concepts and characters emerge that are not part of the typical canon of the history of political thought in this period. These ideas might seem archaic. E.P. Thompson was probably right that considerations of the general will, the muzzling of kings and the evils of luxury were not appropriate guests at the birth of the English working class. The paradigm established by the British anti-Jacobin response to the French Revolution involved an impressively strict relationship between theory and practice. After this, most British reformers never managed to leave this framework behind. Over and over they were deservedly typecast as intellectuals with a penchant for the abstract, which foreign observers like Georges Sorel found both hilarious and exasperating. The theories of practical politics in the 1780s and 1790s I have outlined were iterations of something else: a tradition of radical thought concerned with radical political virtue and historical emulation, with establishing a general will and allowing it to be realised through a sovereign power, and with giving ordinary people power through arms and abstinence. These were not backward-looking theories. They engaged with their contemporary situation - the commercial state, eighteenth-

⁴⁴ Quoted in Cosmo Innes, *Sketches of Early Scotch History and Social Progress* (Edinburgh, 1861), p. 326.

century Scottish philosophy, the development of manufacturing - but they did so through history, classical learning, and an understanding of the relationship between rule and case that was never static. While nobody can compete with the French in that bizarre last decade of the eighteenth century, British reformers who paid heed to practical politics wandered through their own labyrinths with the same enthusiasm for exploring the limits of political action.

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Correspondence of George III, Add MS 37835, f. 196
Hardwicke Papers, Add MS 35618 f. 96

Holland House Papers, Add MS 52236 ff. 112-116b

Misc. British Library Papers

Add MS 22130, f. 40

Add MS 22488, f. 114

Add MS 27777 f. 21

Add MS 32983 f. 337

Add MS 33110, f. 209

Add MS 38103 f. 19

Add MS 42129

Add MS 65153 A

Edinburgh University Special Collections, Edinburgh

Laing Collection

II/588 f.2

II/588 f. 3

II/588 f. 4

II/588 f. 5

II/588 f.6

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