

*If hush'd the loud whirlwind that ruffled the deep,
The sky, if no longer dark tempests deform;
When our perils are past, shall our gratitude sleep?
No! Here's to the Pilot that weather'd the storm!*¹

George Canning composed “*The Pilot that Weathered the Storm*”, in 1802 in order to commemorate, in typically sycophantic fashion, the 43rd birthday of one of Britain’s most formidable 18th Century figures of the establishment; Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger². These ‘*perils*’ facing Britain in the age of the French Revolution, however, went beyond the physical economic and military turbulence that Canning is metaphorically referring to. In 1791, as France’s anti-monarchism escalated after the King Louis XVI’s failed flight to Varennes, Thomas Paine’s concept of *natural rights* flooded the nation, ushering in a new phase of British history, and ringing the death knell for the primacy of the aristocracy, Edmund Burke’s “Age of Chivalry”³. The British radical movement itself largely fell within the bounds of intra-constitutional speculation, advocating moderate parliamentary reform, an expansion of the franchise, and the redistribution of seats away from rotten boroughs. History, however, is all about context. France’s republicanism of 1792 entangled this moderate British *reformist* radicalism in the rhetorical snare of a small rump of French-inspired *revolutionary* ‘radicalism, seemingly posing a fatal threat to Britain’s ideological identity. It is well documented why Britain did not fall victim to this “Age of Revolutions”⁴, however, the true power of this period is subtler, lying beyond the rash of republican rhetoric which swept across the country upon the fall of the French Monarchy. The 1790s opened the door to an ‘Age of Improvement’, one of ‘unbounded prospects of political adventure’⁵, in which previously neglected voices within the nation were, for the first time, heard in this ‘radical’ movement. This initial step towards the democratisation of politics can be seen to have facilitated the growth of the intellectual and political autonomy of the modern British citizen, ‘the inalienable and universal right of private judgement’⁶, thus fracturing the legitimacy of virtual representation and forcing government to consider the needs of the people, and not just itself. Emboldened by events in France, radicals broke centuries’ worth of taboos, rationally evaluating, rather than unquestioningly accepting, the value of the Crown, Commons and the Constitution. Despite Canning’s metaphoric adulations, in many ways Pitt’s vessel of monarchic and feudalistic tradition did not survive the storm, and, although many of these modernising ideas would take decades to mature, the universalising ideas of popular sovereignty which emanated from France encouraged Britons to cut the Gordian knot of archaic ‘Old England’ traditions. Truly, the 1790s allowed the ‘people’ to acknowledge itself on a more cohesive, national scale, opening the door to the

¹ <http://www.historyhome.co.uk/pms/pilot.htm>

² The exact date was 28th May, 1802.

³ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, James Dodsley, 1790, p. 63.

⁴ For a full account of Britain’s 18th Century stability, see Ian. R. Christie, *Stress and Stability in late Eighteenth-Century*, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1984.

⁵ PRO TS 11/952/3496(ii). Quoted in Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty; The English democratic movement in the age of the French revolution*, Hutchinson & Co., 1979, p. 211.

⁶ David Williams, *A letter to the Body of the Protestant Dissenting Ministers of all Denominations*, 1777, pg. 23-4. Quoted in H.T. Dickinson, *Liberty And Property*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977, p. 202.

*Throughout the course of this essay reference to democracy or universal suffrage is in the masculine sense of the word, as it was in the 18th and 19th Centuries.

19th Century of empirical expansion, working class consciousness, and the eventual ‘Majesty of the people.’⁷

In our modern British society, in which members of Parliament are regularly and ruthlessly ridiculed across the nation, this feudalistic concept of the natural superiority of the privileged and ruling classes- for privilege was once the only reliable route into politics- feels rather, though sadly not entirely, alien. This superiority, however, was dragged into the spotlight by the relative competence of the bourgeoisie in the French National Convention, compared with the farcical failings of Louis XVI’s stream of upper-class ministers. The geographical proximity of the two nations, separated by a thin strip of only 22 miles of water, coupled with the rapidly developing means of 18th Century communication, meant that such ideas rapidly permeated British society, receiving their greatest boost with the publication of part one of Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* on 13th March 1791. Within a year, some 200,000 copies were in circulation, and Paine’s seductive egalitarianism posed an unprecedented challenge to the authority of Britain’s ruling classes, previously accepted as the ‘Corinthian of polished society.’⁸ This was, in fact, a change that had been gathering momentum in the depths of the public consciousness for some time; the opening of the House of Commons gallery to the public (1771) and the informal publication of debates which followed, exacerbated the issue by puncturing the cloud of mythical inviolability that had once surrounded Westminster. These were men who fell asleep during speeches, stumbled awkwardly over their words and even arrived at the Commons, as Prime Minister Pitt himself often did, drunk. This hitherto unacknowledged fallibility of the nation’s rulers proved a gift to the satirical talents of contemporary caricaturists, inspiring a new popular culture of the acceptability of criticism of politicians, a concept which James Gilray’s, “Hanging, Drowning” deftly elucidates, and one which is so prevalent today.



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⁷ Mary Thale, *Selections from the Papers of the London Corresponding Society 1792-99*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, Pg. 165-67.

⁸ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 114.

In the period that preceded the French Revolution, only Christopher Wyvil's Yorkshire Association of middle-class intellectuals and the London based mob-like groups under John Wilkes truly seized upon this acceptability of criticism.⁹ By May 1793, however, the London Corresponding Society (LCS) had 6,000 active supporters of their resolutions in favour of universal suffrage, annual elections and a more independent election process. Whilst previous popular opposition to government had been limited to local concerns with bread prices and vaguely accusations of 'venal and corrupt' ministers¹⁰, Pitt now faced a regular, widespread, opposition to individual acts which threatened to impose on his subject's liberties, such as Foxite MPs gathering 130,000 signatures in opposition to Pitt's 'Two Acts' (1795).¹¹ This shift in the popular attitude towards government is best shown in William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, published in 1793 at the height of France's anti-monarchism¹², a text which would inspire radical leader John Thelwall from the pulpit, and one whose concluding thesis was summarised by historian Harry Dickinson as; "Subjects should never revere their government and should always be prepared to criticize those in power."¹³ Such popular irreverence even encouraged ordinary men to consider themselves able to partake in politics, and by 1802 radicals H.C. Combe, William Smith and Francis Burdett (for London, Norwich and Middlesex respectively) were all elected to parliament. Though this process was gradual, historian Jonathan Clark would date the "breaking of the aristocracy's grip on the Church and the Commons"¹⁴ to as early as the passing of the first Great Reform Act in 1832. This came as a direct result of years' worth of popular criticism of governmental actions, acting as a climax of this 'revolution in sentiments'¹⁵ which occurred in the 1790s, as centuries worth of political obedience and servitude were washed away by the belief in the undeniable equality of man.

The defeat of James II by the secularising forces of William and Mary's Protestantism in the Glorious Revolution of 1688 effectively ended any last vestiges of belief in the Divine right of Kings. Despite the temporary erosion of the monarch's popularity in the first two decades of George III's rule, however, the position of the British Monarch was still largely revered by the public at the time of the French Revolution. Wilkite mobs may have cried 'Wilkes and no King'¹⁶, but it appears that the grand jury of the Isle of Ely held the majority view in proclaiming the prerogative as, 'the brightest jewel in the British crown, and the most precious of the rights of the people.'¹⁷ Following revolution in France, however, dissenting radical Richard Price would talk of a 'diffusion of knowledge, which has undermined superstition and error.'¹⁸ To the crowd, the King's person was no longer 'sacred and inviolable'¹⁹ and, on 29th October 1795, with 200,000 of the 'worst and lowest men'²⁰ gathered in St.

⁹For a full account of the nature of this movement, see I. R. Christie, *'Wilkes, Wyvil and Reform'*, as well as Dr.G.F.E.Rude, *'Wilkes and Liberty: a social study of 1763 to 1774'*. Both have been greatly informative in the process of writing this essay.

¹⁰ H. Jephson, *The Platform: Its Rise and Progress*, London, 1892, p. 53.

¹¹ The Seditious Meetings Act (1795) restricted public meetings to 50 people, seems a clear governmental reaction to fears of growing popular political presence. The Treason Act (1795) was the other act under the label of the 'Two Acts'.

¹² King Louis XVI was executed on 21st January 1793.

¹³ Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*, p. 249. See also William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, for the clearest contemporary expression of these ideas.

¹⁴ J.C.D.Clark, *Revolution and Rebellion; State and Society in England in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Cambridge, 1986, pg. 33-34.

¹⁵ Edmund Burke, *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, C. and J Rivington, 1827, pg. 345-6.

¹⁶ Dr.G.F.E.Rude, *Wilkes and Liberty: A social study of 1763 to 1774*, Oxford, 1965, pg. 63-5.

¹⁷ V.A.C.Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770-1868*, Oxford, 1994, p. 203.

¹⁸ Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*, delivered on Nov. 4 1789, at the meeting-house in the Old Jewry, to the society of commemorating the Revolution in Britain.

¹⁹ Jean Louis De Lolme, *The Constitution of England*, T. Spilsbury, 1771, p. 105.

²⁰ Morning Post, 30 October 1795. Found in Poole, *Politics of Regicide*, p. 107.

James' Park, the King was shot at and, upon his flight, the Royal carriage was attacked until 'scarcely a piece of glass about it remained unbroken.'²¹ The corrosive effects of the radical movement on the sanctity of the monarch was significant, for, if this concept of natural rights should extend to the ruling classes- many of whom were wealthier than King George III and none of whom suffered from the same mental instabilities- why should they not include the monarch?

*"It requires some skills to be a common mechanic; but to be a King, requires only the animal figure of a man- a sort of breathing automaton."*²²

Paine, once again, was at the root of such sentiments, however what is most interesting is that this widespread irreverence for the monarch was not, unlike the other French-inspired elements of the radical movement, de-legitimised by the French Revolution's collapse into terror and the surge of patriotic loyalism that followed the outbreak of war in 1793. As late as 1795, the very year in which George was attacked in St. James' Park, a pamphleteer from Norwich would crow, "Off with the monarch's head! and a republic in Great Britain!"²³ Pitt's introduction of the punitive legislation, such as the Treason Act (December 1795) and the 'Two Acts' (1796), soon dissolved the sporadic surges of anti-monarchism within the radical movement. What was not dissolved, however, was the demotion of the British monarch in the public eye. Consider Canning's poem with which this essay begun; his invocation of Pitt, rather than the King, in this proto-Churchillian position as the rallying symbol of national unity at a time of war is, in itself, powerfully indicative of the waning influence of the Crown on the minds of the British public. 'Farmer George' was no Lionheart, and, although a more traditionally regal portrait was painted in 1761 by Allan Ramsey²⁴, perhaps his most famous image is that of what historian Steve Poole calls his 'disarmingly normal family life'²⁵. This picture of domesticity, captured by Johan Joseph Zoffany in 1770 at a time of war with the revolting American Colonies, shows the King with his wife Caroline and six of their fifteen children²⁶. George III truly oozed normality, encouraging the average British citizen to see the monarch as a human no different from themselves, an idea which his grandfather George II's risible death on the lavatory supported. The sheer mundanity of James Gilray's satirical cartoon, '*Temperance Enjoying a Frugal Meal!*' (1792), depicting the royal couple enjoying their notoriously indulgent diet of three boiled eggs and asparagus around the fire, seems to capture this idea perfectly. The monarch was, as Frederick the Great put it, "no more than the first servant of the public", and a significant part of the radical movement's legacy was this reduction in the role of the monarch to the largely ceremonial and patriarchal one which would be solidified by Victoria and Albert²⁷, and which is still very much evident today.

²¹ Morning Chronicle, 31st October 1795. Found in IBID, p. 104.

²² Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, Oxford, 2008, p. 226.

²³ Quoted in M.Morris, '*The monarchy as an issue in English political argument during the French revolutionary era*', unpublished PHD thesis, University of London, 1988, p. 134.

²⁴ See Appendix B.

²⁵ Poole, *Politics of Regicide*, p. 42.

²⁶ See Appendix C

²⁷ Poole, *Politics of Regicide*, Chp. 9.



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In this period, it appears that the “British radical movement had passed from Gentlemen to working men”, with the emergence of Corresponding Societies throughout the nation decentralising radical initiative outside of the emboldening sphere of ‘radical London’ and the mob.²⁹ Such an emphatic transition in political culture could not, however, have occurred without some fundamental changes to British society which had been building up throughout the 18th Century, creating an environment in which the radical sentiments of the 1790s could be spread. Between 1769-1800, in a period in which literacy also boomed, a weekly newspaper circulation of 200,000 doubled³⁰, giving the British populace daily access to political, social and ideological information, often in the form of broadsheets or caricatures, that was entirely independent from the government, through which radical content could later be channelled. Moreover, the rise of a working-class associational culture gave the people a place to interact with radical material, a place wholly emancipated from the vice-like hegemony that the Church, that great feudalistic bastion of the establishment, had previously held over society. This decentralisation of governmental control over working-class social created an environment in which uncensored radical ideas could diffuse throughout all sectors of the community. Naturally, men felt a ‘liberating effect’, able to say what they felt, no longer obliged by the ‘prevailing emphases on the social duties of the lower classes to their superiors.’³¹ Thus, the impact of the 1790s was to provide an issue of parliamentary reform, and even revolution, which transcended these class barriers, igniting all of these non-governmental ecosystems of society, so creating a brief moment in which the people were able to realise and enjoy their radical potential.

This realisation, for the first time, was a nationwide phenomenon; the ‘swinish multitude’³² were previously aware that they were swinish, but the 1790s made them aware that they were a multitude, breaking down the aggressively local form of society which had previously dominated English

²⁸ <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/royal-food/0/steps/17085> James Gillray, *Temperance enjoying a frugal meal*, 28th July 1792.

²⁹ T.M. Parssinen, ‘Association, Convention and Anti-Parliament in British Radical Politics 1771-1848’, *The English Historical Review*, vol. 88, 1973. Quoted in Norbert.J. Gossman, *The Origins of Modern British Radicalism: The Case for the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 20.

³⁰ Christiane Eisenberg, *The Rise of Market Society in England 1066-1800*, Berghahn Books, 2013, p. 86.

³¹ Claeys, *The French Revolution Debate*, p. 76.

³² Burke, *Reflections*, p. 66.

history, and leading the way to the nationalising process of industrialisation in the next century.³³ Newspapers connected previously isolated provincial readers, 'not only with the centre of London but also with interested actors from all parts of the island.'³⁴ In Sheffield, Joseph Gales' *The Patriot* was one of dozens of local newspapers set up in 1792 and, at 3d a copy, was available to 'the meanest capacity'.³⁵ This awareness of artisan radicals of the people as the new market within the nation, indicated that these 'people', even if they didn't hold all of the cards, had a few aces up their sleeves. The widespread political involvement of the masses subsided almost as quickly as it arrived, however, it was a warning shot across the bows, a flame that would never again be quenched, an assumption 'for the first time by hundreds of thousands of a civic identity based on this participation.'³⁶ Historians have often puzzled over the justification of Pitt's repressive measures; the presence of a 'rudimentary revolutionary threat'³⁷ seems an insufficient moral justification for 'Honest Billy', son of Chatham. Perhaps, as Kenneth Morgan has suggested of the Combination Laws (1799 and 1800), although it would prove only a temporary check, Pitt's aim was to 'stem the tide of working class activism.'³⁸

The fall of the Bastille, on 14th July 1789, posed a serious threat to perhaps the most important aspect of Georgian Britain; the inviolability of its Constitution. This mixed constitution, forged after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, had proved the perfect balance of checks between King, Lords and Commons, ensuring that Britain steered itself clear between the barbaric Scylla of the Levellers and the crushing Charybdis of despotism. Exactly 100 years after the Revolution Settlement (1689), few of Britain's markedly superstitious populace would have been ignorant of the Bastille's symbolism, appearing as an improvement upon the flaws in the British constitution, and providing firmer guarantees of individual rights. Indeed, before the Revolution collapsed into its terrible excesses under Robespierre, the alternative system in France seemed to be rectifying all of the mistakes and half-measures in the British Constitution, with the new French Constitution even being considered a "model for all nations."³⁹ This helped to break down the stigma against reform, as cautious reformers, men like John Horne Tooke and Major John Cartwright, sought to distance themselves from the atrocities of Jacobinism by aligning themselves with patriotism. Once the republican fervour of the Revolution had receded into the distance of the nation's memory, this ushered in an age in which reform was no longer treasonable but patriotic, and in which the Constitution was seen as imperfect but perfectible, and dismissing an age in which the Constitution, whilst really imperfect, was considered perfect and sacrosanct. If the only impact of the radical movement of the 1790s was, 'to make "innovation" acceptable in Britain'⁴⁰, then surely, given that this opened the door to post-war radicalism and the democratizing initiatives of 1832 and 1867 (the first and second Reform Acts) it is enough to prove that the radicalism in the 1790s was genuinely formative for modern British society.

³³ For a powerful study on the independent morality and loyalties of pre-revolutionary Georgian Britain, see E. P. Thompson, *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford, Past and Present Society, 1971. Accessed from JSTOR; https://www.jstor.org/stable/650244?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

³⁴ Seymour Drescher, *History's Engines: British Mobilization in the Age of Revolution*, Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2009, p. 739.

³⁵ *Patriot*, vol. 1, pg. 3-10. Quoted in Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty; The English democratic movement in the age of the French Revolution*, The Anchor, 1979, p. 224. Goodwin provides excellent detail of the activities of *The Patriot* and other similar newspapers in pg. 223-233.

³⁶ Claey's, French Revolution Debate, p. 75.

³⁷ Kenneth Morgan, *The Birth of Industrial Britain; Social Change 1750-1850*, Pearson, 2004, p. 79.

³⁸ Morgan, *Industrial Britain*, p. 79, Doc 22.

³⁹ Dr Robinet, *Danton Émigré*, Paris, 1887, p. 50. Quoted in Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, p. 247.

⁴⁰ Samuel Romilly, *Thoughts on the probable influence of the French Revolution on Great Britain*, London, 1790. Quoted in Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, p. 106.

The emergence of radicalism outside of the spectrum of the constitution, which appeared to be leading Britain down the regicidal path of France's 'tantalising allure of novelty', undeniably posed a threat, if only temporarily, to British constitutional validity. In providing Britons with a seductive alternative form of government, however, perhaps the most significant impact of the radical movement was to provide the nation with the opportunity to reassert its love for Shakespeare's 'scepter'd isle'. The massive surge in loyalism that drowned radical voices out after 1793, with John Reeves' Church and King clubs vastly outnumbering their radical opposites, seemed to prove this undying 'attachment of the people to their constitution'⁴¹. Indeed, with the ink of the Civil War (1642-53), the execution of Charles I in 1649 and the years of the Protectorate (1653-58) barely drying on the pages of British history, Britons proved to be, on the whole, a cautious people, keen to avoid the uncertainties and volatility of the previous century. The avoidance of this enticing novelty of widespread parliamentary reform and French republicanism proved a vindicating force for the nation's rulers and the superiority of the British Constitution to its French rival. Such validation gave the nations' rulers the foundation of popular support they needed, safe in the knowledge that any future radicalism was within the bounds of the constitution. Even if the changes in 1832 would alter this constitution almost beyond recognition, governmental conviction in the widespread popular belief in the nation would allow 19th Century Britain to spread its wings and rise to the lofty heights of Victorian empire.

In the snap election of May 2017, Lord Buckethead - a self-professed intergalactic space lord whose policies include the nationalisation of Adele - stood for parliamentary election, gaining 247 votes for the constituency of Maidenhead. This modern-day accessibility of politics may not have been what the radicals of the 1790s had in mind as they strove towards fairer representation and an amelioration of the Constitution, however, what they *were* is more important than what they *wanted*. Inspired by the French Revolution, the radicals created a popular environment in which 'the people' assumed the right to criticise Crown, Commons and Constitution. Such an assumption, for the first time, had a tangible impact on the function of each of these three axioms of British society, an impact that proved "one of the turning points in English history"⁴², as the modernising waters of industrial commercialism first broke the dam of Britain's decaying monarchic feudalism. Yet these waters were only temporarily those of E.P. Thompson's Paineite republicanism and, in the long run, sowed the seeds of a budding working-class consciousness. Although halted momentarily by the distraction of war with France, this new approach to authority as something the people allowed, rather than one which the people served, is without a doubt one of the most important impacts of the period. Britain as a nation was, almost unknowingly, re-defined. The 'poor stockinger, Luddites and obsolete framework knitters', would not realise their potential until the radical movements of the 19th Century, however, the 1790s can be considered the first step in a long journey of the English working-man to escape, to quote Thompson again, the 'enormous condescension of posterity.'⁴³

⁴¹ Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Paris (AAE), CPA 588, fox. 142-3. Sourced from Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, p. 258.

⁴² Herbert Butterfield, *Charles James Fox and the Whig Opposition in 1792*, Cambridge Historical Journal, vol. 9, 1949, p. 293. Found in Claeys, *French Revolution Debate*, p. 76.

⁴³ Thompson, *Making of English Working Class*, p. 13.

Appendix A:

“Hanging. Drowning”(1795). James Gillray (1756-1815) was perhaps the most famous of 18th Century caricaturists, here mocking three of the leading ministers in Britain at the time; (from left to right) Charles James Fox, (nominal) leader of a failing opposition tries to hang himself, dropping to the ground a parchment which says, “Account of the Republican Overthrow.” Fox’s entanglement with the ‘English Jacobins’ was indeed a form of political suicide, as proved by his secession in 1797 upon Pitt’s attracting of the Portland ‘Conservative’ Whigs to his side. In the right of the picture is William Pitt, prime minister. Pitt’s stomach ulcer meant that he was prescribed three bottles of port a day. Often it would be more. His drinking habits were widely known and mocked and, at a time of widespread strife and general war-time austerity, his debauchery whilst on the job clearly undermines his credibility. Henry Dundas, secretary for the state of war, is also seen indulging in a drink, whilst appearing embarrassingly bald beneath his Whig. The portrait of George III hung in the room is physically decapitated by the borders of the poster, a dangerous concept to be playing with less than two years after the execution of Louis XVI. Clearly, the accessibility of such material as broadsheets or in political clubs did no credit to the legitimacy of the ruling classes right to rule the nation.

Source: National Portrait Gallery, D12545

<http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait.php?search=ap&npgno=D12545&eDate=&lDate=>

Appendix B:



King George III, painted by Allan Ramsay in 1761, here appears in more traditionally regal attire.



Appendix C:

Source; Royal Collection Trust

<https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/400501/george-iii-1738-1820-queen-charlotte-1744-1818-and-their-six-eldest-children>

Painted in 1771, Johan Joseph Zoffany (1738-1820) depicts the idyllic domestic scene, with George III- in an almost effeminately elegant blue attire- proudly residing over his six eldest children and his wife, Queen Charlotte. Clouds gather overhead, perhaps suggestive of the turbulent situation in America, but more likely an indication of the instabilities of the previous decade, which are being swept away by the emerging sunlight, as George's minister Lord North begins to assert his dominance over the political scene. The family portrait was not unprecedented, however, the image of the discarded crown and the royal robes draped negligently over the back of Charlotte's chair seems to imply George's prioritisation of family over royal matters. This was certainly not true, but seems to be indicative at least of the impression that Zoffany, and so perhaps the rest of the public, received.

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