Introduction

> I beg Pardon for being so prolix; but as I have the Subject very much at Heart, I know you will excuse this Effusion of Loyalty
>
> Ann Thomas, *Adolphus de Biron. A Novel* (1795?)

Between 1791 and 1805 as many as fifty overtly conservative novels were published in Britain. Others contained distinctly conservative elements. These were the anti-Jacobin novels. They were written in opposition to what their authors believed, or perhaps affected to believe, were the principles of the French Revolution. The implicit assumption behind these books was that these Jacobin principles were establishing themselves in Britain where they threatened to undermine all that had enabled Britain to flourish and thrive. Some of the novels may certainly be considered propaganda. What is perhaps most revealing though is that others lacked an explicitly didactic intent. They seem to have absorbed and recapitulated conservative sentiments almost by default. How and why this happened is one of the subjects of this book. But however it was that so much fiction became aligned with a conservative agenda, these novels provide a very valuable insight into the society which created, commissioned and consumed them. Each novel is interesting in itself, but when read in aggregate, as if they constituted one single text, they take on a greater historical significance as a very direct manifestation of the British response to the French Revolution. And indeed, the two qualities which the late eighteenth-century novel has routinely been regarded as displaying – 'popularity as a form of entertainment and . . . inferiority as a form of art'[1] – provide a transparency in the relations between production and reception, and thus the link between literature and the society which generated it, which is seldom available. Their popularity, and their tendency to reproduce the familiarly conventional, endow these novels with a representativeness which entitles them to be thought of as a vital key to the understanding of British society in an age of crisis and as

perhaps the most historically meaningful literary response to the French Revolution and its aftermath.

Yet both literary historians and critics have been reluctant to explore the conservative fiction of the decade or so on either side of 1800. Partly this is due to an embarrassment of riches. Few of the paramount figures of literary romanticism had qualms about engaging directly with the political issues of their day. The reactions of these eminent figures undoubtedly conduce to our understanding of the period, and, in particular, the famous recantations of support and sympathy for the Revolution made by Coleridge and Wordsworth in the late 1790s do still act as fixed points of reference in the history of the response to the Revolution. But whether these are in any way typical of society as a whole is a very different question. The audience for new poetry was, after all, limited and specific. The readership of novels, by contrast, was almost certainly expanding. And scholars working on the novel of the 1790s and 1800s have also been spoiled for choice. The resurgence of historicist criticism has demonstrated just how many previously non-canonical authors now demand scholarly attention.[2] Perhaps understandably, research has tended to focus on those works which are significant either in literary terms or because they exhibit doctrinal originality. Conservative novels, at least at first glance, seldom fall into either category. Indeed, the fullest attempts to chart the extent and diversity of anti-Jacobin fiction remain the single chapters (or less) allotted to them by Allene Gregory in 1915, J. M. S. Tompkins in 1932 and Marilyn Butler in 1975.[3]

Although none of these studies identified more than about a dozen anti-Jacobin novels, when in fact at least three times as many were produced, it is hardly fair to criticise them for the underestimation since none of their authors actually set out to provide full surveys of conservative fiction.[4] Yet they have contributed to the creation of the impression that there were more, and more important, radical novels published in the 1790s than conservative. The claims of critics who asserted that the political novel of the late eighteenth century was 'usually associated with radical ideas' or that 'surely few novelists, except Jacobin ones, ever hoped that their performances would conduce to the happiness of their readers by any other means than by entertaining them' have remained largely unchallenged.[5] The reality was that anti-Jacobin novels outnumbered Jacobin fictions and outlasted them too. Even including the more dubiously Jacobin novels there were still only about twenty radical novels produced, with only a very few of them appearing any later than 1796. The forty-plus conservative novels reached a peak of production only in

about 1800 and fresh works were still appearing five years later. Anti-Jacobin fiction as propaganda may not have actually won the Revolution debate itself, but it was certainly on the winning side.

However, rather than recognising the dominance of anti-Jacobin fiction in the literary marketplace by the later 1790s, critics have sought to question the oppositional relationship of conservative and radical fiction. Claudia Johnson, for instance, has contended that

> Most of the novels written in the 'war of ideas' are more complicated and less doctrinaire than modern commentators have represented. It does not suffice to denominate writers as 'conservative' or 'radical' according to whether they were 'for' or 'against' the French Revolution. By the mid-1790s, with France and England at war and the Revolution and Terror *faits accomplis*, there were few English 'Jacobins' around, and among professed 'anti-Jacobins', there is far more disagreement than first meets the eye.[6]

In keeping with this attempt to downplay the disparity between radical and conservative fiction recent critics have variously argued that both were together engaged in the process of establishing new middle-class values or the attempt to revise the limits of gender propriety.[7] Certainly, these attempts to revise the notion of a heavily polarised debate provide an important caveat to older assumptions and a valuable warning not to interpret novels too glibly according to their ostensible political orientation. Several authors are much more problematic than has often been thought and do defy easy political stereotyping. But crucially the majority of politicised popular novelists manifestly did not seek, nor achieve, any degree of ideological ambiguity in their fiction, but rather attempted exactly the opposite. Most of those of a broadly conservative orientation certainly thought of themselves, and were keen to promote themselves, as frank and forthright anti-Jacobins, routinely constructing their writing on the basis of their enmity towards the opposing tendency.[8] Charles Lucas, for instance, was perfectly candid in his retrospective discussion of his anti-Jacobin novel *The Infernal Quixote* (1801). 'The work was written to counteract the *revolutionary* mania among the community at large,' he remembered; it was 'avowedly written against the modern principles of atheism and licentiousness, disguised as philosophy'.[9] Indeed, many conservative novelists were aware, and delighted to admit, that they were contributing to an established and coherent genre. Both Jane West and Elizabeth Hamilton, whom Claudia Johnson holds up as ideologically conflicted authors, acknowledged their novels' similarity and indebtedness to earlier anti-Jacobin fictions, using their prefaces to

exonerate themselves from the charges of plagiarism which they feared their novels might naturally attract.[10]

Moreover, if reception rather than production is taken into account when assessing fiction's political alignment then it seems much clearer that many novels were regarded as either Jacobin or anti-Jacobin when they were first produced, no matter how much modern scholars have sought to problematise their taxonomy. Not only the witch-hunting of the *Anti-Jacobin Review* or *British Critic* bears testimony to this, although their paranoid identification of exactly what was Jacobin and anti-Jacobin remains a useful indicator. Those contemporary reader-responses to which we have access proclaim that an awareness and acceptance existed of two literary camps, conservative and radical. The literary pundit Hugh Murray, for example, exhibited no unease whatsoever about identifying two distinct and cogent genres of 'Philosophical romances' which had made their appearance in the years leading up to 1805. 'Some of the first,' he wrote, 'were written with the view of supporting some very ill-founded and dangerous principles' – the Jacobins – but 'of late', he continued, 'several very ingenious works have been produced, with the view of counteracting the bad effect of those above alluded to.'[11] Most of all, though, the way in which the anti-Jacobin novel became formularised into a convention, a process which I shall be examining in some detail, demonstrates that a coherent anti-Jacobin genre undoubtedly existed for contemporaries, a genre within which only a very few of the best works displayed any substantial degree of difference and, thence, ideological ambiguity.

That even new historicist literary critics have still by and large been seeking to identify and investigate radical authors, novelists whose work posed some kind of a challenge to the prevailing structures of society, is all the more surprising since recent historians have increasingly been turning their attention to the forms, and prevalence, of conservatism in the Britain of the 1790s and beyond. Those who first opened up the study of the British response to the French Revolution overestimated the strength of radicalism in the 1790s.[12] Their enthusiasm was first replaced by more balanced assessments of the Revolution debate.[13] And more recently it can seem as though the heirs of Burke have entirely driven the heirs of Paine from the pages of historiography.[14] This new emphasis on the conservative represents something more than a mere oscillation in scholarly fashion. It is essentially a recognition that loyalty, patriotism and even a quite specifically targeted anti-Jacobinism, were much more significant elements in British society – affecting more people

more deeply – than any radical impulse had ever managed to become. Radicalism, it is now generally recognised, only ever appealed to a relatively small section of society, and, in its appeal to a mass constituency in mainland Britain, was a transitory phenomenon. Those converts it did make in the early 1790s – that largely (but not exclusively) urban, sophisticated, subordinate élite which joined the corresponding societies and read Price, Paine and perhaps even Godwin – quickly, by about 1795, returned to their former political quiescence. Partly this was because new laws – Pitt's 'terror' – compelled them to do so. Perhaps also the propaganda campaign of the early 1790s (of which anti-Jacobin novels, at that time, were only a small part) had an effect. But most of all, events on the Continent turned Britons against the Revolution. The regicide, the Terror and the Edict of Fraternity which promised French support for insurgency in Britain, all played their part in 1792–3. The military victories of the Revolutionary armies in late 1792, which proved the Revolution might survive and export itself, and the interference with British trading interests in the Low Countries which it brought, added to British misgivings. And when the National Convention declared war on Britain in January 1793, the Revolution and the Jacobinism which was supposed to animate it were not only discredited in the eyes of most Britons, but were transformed from something with which an enlightened Briton might sympathise into something deserving nothing less than the most thorough execration, from something from which many had derived a satisfying sense of *schadenfreude* into something which shattered British complacency and seemed to demand concerted opposition. The 'Revolution debate', the 'war of ideas', withered away, not because every champion of radical doctrine had been utterly converted by the logic of the conservatives, but because few of them, with just one or two exceptions, could be found who wished to defy a near unanimous and highly militant anti-Jacobinism to put forward what had suddenly become dangerously unorthodox opinions.

This is not to say that the radical threat had entirely dissipated by the mid 1790s. Some lone radicals were still travelling the country at the turn of the century attempting to whip up support for their cause. More worryingly, the mutinies in the Royal Navy in 1797 were undeniably exacerbated by radical rhetoric. There were serious food riots in 1800-1 and labour disturbances throughout the period, possibly with an accompanying insurrectionary purpose in the case of the Yorkshire Black Lamp conspiracy of 1802. Nor did the great Irish Rebellion of 1798, or Emmet's Irish rising of 1803, materialise from nowhere or achieve

their frightening – albeit limited and temporary – successes without a network of radical agents, both Irish and British, behind them. And there were many informed Britons who worried about the likelihood of a French invasion of the mainland, let alone Ireland, well into the 1800s (a well-grounded anxiety, as was proved by the attempted French landings in Wales and Ireland in 1796, 1797 and 1798).[15] Yet so much of the evidence pointing to a continued revolutionary underground enduring until the re-emergence of a confident and vocal radicalism after about 1807 derives from the reaction to that perceived threat by the establishment rather than from the threat itself. Government spies and state prosecutors were kept busy throughout the period creating a culture of state repression which, in retrospect, seems totally out of proportion to the level of danger. We do not know, for instance, if Colonel Despard's 1802 conspiracy would ever have come to fruition (let alone have been successful), because Home Office measures forestalled it. But what we do know is that Henry Addington was sufficiently worried about the information he was receiving to instigate prompt and decisive action.

Such swift government action, along with runs on banks, hoarding of specie and anxious letters to newspapers are symptoms of panic but not proof of imminent revolution *per se*. Whether or not the virtual conservative hegemony of which some historians talk had been established by the mid 1790s then, the important point remains that there was no dispersal of the sense of crisis in Britain even after the Treason Trials (1794) signalled the beginning in earnest of the government's clamp-down and the corresponding and constitutional societies had organised their last mass meetings (1795). Rather, as the orators of conservatism found they had fewer and more reticent voices against which to compete they simply became more strident and bombastic. Certainly, few could compete with the grandiloquence which Burke had achieved as early as 1790 in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. But after the period of genuine debate which followed, as the followers of Burke and Paine sparred with one another – a time when the fate of the Revolution in France still hung in the balance and when the rhetoric of conservatism had become a little muted – Burke's impressive chords were struck once again with all the told-you-so triumphalism of a party which had been vindicated.

For various reasons, it was in the interests of these vocal anti-Jacobins to maintain the spectre of the Jacobin threat. Some still genuinely believed Britain to be in peril. Others, particularly those influenced by Evangelicalism, thought their business only half completed. Though they might feel that they had seen off the immediate threat of a French-inspired

revolution, they still found Britain possessed of a brittle social structure, riddled with corruption, which, if not quickly shored up, might collapse at any moment and achieve that which French agents, arms and principles had thus far found impossible. But besides the triumphalism and the genuine anxiety, there were two other important elements which sustained the sense of a 'Revolution crisis' after the real danger had subsided. First, it is impossible not to notice the sort of communal psychosis which permeated British society in the 1790s and beyond. The analogue is the astonishingly pervasive anti-communism of more recent times, and the anti-Jacobinism of the late eighteenth century is just as difficult precisely to account for. Undoubtedly it had its roots in the anti-Gallicanism and anti-Catholicism which had dominated the psycho-ideological composition of British identity for many decades. But it was also fed by propaganda of various sorts which encouraged the British public to comprehend the wholly unprecedented events in France as a catastrophe of quasi-biblical proportions, not as a series of political incidents but as a great moral offence against virtue, nature and God. Jacobinism, although it was also much more than this (for it was also often represented as having tangible effects too, such as depriving the people of food and rendering profitable business impossible), became a dreadful synthesis of assaults on queens, killings of kings, of priests hanging from lamp-posts, streets deluged in blood, and of cannibalism, incest and unrestrained sexual licence too. Jacobinism, in other words, was a gestalt with no set definition, and thus provided the perfect basis for the sense of crisis which developed and perpetuated itself in the 1790s and early 1800s. It was a crisis during which the challenge Britons felt they faced amounted to much more than the sum of its parts would have seemed if ever rationally appraised.

Second, though, there were numerous individuals and groups who deliberately maintained and exacerbated the idea of a Jacobin menace, using it as a stalking horse for their own, more narrowly targeted campaigns. Evangelicals like Hannah More or the members of the Eclectic Society used Jacobinism as a pretext for forcing through their vision of a moral reformation.[16] Contrariwise, Jacobinism could also be used as a stick to beat any and all movements for reform, of whatever complexion, and ultra-reactionaries had no hesitation in doing so. Anyone from the followers of Fox and the Society of the Friends of the People to the enemies of the slave trade or those who, like Hannah More herself, sought to establish Sunday schools, could be labelled as Jacobins, and frequently were by the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, the individuals who made up its staff

and many others of like mind. They too were able to do this because Jacobinism had no fixed meaning.

It would be impossible to propose a precise definition of Jacobinism. Contemporaries used the word frequently, and often deliberately, without any exactness, purely to stigmatise their opponents. Jacobinism was simply a label for all that conservatives found detestable within society. Robert Bisset's attempt at a definition demonstrates this negative postulation and the almost limitless scope of attack: 'Whoever is the enemy of Christianity, and natural religion, of monarchy, of order, subordination, property and justice, I call a Jacobin.' They were the enemies of every established institution Bisset could think of, in other words, and, by an easy extension, of any which he could not.[17] By the same token anti-Jacobinism was its opposite, undefined but still an abiding moral and political imperative which, by the middle of the 1790s, permeated almost the entirety of British society.

This opposition to Jacobinism and the Revolution manifested itself on two levels. The majority of the nation became possessed, or in most cases continued to be possessed, of a sort of residual and passive conservatism, a political acquiescence which had always been largely based on anti-Gallicanism and had no difficulty incorporating a newer anti-Jacobinism into its constitution. But second, there were those who became active anti-Jacobins. Some confined themselves to signing loyal addresses or attending loyalist demonstrations – both astonishingly common diversions – but many also joined the army, the Volunteers, or more specifically dedicated organisations such as the Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property Against Republicans and Levellers, the largest political organisation in the country at its height in 1792–3.[18] It is to the latter group of active conservatives that the first anti-Jacobin novelists belong. Figures such as Edward Sayer, Ann Thomas or Henry James Pye, who published strongly anti-Jacobin novels in the first half of the 1790s, were 'doing their bit', were volunteering for duty every bit as ardently as their more military-minded comrades. They believed that, as Hannah More put it in 1793, 'it is not so much the force of French bayonets, as the contamination of French principles, that ought to excite our apprehensions'.[19]

Indeed, it is immediately clear that anti-Jacobin novelists exactly fit the pattern that historians of conservatism have recently established for other forms of militant loyalism in the 1790s, a concurrence which, again, makes it all the more surprising that anti-Jacobin fiction has so far received so little attention. Having surveyed almost every manifestation of

popular conservatism other than fiction, for instance, Harry Dickinson, has contended that,

> In mounting a more sustained response to the radical challenge, the conservative defenders of the existing constitution in church and state matched every action to be taken by the radicals and usually did so on a larger and more impressive scale. In its strategy and its tactics militant loyalism copied and improved upon those adopted by its radical opponents.[20]

This could not more precisely apply to the anti-Jacobin novelists who not only expropriated the form of the novel from the radicals for their propagandistic purposes, but absolved themselves of all anxiety about pressing a popular form into political service by continually restating the fact that the Jacobins had villainously commandeered it first (see chapter one for examples of this rhetoric).

Similarly, Dickinson and others have pointed out that popular loyalism was independent and never under the control of the governing élite. Again, this is a characteristic which anti-Jacobin fiction shares. Elizabeth Hamilton may have received a pension from the King and Pye may have been Poet Laureate, but they were exceptions and, in any case, their anti-Jacobin novels were in no sense commissioned by the government.[21] Novels were never a form of state propaganda, and nor, in one important sense, were they propaganda at all. As Dickinson suggests, most conservative publicists 'were clearly reinforcing and tapping prejudices which already existed'.[22] So too were novels – not creating, nor even seeking to create, an anti-Jacobin rectitude in their readers, but writing to reinforce existing convictions. Fiction was perfectly adapted to reinforce anti-Jacobin nostrums without appearing to ram them home. But moreover, as a commodity in a competitive market, they would have been unable to do anything else – unless their authors or publishers were prepared to sustain large financial losses. The small active group of anti-Jacobin novelists within the population, in other words, relied for their existence on that much more substantial residual, passive conservatism in which almost the entirety of British society was involved by about 1794–5. If propaganda, by definition, seeks to provide its receivers with something they do not already possess, so anti-Jacobin literature, since it sought no converts and relied for its existence on a market which already shared its beliefs, cannot be regarded, in the strictest sense, as propaganda.

Anti-Jacobin fiction was two things successfully merged. It was a political campaign aiming to repulse Jacobinism. And it was a product,

requiring a market for its existence. It was able to achieve both these things at once by retailing a sort of confirmatory anti-Jacobinism, bolstering the conservative convictions of its readers and simultaneously establishing a remunerative niche for itself. The fact that Jacobinism was almost extinct by the mid 1790s, therefore, gave strength to the anti-Jacobin novel rather than depriving it of its purpose, for as the threat of revolution receded anti-Jacobin fiction was able to build on the ideological unanimity of the population to expand its market and, by reaching more people, most of whom had become increasingly predisposed to accept it, to enhance its potency as an agent of conservatism.

It is when viewed in this light that anti-Jacobin fiction can best help to clarify the nature of conservatism as a whole in Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Anti-Jacobin novels appeared in dribs and drabs in the early 1790s. By 1794–7 a handful had materialised. But by 1798 the trickle had become something approaching a torrent, with some thirty highly conservative novels published between then and 1805, years when a French invasion seemed conceivable, but when radicalism had receded to its lowest ebb. Anti-Jacobin novels might have had subtitles like *The Philosophy of the Day* (1802), *A Tale of the Day* (1801) or *A Tale of the Times* (1799), but in fact they were tales of times then past. Indeed, Mary Anne Burges' *The Progress of the Pilgrim Good-Intent*, subtitled '*in Jacobinical Times*', was no less out of sync with the age it professed to concern itself with in 1822, when it reached its tenth edition, than it had been when it was originally published in 1800.

Most obviously, by following the contours of success of anti-Jacobin fiction much is revealed about the chronology and duration of anti-Jacobinism as a whole. Anti-Jacobin novels would not have been produced in such numbers in 1800, or in 1805, if there had been no market for them. Clearly, this supports the conception of anti-Jacobinism as a phenomenon only tangentially linked to the Revolution itself or to any actual manifestation of radicalism in Britain, both of which were well past their apogee by the time the anti-Jacobin novel reached its zenith. What it also suggests, though, is that anti-Jacobinism picked up speed as the 1790s wore on, almost in an inverse proportion to the threat actually posed by Jacobinism. It is apparent that the same pattern holds true of the most militantly loyalist periodicals and non-fictional publications too, but enterprises such as the *British Critic* (1793), the *Anti-Jacobin* (1797–8) or the *Anti-Jacobin Review* (1798–1821), or the investigations of the 'Illuminati conspiracies' published by William Playfair, the Abbé Barruel and John Robison (1795–8), or even such exercises as the Cheap Repository