Introduction

This book offers a historical account of literary representations of Switzerland from Joseph Addison to John Ruskin, drawing attention to the ideological uses of the Swiss myth in the parallel developments of Romanticism and liberalism. Contemporaries perceived Switzerland and the cultural phenomenon that came to be known as Romanticism as practically synonymous. Almost every single author now belonging to the British Romantic canon wrote about the Alps or Switzerland, and many of today’s most exemplary Romantic works are at least partially set there. Analyzing a wide range of published and unpublished texts, including poetry, drama, and fiction but also travel writing, speeches, political and religious tracts, journals, letters, and visitors’ book entries, I show that this interest was as much political as it was aesthetic, Switzerland’s history, landscape, and manners offering attractive, but also potentially disruptive, images of republican virtue to writers in Britain and across Europe.

Merging the country’s founding narratives going back to the late Middle Ages with the eighteenth-century image of a happy, peaceful, and independent nation of alpine shepherds, what historians commonly call the Swiss myth transformed Switzerland into an ideal republican landscape in which nature, liberty, and manners harmoniously corresponded. Its various figurations as William Tell, the founding oath on the Rütli, the popular assembly, the happy shepherd, or the ranz des vaches, to name a few, have authorized different, even antithetical interpretations, the Swiss myth standing for a unique combination of conservative, progressive, and radical associations. Among these we may list traditional values such as courage, simplicity, local attachment, communal self-autonomy, domesticity, patriotic duty, neutrality, hard work, religious tolerance, and Christian faith, but also, more controversially, national independence and natural rights, including liberty, equality, and the right of revolution. Like all political myths, the Swiss myth helped both the Swiss and their European observers, in particular the British, interpret their own political
and social conditions, and reevaluate the meaning of liberty and sovereignty in the face of often dramatic historical change.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is the best known, but by no means the only writer to exploit the myth’s paradoxes for political purposes, synthesizing classical republicanism with natural law theory to develop his radical ideal of modern democracy. Christopher Flood and Chiara Bottici both cite Rousseau’s state of nature as a perfect example of political myth. Flood defines this last as “an ideologically marked narrative which purports to give a true account past, present, or predicted political events, and which is accepted as valid in its essentials by a social group.” Bottici adds that political myths, like ideology, serve “to make significance of the specifically political conditions for a certain group or society,” but unlike history, “must produce significance and be sufficiently dramatic to push someone to act.” The two political philosophers rely on Clifford Geertz’s definition of ideology in order to recast myths not as false consciousness but as useful mapping devices to make an autonomous politics possible.4 Their conceptualization of political myth accords closely with the Romantics’ own imaginative historicism, notably as defended in William Godwin’s “Of History and Romance” (1797). Also basing himself on Rousseau, Godwin writes:

I ask not, as a principal point, whether it be true or false? My first enquiry is, “Can I derive instruction from it? Is it a genuine praxis upon the nature of man? Is it pregnant with the most generous motives and examples? If so, I had rather be profoundly versed in this fable, than in all the genuine histories that ever existed.”

My study relies on the above concept of political myth as well as on the rich field of scholarship arguing for the existence of a classical republican tradition,6 on recent Swiss historiography informed by this so-called republican turn,7 and on studies arguing for the importance of classical republicanism to Romanticism.8 A frequently used yet contested label, classical republicanism is often divided into the earlier neo-Aristotelian approach most famously represented by Hans Baron and John Pocock, who coined the term “civic humanism,” and the neo-Roman approach introduced by Quentin Skinner, Maurizio Viroli, and Philip Pettit.9 The first, basing itself on Aristotle, Machiavelli, and the English seventeenth-century republicans, idealizes the Greek polis, values ownership of land and possession of arms as requirements of citizenship, and regards virtue as an end in itself. The second, looking back to Roman law, imagines civic involvement instrumentally, as a condition for protecting one’s autonomy from arbitrary
power. Pettit’s neo-republican principle of “non-domination” is particularly useful here. Charles Larmore defines it in the following manner: “We are free to the extent that we do not find ourselves under the domination of others, subject to their will and thus exposed to the vicissitudes of their desires.”

Not all historians and political scientists have accepted these terms uncritically. Joyce Appleby, for instance, has shown the difficulty of distinguishing the language of classical republicanism from that of liberalism, notably in eighteenth-century Whiggish discourse in Britain and in the United States. Dan Edelstein has made the case for a utopian French republicanism, or what he calls a “natural republic” issuing from Fénélon, Mably, and Rousseau rather than directly from the classical republican writers. Most recently, Jonathan Israel has argued that scholars overlooked the tensions between democratic and aristocratic republicanism, and has asserted more controversially that classical republicanism was “broadly irrelevant” to the development of modern liberal democracy, which was derived from an Enlightenment republicanism based on reason, rights, and representation.

Despite these objections, I have retained the concept of classical republicanism, but do not make the ex post facto distinction between civic humanism and neo-Roman republicanism. As Keith Michael Baker reminds us, classical republicanism in the eighteenth century was a “discourse of political diagnosis rather than a model of an ideal regime of government,” enabling writers in Britain, France, Switzerland, and elsewhere to oppose modern commercial society’s perceived corruption and government tyranny. As in other Early Modern republics, republicanism in Switzerland implied neither democracy nor social equality as these terms have been understood since the French Revolution. Rather, it protected the rights and established forms of political participation for those who could claim citizenship, which in most Swiss republics meant a small minority. As we shall see, Switzerland’s ruling oligarchies, the so-called “patriot” writers who sought to expand political rights, and the British observers who commented on them drew on the same classical republican language as a form of political and social “diagnosis.” In the second half of the eighteenth century, however, mythicized images of Swiss republicanism were also deployed to imagine new, utopian social and political arrangements that might unite the classical republican ideal of popular sovereignty with the Enlightenment ideal of a well-ordered society. Although many of Switzerland’s republics were urban and commercial, Swiss republicanism was increasingly adapted to the country’s agrarian republics and cast in opposition to commerce, distinguishing Swiss from...
Dutch republicanism for example. This alpine variation on classical republican ideology, while resembling some elements of Jeffersonian democracy, was considered a special case due to the country’s unique manners, history, and geography.

Among the patriot writers who helped establish Swiss republicanism as exceptional was of course Rousseau. As we shall see, his *Social Contract* (1762) offered readers the most radically democratic of all the Swiss myth’s iterations by imagining a political community in which the governors and governed are identical, and where virtue is necessary to the general will. Until the 1780s, such an agrarian and largely utopian inflection of classical republicanism could still feed radically democratic hopes. According to Israel, the advent of the French Revolution, anticipated by the American Revolution and Geneva’s failed revolution in 1782, tellingly fought between democratic and aristocratic republicans, made it largely irrelevant. France’s Girondins appropriated the Genevan philosopher’s ideas in the name of a modern representative democracy, whereas Robespierre and the Montagne made the cult of republican virtue a cornerstone of the Terror. Then, in 1798, France all too easily occupied Switzerland following a series of revolutions in the cantons and occupied territories, challenging that country’s proverbial freedom and virtue. By the turn of the nineteenth century, the Swiss myth was almost always imagined as a conservative alternative to French-style republicanism. Foreign observers and Swiss alike looked back nostalgically to the country’s medieval wars of “liberation,” or restricted the myth to the rural democracies, which had resisted the French invaders longest. Replacing modern *liberté* with an atavistic ideal of *Freiheit* based on domestic virtues, Christian faith, customary rights, and national independence, they transformed Swiss republicanism into a counterrevolutionary ideology more akin to Burke than to Rousseau.

This conservative version of the Swiss myth, as I shall argue, appealed to a generation of European intellectuals disenchanted by the failure of the French Revolution yet still eager to believe in some form of popular sovereignty, helping them in particular to sublimate their own former republicanism into liberalism, or what Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson have called a “republic for the moderns.” As Sheldon Wolin has shown, liberalism is as much the product of conservative as of progressive forces, a reaction not only to absolutism but also to radical democratic experiments such as the English Commonwealth or the French Revolution. The Swiss myth notably helped British Whigs and radicals align themselves with Burke’s “Old” Whigs in the wake of the Revolution’s...
perceived failure, and to rearticulate notions of liberty, rights, and sovereignty as the product of “second” nature, in other words of the existing social order rather than of Enlightenment reason. Among them were political writers such as the Scottish lawyer and M. P. James Mackintosh, as well as Romantic poets, in particular William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

‘Tweaking Alasdair MacIntyre’s definition of republicanism in *After Virtue*, one may understand these writers’ romanticism as the “project of restoring a community of virtue” in the wake of the French Revolution. The New Historicist criticism that has dominated British Romantic studies in the last forty years has shown little sympathy for their perceived ideological accommodation. As Paul Hamilton nevertheless argues, the events in France gave rise to a sort of Machiavellian crisis or *occasione* that prompted the republic of letters on both sides of the Channel to “strategically re-vision” its understanding of history, and to seek out a third position between revolution and reaction, an “imaginary politics” he coins “realpoetik.”

Writers were in search of what Burke calls the “soul of a true republic,” notably to forge a liberalism distinct from both radical democracy and from what many perceived at the time as the desiccated ideologies of Benthamite utilitarianism and Adam Smith’s political economy. We find this “strategic re-visioning” of republican aspirations in both Whig and Tory authors, who used the Swiss myth to imagine an alternative to universal political participation in the wars of national liberation, for example, or to rewrite republican virtue as private or “negative” freedom. Yet the myth never completely lost its more radical, Rousseauian significance, notably among progressives such as Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, but also among more conservative writers, including Wordsworth and Walter Scott, providing a specular foundation upon which to imagine modern forms of liberal democracy.

Although I discuss a large number of authors with sometimes very different ideological agendas, Wordsworth remains my central protagonist for a number of reasons. First, the poet’s association with Switzerland was proverbial in the nineteenth century: a book on Romantic-period Switzerland is necessarily also a book on Wordsworth. Moreover, his two Swiss tours in 1790 and 1820 gave rise to a fifty-year imaginative dialogue with that country, starting with a poem entitled “Septimi Gades” in 1790 and ending with the 1844 *Kendal and Windermere Railway* pamphlet, that enabled him, as I will argue, to imagine the Lake District as a mountain republic. Third, against Edward Duffy’s claim that, “as unearthed by the *Prelude*, the hiding places of Wordsworth’s power revealed themselves as..."
insistently English,”23 I will show that the poet also drew his power from foreign scenes, notably the Vale of Trient which he revisits repeatedly in his work because of its association with republican virtù, and transfers onto Grasmere. For Wordsworth and his contemporaries, the imaginary boundaries of Switzerland extended beyond its political borders, often encompassing Chamonix, the Grande Chartreuse, and the poet’s much-loved Lake of Como. Indeed, the Romantics’ aesthetic appreciation for the Alps often bordered on a form of imperialism as local identity was either idealized or erased. Wordsworth nevertheless showed far more consideration for the Swiss than did many of his contemporaries, in particular Shelley, and his sense of continuity between these various sites and between various stages of his life was as essential to his politics as they were to his poetics.24

That Wordsworth’s politics have been under so much critical scrutiny attests not only to their creative value, but also to their ideological complexity. The poet’s insistence on a continuity between his early radicalism and his later conservatism makes his work an ideal case study to better understand the dual development of Romanticism and liberalism. By looking closely at how he responds to events in Switzerland, including the 1798 French invasion, and how he creatively appropriates the Swiss myth to invent a sense of continuity, I hope to offer some fresh perspectives on the poet’s ambivalent Toryism.25 A number of scholars have already written persuasively on his political configurations of Switzerland and the Alps, most notably Alan Liu, Simon Bainbridge, and Gregory Dart.26 While they often ignore the historical context of Switzerland, almost always interpreting Swiss images as metonyms for the French Revolution, Rousseau, or Napoleon, their readings have contributed to my own, as have Theresa Kelley’s exegeses of the poet’s aesthetic “revisioning” in the wake of the French Revolution, as well as Georgina Green’s insights into Wordsworth as a poet-legislator.27 Thanks in part to the Swiss myth, I shall argue, the poet’s turn in 1798 to a Burkean ideology of prejudice and prescription altered but never completely superseded his republican faith in the people.

Because of Wordsworth’s familiarity with the English republican canon, as Zera Fink has shown,28 the continuities and ruptures in his politics are better interpreted through the framework of a Protestant, Anglo-Swiss, and Whig-Liberal tradition, with its classical republican language of patriotism, than as the product of post-Kantian arguments on moral autonomy or even a Herderian ideal of spiritual nationalism. Maurizio Viroli asserts that in the wake of Johann Gottfried Herder’s Treatise on the Origin of
Language (1772), the meaning of freedom shifted from patriotism to nationalism, as the love of one’s free political institutions was conjoined with or even superseded by the love of one’s language, culture, and traditions, or what Herder calls spiritual freedom. “To generate true patriotism,” Viroli writes, “the political ideal of the republic had to be absorbed within the spiritual unity of the nation.” This spiritual nationalism, as seen for example in Germany’s Befreiungskriege against Napoleon, or in the revolutionary ideology of Giuseppe Mazzini, is clearly an important expression of Romantic liberalism, and we see suggestions of it in several texts, notably Wordsworth’s liberty sonnets and Convention of Cintra. Yet as Benedict Anderson has pointed out, Switzerland’s geographical, religious, and linguistic divisions delayed the development of a unified national identity until the latter part of the nineteenth century, complicating nationalist interpretations of the Swiss myth, which continued to elicit its primary meaning during the Romantic period from classical republican discourse. This same language, as John Burrow suggests, also created a link between eighteenth-century Whiggism and nineteenth-century liberalism, helping former British radicals such as Wordsworth and Mackintosh keep their republican hopes alive while allowing them to readjust key terms such as the “people” and “rights” to the exigencies of the postrevolutionary age.

James Mackintosh, who makes several appearances in this book, perhaps requires more of an introduction than does Wordsworth. The Edinburgh lawyer was well-known among radical circles and became internationally recognized at twenty-five after the publication of Vindiciae Gallicae (1791), his reply to Burke’s Reflections which advocates political change through reform rather than revolution. Alongside other self-made “men of talent,” including Charles Grey, Samuel Whitbread Jr., Richard Sheridan, Samuel Rogers, Sydney Smith, and Richard “Conversation” Sharp, Mackintosh helped found a short-lived political society in 1792, the Association of the Friends of the People, that advocated nonviolent constitutional reform as a way to “moderate the shriller demands of the more populist elements.” By 1793, Mackintosh started to become disillusioned with events in France, and in 1796, two years before Wordsworth’s still private change of heart, he publicly endorsed Burke as the voice of prudence. From 1798 onwards, the same elite group continued discussing politics at Holland House, unofficial headquarters of the Whig opposition. After Napoleon’s 1799 coup, Mackintosh definitely renounced the French Revolution and even volunteered to serve in a militia, drawing accusations of “apostasy” from Charles Lamb, Coleridge, Southey, and Godwin. Whereas Wordsworth
and his fellow Lake Poets continue to be criticized today for their own political turn, however, Mackintosh is mainly remembered as what poet Thomas Campbell once called “the apostle of liberalism”36 because of his principled opposition to the Tory government and his lifelong efforts in favor of legal as well as political reform.

Longstanding relations between Mackintosh, other members of his Whig circle, and the Lake Poets, notably via links with the Wedgwood family, should remind us that Whigs and Tories were ideologically closer at the beginning of the nineteenth century than usually acknowledged. The English liberal tradition, with its republican language of virtue and idealization of popular sovereignty, but also its admiration for the Swiss myth, was their common ground. As Richard Bourke usefully states, “the eighteenth-century British constitution was typically understood as exemplifying popular sovereignty,” a doctrine that was “a staple component of Whiggism, not a radically new idea that emerged between Rousseau and the Revolution.”37

In 1779, the Whigs’ most admired politician, Charles James Fox, had argued that the government should be responsible to the legislature, and hence to the people, not to the King, a claim that even Burke agreed with, and that looked forward to the liberal constitutional practices of the nineteenth century.38 By 1800, however, Whigs and Tories alike viewed Rousseau’s theory of the general will as a dangerously illiberal and illusory interpretation of popular sovereignty, and much like in 1689, sought ways to harness its anarchic power. Burke, who for all his reactionary fervor remained a supporter of constitutional government and parliamentary representation, provided arguments that would be hugely influential among nineteenth-century liberals as well as conservatives, confounding critics who try to pigeonhole his political ideas under one label. Perhaps the most important of these was his rewriting of the social contract as an organic relation between the living and the dead, ridding it of its radical element.39 This implied that reforms should be gradual, domestic attachments privileged over civic participation, governments tributary of local manners rather than ideologies, and feeling given more weight than reason. Burke also warned of the necessity of finding a source of power outside of ourselves as a constitutional safeguard againstarchy or usurpation, a concept translated by liberal theoreticians into the state’s neutral power. All of these ideas contributed to Romantic nationalism, but even more so to modern liberalism’s prudent, if not anxious, approach to politics, which relies on “negative” freedoms and constitutional limits on power, on the separation between the civil and political spheres, and on a greater emphasis on moral rather than political reform.
Introduction

To better understand Burke’s liberal legacy, one may briefly look at how he was received across the Channel by members of the Coppet circle, in particular Benjamin Constant, who developed his theory of modern liberty in discussion with two other Swiss writers, Germaine de Staël and Jean-Charles-Léonard Simonde de Sismondi. All three spent time in Britain, were intimate with (and in the case of Sismondi, related to) Mackintosh and to the Holland House circle, and were extremely familiar with the ideas of the Scottish moral philosophers. But their liberal theory was also tributary of the French Enlightenment philosophs, especially Montesquieu and Rousseau. Political historians and theorists have debated whether Constant may be said to belong to the British political tradition, and if so, what he shared with Burke. Unlike the Irish parliamentarian, Constant never repudiated the Constitution of 1789, which he like most Whigs believed was written in the same spirit as the Glorious Revolution, nor did he object to the usefulness of theoretical principles independently of specific constitutions. By the late 1790s, however, Constant, Sismondi, and Staël turned to Burke and to the English Constitution in order to better understand how to limit sovereignty and put an end to France’s revolution, integrating points of conservative opposition into their own liberal arguments. As Staël stated with a touch of regret in 1798, “How many questions present themselves to the mind when you abandon the principle of pure democracy to adopt representative government?”

Constant developed his response to these questions in *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation* (1814) and his unpublished “Principles of Politics Applicable to All Representative Governments” (1815), which show a similar distrust of popular sovereignty as Burke’s late writings. Much like Sismondi, he argues for the protection of individual rights, advocates the separation of powers and political representation, and ascribes a role to the monarch as neutral arbiter. His famous speech, “The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns” (1819), returns to and synthesizes the Coppet circle’s various responses to Rousseau’s democratic social contract around the turn of the century, replacing political participation, or what he calls the “liberty of the Ancients,” with civil and individual freedoms, which he claims are a modern invention. The speech has been cited by Isaiah Berlin among others to highlight liberalism’s distinction between the civil and political spheres, or what Berlin in 1958 influentially but reductively labeled negative versus positive liberty. Given as part of a lecture series on the English constitution, and dedicated to the celebrated Whig lawyer Sir Samuel Romilly, its definition of modern liberty closely resembles what the
Romanticism, Republicanism, and the Swiss Myth

philosophes called la liberté des anglais. Yet Constant is far more equivocal than Berlin in determining which kind of liberty is best. Although representative government is a utilitarian means of dividing labor in a large commercial state,47 he cannot help regretting the moral loss incurred when active participation in the civic life of the republic is done away with, concluding that legislators should ideally try to combine the two sorts of freedom in order to keep the republican ideal of virtù alive, notably through civic education.48

“If the power of morals is not, so to speak, the constituent power of a republic,” Staël wrote two decades earlier, “then a republic cannot exist.”49 The Coppet circle’s insistence on virtue (and implicit rejection of Benthamite self-interest) for the well-being of a republic is a defining principle of Romantic as opposed to utilitarian forms of liberalism, one that we also find in Burke, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and in many other writers in this book, and that was often sought high up in the Alpine valleys of Switzerland. At the same time, Staël’s allusion to Abbé Sieyès’s influential concept of constituent power, imagined as a representative body elected to create the new nation’s constitution, reminds us how liberalism sought to moderate the power of the sovereign through political representation.50 Whereas the Swiss myth could still be used before the Revolution as a model of direct democracy, it contributed in the postrevolutionary era to the acceptance of representation as a modern form of liberty by privileging negative freedom and by casting the people as a formal, moral, or even spiritual rather than effective power. Romanticized images of Swiss Freiheit, in particular, helped postrevolutionary writers view national independence as more fundamental than political rights, and imagine the people’s sovereignty as virtual, justifying a constitutional oligarchy. Andreas Kalyvas, referring disapprovingly to Hans Kelsen’s metaphorical understanding of constituent power, refers to this liberal sleight-of-hand as the “‘noble lie’ of modern constitutional thinkers.”51

Constant was well aware of this lie, writing that representation makes the individual “sovereign only in appearance.”52 From the very beginning of modern liberalism, in other words, political theorists have been uneasy with the sublimation of the people’s power into legal forms such as representation or transcendental forms such as the spirit or nation. Writers as ideologically different as Marx, Carl Schmitt, Hannah Arendt, and the Communitarians have also viewed the passing away of “ancient” liberty as a loss, one that is felt more strongly than ever today because of our democratic crisis.53 Not everyone agrees with Schmitt’s illiberal reading of