Introduction

This is a collection of essays in the traditional sense. They are a series of 'assays' – attempts qualitatively to weigh certain ideas, interpretations and explanations, using a mixture of evidence and reasoned judgement. Their focus is on the politics, writing and language in Britain in the 1790s and beyond; in particular, on the rise of movements for reform, on the associated statements made and principles appealed to, and on the ways in which these were responded to. Individually, the essays raise a series of questions about how best to think about some of the key figures, practices and puzzles in the interpretation of the period. Collectively, they attempt to understand what was going on in one of the most vibrant periods of British intellectual and political life.

Britain in the 1790s might be thought to stand somewhat in the shadow of the French Revolution. It was certainly profoundly affected by events in France, but its experience had a character and logic that was very much its own. As events in France first unfolded there was widespread support for France, a certain degree of condescension and a profound sense that the events might lead to more peaceful relations between Britain and France. As the revolution took a more radical turn, hostility towards it began to crystallise, with Edmund Burke's 'Speech on the army estimates' in February 1790, and his subsequent *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (November 1790), providing the first powerful statement of resistance both to France and to what were seen as collateral attempts at reform in Britain (as the proposals for the repeal of the Test and Corporations Acts, and for extensions of the franchise came to be depicted, despite their origins in the 1780s). The 'revolution controversy' demonstrated the breadth and (albeit less often) the depth of political opinion in Britain, and fuelled both demands for reform and resistance to it. Several of the essays here deal with processes of politicisation, with understanding the relationships between these processes and their associated forms of expression and with a set of underlying and recurrent questions about the real character of radical thinking and of the organisations that sprang up to further or oppose it. How should we understand the radical artisan

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societies? Were they a potentially revolutionary movement? Was their failure a function of internal conflicts or external repression? Should we see the loyalist associations that emerged in response as diametrically opposed in both principle and practice, or as sharing a number of common features with those they denounced?

The period has attracted a number of eminent historians, and has increasingly received attention from specialists in literature and Romanticism. E. P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* (1968) helped revitalise the study of the decade and challenged scholars to think more systematically about the social foundations of its political movements. Albert Goodwin's *Friends of Liberty* (1979) gave further impetus for scholars by his detailed work on the organisation of the movements, in particular on the provincial corresponding societies. And J Ann Hone's *For the Cause of Truth* (1982) extended Goodwin's London narrative into the 1820s, while James Epstein's and Gareth Stedman Jones' work produced some major rethinking of the connections between the movements of the 1790s and those of the 1830s and 1840s.[1] Goodwin's, Hone's and Epstein's research was, like Thompson's, focused on reformers; subsequently, work by Robert Dozier, Harry Dickinson, Linda Colley, David Eastwood and Stuart Semmel broadened the scope by charting and explaining the rise of loyalism, linking it with that of a popular nationalism.[2] There has also been a renewed attention to a range of aspects and figures of the 1790s that have contributed more broadly to our thinking on the period – such as Olivia Smith's analysis of the politics of language;[3] Gregory Claeys' accounts of John Thelwall and Robert Owen and of the pamphlet literature of the debate;[4] Marianne

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[1] James Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790–1850* (Oxford University Press, 1994); Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832–1982* (Cambridge University Press, 1983). See also Jenny Graham's *The Nation, the Law and the King: Reform Politics in England, 1789–1799*, 2 vols. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000).

[2] Robert R. Dozier, *For King, Constitution, and Country: English Loyalists and the French Revolution* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983); Harry T. Dickinson, 'Popular conservatism and militant loyalism, 1789–1815', in Dickinson, ed., *Britain and the French Revolution, 1789–1815* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 103–26, and 'Popular loyalism in Britain in the 1790s', in Eckhart Hellmuth, ed., *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 503–33; Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); David Eastwood, 'Patriotism and the English state in the 1790s', in Mark Philp, ed., *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 146–68; Stuart Semmel, *Napoleon and the British* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

[3] Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language, 1791–1819* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

[4] See *The Politics of English Jacobinism: Writings of John Thelwall*, ed. Gregory Claeys (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), *Citizens and Saints: Politics and*

Elliott's studies of Ireland;[5] Frank O'Gorman's studies of elections and
Paine riots;[6] John Cookson's detailed work on the armed forces and the
'Friends of Peace';[7] Nick Rogers' studies of riots;[8] Gillian Russell and the
late Jane Moody's work on theatre;[9] Michael Durey's work on trans-
atlantic radicals;[10] Austin Gee and Katrina Navickas's books on volun-
teering and later provincial radicalism and loyalism;[11] Vic Gatrell's study
of caricature;[12] and so on. At the same time, literary scholars with interests
in the intellectual movements of the period also turned to ask questions
about how their work connected with this broader historiography; Marilyn
Butler was a major influence in this process.[13] This has produced a
generation of literary/historical writing that embraced the linguistic turn
but that also sought to give the analysis a firmer grounding in a detailed
historical understanding of the period. I am thinking here of Iain
McCalman's detailed investigations of the radical underworld;[14] Jon
Mee's work on radical literary London;[15] Kevin Gilmartin's studies of

Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism (Cambridge University Press, 2002) and *The French Revolution Debate in Britain: The Origins of Modern Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

5   Marianne Elliott, *Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen and France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982) and *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

6   Frank O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons and Parties: The Unreformed Electorate of Hanoverian England, 1734–1832* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) and 'The Paine burnings of 1792–1793', *Past and Present* 193 (2006), 111–55.

7   John Cookson, *The British Armed Nation 1793–1815* (Oxford University Press, 1997) and *Friends of Peace: Anti-War Liberalism in England, 1793–1815* (Cambridge University Press, 1982).

8   Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture and Politics in Georgian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) and forthcoming work on the Royal Navy and impressment.

9   Gillian Russell, *The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics, and Society 1793–1815* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

10 Michael Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997).

11 Austin Gee, *The British Volunteer Movement 1794–1814* (Oxford University Press, 2003); Katrina Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism in Lancashire 1798–1815* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

12 Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006).

13 Perhaps most through those she taught and talked to (including me), but encapsulated in the volume she has edited, *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), and her *Romantics, Revolutionaries and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760–1830* (Oxford University Press, 1981).

14 Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795–1840* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

15 Jon Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (Oxford University Press, 2003) and *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762–1830* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

print culture;[16] and John Barrell's seminal work on the Treason Trials and the 1790s more widely.[17] The scholars of this latter groups, it seems to me, have combined an impressive attention to historical detail with a critical intelligence that has redrawn our understanding of the decade and of the first twenty to thirty years of the nineteenth century.

The essays in this collection have been written over a twenty-year period. In that time I have been fortunate enough to know and work with, in different ways, many of those I have mentioned above. The intellectual community of scholars of the 1790s has some similarities to the free and easy debating clubs of the period: an egalitarian culture of discussion and debate, informed by different interests and experiences, and always critically probing the work of others. As a result, my thinking on issues has developed over time in interaction with their work. It has also, in part, responded to other literatures I have worked with in other contexts that remain largely off-stage in these essays. These 'outside' influences are most evident in the first three essays in the collection, which chart my attempts to analyse the popular movements of the period by drawing on some of the insights of theorists of social movements as well as that of other historians, and responding to analyses that I felt were dismissive of the reformers – for example, seeing in their disagreements and controversies an explanation of their failure.[18] Having read widely in the then emerging literature on social movements in political sociology, and following the discussions about the place of class in understanding the rise of Chartism, I found unpersuasive the implied standard for political movements that some of the literature worked with, and I sought to explain why. I did not then fully appreciate the dangers of treating 'the reformers' as a unity, when their identity was in large part a function of a polarising struggle, arising out of the responses to events in France. This sense that the lines between reform and loyalism were products of the decade led me to turn my attention to John Reeves' Association for the Protection of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers and to the dynamics of that movement. 'Vulgar conservatism' is an attempt to read popular loyalism using the same attention to performance and to the tentative character of meaning that I used in 'The fragmented ideology

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[16] Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge University Press, 1996) and *Writing against Revolution: Literary Conservatism in Britain, 1790–1832* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[17] John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide 1793–1796* (Oxford University Press, 2000) and *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

[18] Ian R. Christie, *Stress and Stability in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain: Reflections on the British Avoidance of Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

of reform'. But what came out of the two pieces was the recognition that I was suggesting an asymmetry between the two movements (and a unity to each of them), in which radical 'insincerity' was a function of tactical responses to repression while loyalist insincerity was simply opportunistic. I do think that there is something right about that suggestion, and 'Disconcerting ideas' tries to defend that view. But it does so with a sharper sense of the dangers of making assumptions about the stability and dimensions of the political spectrum, suggesting instead that there are things that themselves need to be explained. Through these pieces I think I now have a better sense of the complexities of interaction in the 1790s, and of the way in which commitments were forged, worked through and issued in action; and I hope I have made the case for not sequestering accounts of loyalism and radicalism off from each other.

If the histories of the 1790s and work on social movements were the dominant sources in the first three pieces, the second pair of essays draws on wider debates in political theory on republicanism and on methodology in the history of ideas. J. G. A. Pocock's work on civic humanism has had a deservedly major impact on our understanding of British and American political culture in the eighteenth century.[19] Moreover, following work by Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner, it has resulted in a more nuanced 'neo-Roman' model of liberty, which Pettit has done much to ensure has relevance in politics today.[20] Thanks to Iain McCalman and Jon Mee I was fortunate to be visiting the Australian National University when Pettit was developing his ideas, and we were able to talk about them at length. His thinking dovetailed in many respects with the work I was then engaged in on political corruption. Nonetheless, while I believed that there was much to be learnt from this work, I had a nagging concern that there were substantial objections to thinking that republicanism, as a language and set of intellectual commitments, was something that could be said to be at work in any very determinate way in the 1790s. These two essays follow through these objections in rather different ways, the first by looking at the detail of what people were saying and doing in the 1790s and beyond, the second by pressing the question of what it might mean to commit oneself to republican manners, and to ask how far these sort of commitments were able to sit comfortably alongside a range of developments in society and culture at the end of the eighteenth century. While I

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[19] See below, Chapter 4, and see esp. his *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 1975) and *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[20] Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford University Press, 1997); Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

do not claim that republican commitment is impossible, I do suggest that it is something that depends on a range of very special circumstances, and that in turn casts doubt on exactly what meaning we should ascribe to republican language in the period.

In the course of the last thirty years I have worked extensively on the lives and writing of William Godwin and Thomas Paine – especially Godwin. In the essay on Godwin here I examine an issue that has troubled me for some time. E. P. Thompson was hostile to Godwin (and once described me as an overcommitted Godwinian), but he was hostile in the way that the left sometimes have of being harder on those who are close to them than those they oppose.[21] The heroes of the decade, for Thompson and many others, are the orator John Thelwall and the London Corresponding Society (LCS) secretary Thomas Hardy, rather than the more aloof and rigidly intellectual Godwin. For Thompson, Godwin's greatest apostasy was when he apparently turned against Thelwall in his *Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr Pitt's Bills* in 1795, criticising the pyrotechnics of Thelwall's oratory, which he saw as potentially inflaming an ill-informed and uneducated class. That action casts Godwin beyond the pale for Thompson. This account seems to me to be based on a misreading of Godwin's position, and of the events of the period more widely. Godwin's actions revealed the distance he had always maintained from political radicalism, but they also demonstrate his commitment to the steady progress of ideas and their gradual diffusion through society. Thompson reads Godwin as an enlightenment rationalist, whereas, in fact, Godwin had a nuanced understanding of the power of Burke's thought, which framed his attempt to think through how it might be possible to influence men and women and to help them take ever greater responsibility for their destinies. For all the utopianism of Godwin's *Enquiry concerning Political Justice* (1793), it was as much rooted in a historical sociology of some power as it was in what we tend to think of as enlightenment rationalism.

The first essay here on Paine was also prompted by a problem in knowing how to approach the diverse writings and activities of the writer and polemicist. Must we think of someone's oeuvre as a consistent and coherent, interrelated whole? Or does that impose a coherence on our reading that cannot be justified? This kind of issue is prominent in this period, in part because of the tendency to sweep together people's activities into a universal bin labelled 'enlightenment', or, subsequently, to do so into another called 'romanticism'. Against that temptation, and the

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[21] See E. P. Thompson, *The Romantics: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Thelwall* (Woodbridge: Merlin Press, 1997), 96–106; see also 87–95.

corresponding sense that people need a single framework within which to arrange their ideas, I use the work of the anthropologist Dan Sperber to think about the different kind of propositional claims Paine might be making in different areas of his life.[22]

If coherence across domains is too often anticipated, so too is coherence across time. The image we have of Paine is that of a blunt and forceful character (and writer) whose revolutionary credentials were nailed to the mast in 1776, and remained there through his experience of the French Revolution and the British agitation for reform. For most commentators he seems to have been hardly affected by the specificity of the contexts in which he wrote. In the second essay on Paine, my concern is to argue that aspects of Paine's thought that people tend to brush over – for example his lack of interest in universal manhood suffrage until after the second part of the *Rights of Man* (1792) had been published – need to be taken seriously as evidence that the way in which he saw the world was far from as simple as it is usually portrayed and that it had an evolving character. In the essay, I am particularly concerned with the way that Paine's thinking evolved, not in response to Burke but prior to his clash with Burke, and arising from his membership of a group in Paris in the late 1780s that was responding to both the opening events of the French Revolution and the debates arising out of the Federal Convention in the United States.

All these essays are also concerned with the nature of evidence. As a graduate student in political theory I found the most persuasive work on method was that which argued for a contextualist history of political thought, as exemplified in the work of Quentin Skinner, John Dunn and J. G. A. Pocock.[23] Within this emerging body of work there was a strong tendency to treat context linguistically, however, and to treat linguistic context as comprised of substantive works of political thought. That predilection was in part a function of their resistance to a legacy of reductionism within Marxist historical and literary interpretation, but it tended to assume that the answer to the methodological question 'Which context?' was rather easily given. What I tried to do in my first book was to use a wider reading of context by identifying Godwin's conversational circles as a crucial forum for the development of his ideas, and I have subsequently sought to take a wider account of the way in which writing

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[22] Dan Sperber, *On Anthropological Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).
[23] Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. I, *Regarding Method* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); John Dunn, 'The identity of the history of ideas', *Philosophy* 43 (1968), 85–104; J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (New York: Atheneum Books, 1973). I have discussed this movement from the perspective of political theory in 'Political theory and history', in David Leopold and Marc Stears, eds., *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 128–49 (ch. 7).

and reading are partly framed by practices and institutions as well as by
other texts.[24]

Even if one does not treat the character of 'the archive' in quite such
labyrinthine complexity as Michel Foucault, many of his questions remain
pertinent: why not accord the same status to laundry bills as to literary
texts?[25] Not that we should; but we need to know how we are answering
that question in dealing with the various forms of evidence available. My
concern with these issues runs through all these essays. What counts as
evidence for the existence of particular beliefs or commitments? What are
the boundaries for what has been best described as 'the revolution con-
troversy'[26] (does it include canonical works of literature at one end, and
handbills and chalked slogans on walls at the other?)? Why does material
appear in one genre but not another? What lines of demarcation seem to
exist that break the connection between performances in one domain and
those in another (as in Paine's scientific experiments and his political
commitments)? One area I became increasingly fascinated by was that
of popular song – as an expressive medium for ideas and sentiments; as a
vehicle for news and information; as a highly flexible performance that
could respond to its audience's demands; and as an expression of a partly
local and partly national culture. Over the course of many years of iden-
tifying songs, in manuscript collections, chapbooks, songsters, broadsides
and newspapers, it became clear to me that this was a major field of study,
and one that does not simply add a further dimension to our understand-
ing of the decade but might actually lead us to change how we read other
elements in the period. I have not yet done this material the justice it
demands, and, despite excellent work by Vic Gammon, Terry Moylan
and others,[27] there is clearly room for more. Nonetheless, the piece in this
collection on Nelson is partly an attempt to see what can be made of this
type of evidence. When I was originally asked for the piece I thought I had
found about ten major Nelson songs. By the end of my research I had
identified between eighty and ninety. I do not claim to have identified
everything that existed, but I do not think there were others in wide
circulation in the period (and that is the crucial point for the argument

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24 See my *Godwin's Political Justice* (London: Duckworth, 1986).
25 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock Publications,
   1972).
26 By Marilyn Butler in *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy*, and in contrast
   to Alfred Cobban's *The Debate on the French Revolution, 1789–1800* (London: A. & C.
   Black, 1950).
27 Vic Gammon, 'The grand conversation: images of Napoleon in British popular balladry',
   Journal of the Royal Society of Arts 137 (1989), 665–74; Terry Moylan, *The Age of
   Revolution in the Irish Song Tradition: 1776 to 1815* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000).

I make). If the argument is right, the piece points to a degree of control by loyalist forces over something as mercurial as popular song, which gives us a much more forbidding picture of the loyalist upsurge in the early 1800s than is usually acknowledged.

This has also been a fertile period for those working on the French Revolution, and interpretations of France have had a considerable impact both on more theoretical approaches to the study of intellectual history and on the way in which people think about Britain in the period. But one result of a turn against social history and the development of a more intellectual and cultural approach to the French Revolution is the development of a certain element of discursive determinism: a tendency to see events as unfolding from the way in which people conceptualise and talk about the world. This reintroduction of political language and discourse as a primary driver of human actions does, indeed, add an important dimension to our understanding, but it has its limits. One problem is that the intellectual coherence of a position is in many respects an artefact of the reader and the historian. It is we who attribute intellectual and conceptual coherence as a way of accounting for roads taken or not taken – and, while there are clearly moments when political languages do take a determining role, we tend to overstate their monolithic character, to underplay their fragility and to obscure the power and violence that are required to turn propositional coherence into social and political reality. In the two final chapters I turn to a broader example of the way in which political ideas are seen as connected with social reality. In the 1790s and early 1800s, in France, Britain and elsewhere, the language of popular sovereignty, the nation and liberty becomes more widely used, giving rise to a sense that it is in this period that something like a principle of national self-determination is first articulated. Yet, although intellectual historians notch the progress of such ideas up in the emergence of a new modernity, my concern is to show that, while the idea may be there, it is deeply flawed, and in a major sense indeterminate. It is made real in various forms, as in the 1792 French declaration of aid to oppressed peoples, in the *levée en masse* and in the development of various national rhetorics. But we need to see this not as an idea come to fruition but as a set of claims from which social forces and political power forge practical instantiations of commitments that are not in themselves very intellectually coherent. On this kind of history of political thought and conceptual change, the word is made concrete through power, and it is through power that its insistencies and indeterminacies are ironed out – not once and for all, but in this context, on this occasion, in this instance. I do not try to defend the view that this is always the right way to understand ideas, but, if this kind of interpretation can be defended, it suggests that the history of political thought and

conceptual change may need to be much more historically located than it often is, not just in other texts or textual contexts but in patterns of discourse and in the practices, institutions and behaviours that are integral in turning principles into action, and through which power is exercised and order imposed.

This more sceptical account of ideas and their place is also a key theme in the final essay, 'Time to talk', in which I turn back to the LCS and its papers to suggest that, rather than there being an underlying coherence to the positions of the society, we can understand what they say and what they do better by recognising that their commitments were barely, if at all, doctrinal, being for the most part tactical, exploratory and provisional. They shared a broad programme, and they could see that some convictions might damage their capacity to see that programme through, but they did not look for uniformity, and they remained, in many respects, genuinely open-ended about what might happen next. This, and the earlier essays, are both, in this sense, an attempt to recognise in the period the possibilities for other voices, other outcomes, other ways of drawing lines and identifying dangers and possibilities. It was an age in which ideas were re-forming – but that process was one that contained possibilities and potentials for individual and collective agency that became fought over, negotiated and realised to greater and lesser degrees. It was a period in which much changed, even when it did not change in ways that the ideas that people shared and fought over feared or predicted. What I have tried to do in these various essays is to understand better how people negotiated this set of shifting sands, not just in their discourse and publications but also in other aspects of their lives, and in doing so to see the way that their lived experience and their language changed together, not unidirectionally, and often unpredictably. My hope is that we get a better sense of how that world appeared to those who lived in it, a better sense of the extent to which, in different ways, things might have been other than they were, and a better sense of the complex interaction between ideas, practices and commitments in Britain in the revolutionary period.