

Introduction

A New Era

In response to the French Revolution, a wave of enthusiasm for and optimism about social and political change swept Britain. The Dissenting minister Richard Price famously provoked Edmund Burke's ire in 1789 by preaching that, having shared in the benefits of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and seen two other revolutions (American and French) he could see 'the ardour for liberty catching and spreading, a general amendment beginning in human affairs, the dominion of kings, changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience.'¹ Other members of the middling and professional orders, especially those concentrated around the arts, literature and professions of London, also saw these events as heralding wider changes in the European order: from war to peace; from competition to harmonious and productive exchange; from force and fraud to a rational grounding of authority. Tom Paine felt sufficient confidence that the age of European wars was over that he designed a whole welfare system on the assumption that the taxation collected to fight wars could safely be repurposed to promote a better society.²

People brought to these expectations a legacy of enlightenment critiques of luxury and the waste and decadence of fashionable society, a scepticism about the legitimacy of monarchy, aristocracy and priest-craft and a set of aspirations for a more egalitarian and open world that would be based on talent and contribution. Above all, they wanted to think for themselves, to read about events and ideas, to discuss them with their associates and to be in the vanguard of change. And they acted: they met and talked; they established societies; they wrote tracts and texts; they

¹ Richard Price, 'A Discourse on the Love of our Country', in *Price, Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 194.

² Thomas Paine, 'Rights of Man: Part the Second' (1792), in Mark Philp (ed.), *Rights of Man, Common Sense, and other Political Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), chapter 4.

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abjured aristocratic manners and excess; they cut their hair and changed their clothes; they preached and practiced the improbability of human capacities; and they sought to practice equality. Theirs was not a passive response to events overseas, but an active attempt to be involved with, to embody, and thereby to further the changes they saw as immanent in the world unfolding around them. With the benefit of hindsight, Wordsworth's description of their French compatriots captured their ambition and his anxiety about their hubris.

The inert
 Were roused, and lively natures rapt away!
 They who had fed their childhood upon dreams,
 The playfellows of fancy, who had made
 All powers of swiftness, subtilty, and strength
 Their ministers, – who in lordly wise had stirred
 Among the grandest objects of the sense,
 And dealt with whatsoever they found there
 As if they had within some lurking right
 To wield it; – they, too, who, of gentle mood,
 Had watched all gentle motions, and to these
 Had fitted their own thoughts, schemers more wild,
 And in the region of their peaceful selves; –
 Now was it that both found, the meek and lofty
 Did both find, helpers to their heart's desire,
 And stuff at hand, plastic as they could wish;
 Were called upon to exercise their skill,
 Not in Utopia, subterranean fields,
 Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!
 But in the very world, which is the world
 Of all of us, – the place where in the end
 We find our happiness, or not at all!³

This is a book about these members of the middling orders who championed reform, who believed in the importance of reason as a basis for equality and an authoritative guide for their own behaviour, and who challenged the conventions and practices of society. This includes Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Mary Hays, Thomas Holcroft, Elizabeth Inchbald, Amelia Alderson and many of their associates.⁴

³ Wordsworth, 'The Prelude' (1805) Bk X, l. 711–731. In Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth*, Oxford Authors series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 550.

⁴ Something needs to be said about the terminology of 'middle class' and the middling sort. There is evidence of the emergence of people engaged in a broad range of occupations and activities that involved little menial labour, that relied on some skills and some education and that generated an income that allowed people to maintain their families in a moderate style, with a developing range of entertainments, consumption patterns,

In the title, and in what follows, I emphasise ‘conduct’ because I am concerned less with what people said or wrote and more with how they conducted themselves. That is, with how they acted, what principles and aspirations they sought to embody, how they measured themselves in relation to those around them and how they read and responded to the conduct of others. Their conduct was for them a work in progress. They practised it through their relationships, in their writing and in their actions. Indeed, their lives were conducted through a range of activities or ‘practices’ – where that term denotes a combination of components that have an internal logic that delimits and enables agency and through that produces and reproduces the person’s world of experience. Their conduct and commitments have to be understood in relation to the shared practices, networks and discourses that operated in their circles and in the wider society. And we can appreciate the distinctive character of some of their more radical relationships only by locating their conduct within the set of more widely shared conventions and activities that they partly took for granted. At the same time, it is clear that those involved often underestimated the influence that these wider conventions exerted on their individual choices and commitments.

Most of those on whom I focus welcomed the French Revolution and supported the cause of parliamentary reform in Britain in the following decade. William Godwin plays a key role, in part because of the resource that his diary offers to historians,⁵ and in part because he epitomises

activities, etc. that they participated in and that partly emulated but were also often distinct from those of the aristocracy. Drawing objective boundaries for such a class is unlikely to be successful in this period, as would be searching for evidence of a strong subjective unitary identification as a class. There was a good deal of awareness of position, but it was on a complex, gradated ladder. As I argue in Chapter 8, we have to ask different questions about how particular groups and communities might come to have a sense of shared identity and commitments. With the people I examine here, I do not claim that middle class identity was what they fixed on, so much as that writers, professionals and those connected with arts and entertainment in London began to have a sense of themselves as something like a universal class – in the sense of it being in the vanguard of thinking and progress. They were not on the edge of precarity, nor working wholly at the behest of others, nor were they part of a wealthy and idle élite, and they came to see themselves as in some sense holding the balance and ensuring that society would be progressive – although these two impulses parted company in the 1790s under the pressure of political polarisation. Dror Wahrman makes a case for that emerging identity to be fundamentally about politics and ideas. If I disagree, it is because I think those are not ‘natural kinds’ and we are better looking at sets of shared and developing practices. But in either case – I want to argue that, seen from the inside of the group I am interested in exploring – there was a strong sense that in some respects their time had come. See Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain 1780–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁵ A digital edition which I edited with Victoria Myers and David O’Shaughnessy in 2012 with a grant from the Leverhulme Trust: *The Diary of William Godwin*, edited by

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some of the distinctive features of this group of intellectuals of the middling and professional orders and their hopes and expectations. But, while some sections of the book are particularly devoted to Godwin and his immediate circles, my aim throughout is to draw on a wide range of primary resources so as to more fully understand the context for people's thinking and acting. I am also especially concerned to understand the ways in which women in these circles conducted themselves, the challenges and pitfalls they faced and the extent to which their actions were similar to or distinct from those of men and women of similar social status who did not share their political aspirations. More widely, I examine how the agency and understandings of this group fared as the world they inhabited faced the challenges of the developing war with France and the escalation of government repression. Dealing with often dramatic changes and sometimes traumatic experiences, how did people whose hopes and ideals were so positive cope with an increasingly dispiriting and oppressive reality? How did they explain these changes to themselves and how far did they adjust their actions to the more straitened circumstances in which they found themselves?

I have written previously about the political ideas of the period, about both loyalist and reform movements and about areas of literary activity, but this book tries to think more systematically about a range of practical and discursive tensions that emerged in the period between what these men and women aspired to and what they were able to achieve. It focuses in particular on the way that, for all their aspirations, their lives remained embedded in and profoundly shaped by often very conventional social expectations, practices and forms that often undermined or challenged their hopes and ambitions. There are ironies here, and in some cases tragedies, and many were not solely of their own making. But change brings challenges, and this book is an attempt to examine how the rhetoric and the ambitions for change, particularly in relation to inequality, were formulated and practised within a society of deeply engrained customs and conventions.

The multiple dimensions of people's lives and worlds, how they knitted together and with what degree of individual agency demands attention. There was for my subjects what we might think of as a 'Neurath's boat' problem.⁶ Otto Neurath drew an analogy between how we make

Victoria Myers, David O'Shaughnessy and Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford Digital Library, 2010), <http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>.

⁶ In his *Anti-Spengler* (München: Georg D. W. Callwey, Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1921): 'we are like sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom'.

critical progress in relation to knowledge and how we might repair a boat at sea. We can take up any given plank, scrutinise and replace it or repair it; but we cannot take them all up simultaneously without drowning. So too my subjects conducted themselves and lived their lives through sets of practices replete with assumptions and categories, principles of exchange and equivalence, and forms of engagement with a material world that invoked categories of salience and value, permanence and instability. Some of this they took largely for granted; some they were acutely aware of and critically reflective about. In any context, trying to focus on all the moving parts simultaneously produces disorientation and confusion. For my subjects, their enthusiasm for France, their sense that they were participating in a new age, their beliefs in the remediability of the present and their optimism about the changes they saw as prefigured in events around them were accompanied by much that they barely attended to or assumed to be natural, inevitable or a task for the future.⁷

The period 1789–1815 has been the focus of extensive scholarly work because of the drama of events, the belief that it represents a turning point in the development of popular politics, and the wealth of literary and cultural material relating to the politics of the period.⁸ This attention

⁷ One question I cannot deal with here concerns the complex relationships between the reforming literary culture of the 1790s and the advocates for ending the slave trade. My sense is that here too there was considerable inattention and unexamined assumptions both of their own superiority and of the eventual emancipation from nature for those in chains. But serious questions as to the capital's dependence on slavery, how deeply the trade ran through its commercial and intellectual veins and the way in this inflected the lives and attitudes of those so connected seem rarely to have been asked. Slaves were used as a poignant image – but their embodied reality and their contribution to the wealth of the country and to the racial distortion of its culture was rarely the subject of sustained reflection. In Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), edited by Eleanor Ty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), for example (as in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*), it is clear that our heroine's family is steeped in the trade. This raises questions for the modern reader about how far Emma's own disordered emotional world is in part an inflection of that deeper corruption and how far Mary Hays intended this or was relying on a commonplace understanding of the hazards of the trade. But these are not issues that the literary radicals dealt with directly for the most part – and if we look, for example, at women using the analogy between slavery and the position of women at the end of the eighteenth century, we do not find ourselves in contact with their most progressive thinking.

⁸ There is a voluminous literature, detailed extremely well in Boyd Hilton's text and the bibliographical essay in his *A Mad, Bad, & Dangerous People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), which should be accompanied by Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes, *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press/Past and Present, 2003), especially the essays by Burns and Innes. In relation to the rise of popular radicalism and the government response, see: John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793–1796* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic*

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is coupled with a powerful sense that this quarter of a century represents a peak of enlightenment optimism alongside the dawn of romanticism with its recognition of more subterranean forces in the human and natural world. And in that combination it includes an acknowledgement of the impact on men and women in Britain of wider events: the traumas of war; the mixed horror and intoxication of the Revolutionary Terror in France; the re-ordering of Europe under Napoleon; the challenge to Britain's trade and colonial activity following the American Revolution and subsequently the Napoleonic blockade; and the growing movement against the slave trade on which so much British wealth rested. Professional and literary men and women and more generally people of the middling sort were trying to exercise agency and realise their hopes in a world that was rapidly changing, both promising much and at times seeming on the brink of disaster.

London

In the 1790s the population of London stood at about one million people. It was then the biggest city in the world. Heinrich Heine wrote to his friend Friedrich Merckel, while visiting London in April 1827, 'London has surpassed all my expectations in respect of its vastness; but

Movement in the Age of the French Revolution (London: Hutchinson, 1979); Jenny Graham, *The Nation, the Law and the King: Reform Politics in England, 1789–1799* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000); J. Ann Hone, *For the Cause of Truth: Radicalism in London 1796–1821* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); Mark Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution 1789–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963) and *Customs in Common* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1993). For print culture and the related literary world see: Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), *Writing against Revolution: Literary Conservatism in Britain, 1790–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Harriet Guest, *Unbounded Attachment: Sentiment and Politics in the Age of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and *Small Change: Women Learning, Patriotism, 1750–1810* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2000); Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) and *Print, Publicity, and Popular Radicalism in the 1790s: the Laurel of Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language 1791–1819* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). For war and its impact, see: John Cookson, *The British Armed Nation 1793–1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Jenny Uglow, *In These Times: Living in Britain through Napoleon's Wars, 1793–1815* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014). And for the wider cultural and social changes of the period, see: Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth Century England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006) and his *Imagining the Middle Class*.

I have lost myself – nicely capturing the spatial *and* personal disorientation produced by the sheer size, and, implicitly, the sense that one maintains one’s orientation only in more constrained circles.⁹ The city grew significantly in the first half of the century, but it is still plausible to think that something of that experience would have been shared by visitors thirty years earlier. Despite this, there is a tendency to think of 1789–1815 as a period in which everyone knew everyone else (or at least, ‘anyone who is anyone’ would have done so). I previously thought something like this in relation to William Godwin, since his diary is such a cornucopia of reference for London between 1788 and 1836. Over time, however, I have become increasingly convinced that while he met a lot of people in his lifetime, we need to avoid overstating his and other people’s connectedness and we need to reflect carefully on what this apparently dense sociability in fact meant to those involved. We should also not assume that his experience was a common one. Accordingly, I have tried to look much more closely at the bases on which people’s core circles were formed and to assess the extent to which a relatively small group of associates played a dominant role in most people’s sociability.¹⁰

The groups of reformers and literary radicals that I focus on are a particular slice of London’s life. In exploring this world I also examine some of the assumptions often made about the period: that people were all equally in the know about scandals, fashions, literary disputes, and so on; that caricatures spoke to a wide general audience; that those in government understood a good deal about the nature or ambitions of the reform societies; and that the deliberative equality to which reformers aspired was widely reciprocated by those with whom they interacted in bookshops, at dinners or in meetings. To take one example, much of the extensive literature on the period sees the literary and political culture of London as a relatively unified domain, in which people knew each other and in which there was extensive engagement, often across gender boundaries and those of social class. In contrast, I argue that the worlds people inhabited may have been much more fractured and divided and that what held those worlds together might have varied considerably between men and women and between areas of cultural activity and profession. I suggest we might usefully think of a range of ways in which

⁹ Celina Fox, *London: World City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 12.

¹⁰ I have also been influenced (if not wholly persuaded) by the suggestion of the anthropologist Robin Dunbar that there might be an upper limit to the number of people we can know. R. I. M. Dunbar, ‘Neocortex Size as a Constraint on Group Size in Primates’, *Journal of Human Evolution* 22(6) (1992), 469–493.

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people were known to each other: friendship, acquaintance and ties based on family and locality; and that we should reflect on the way that people's aspirations for certain types of exchange influenced the relationships they formed. To take one instance, it is clear that the egalitarian aspirations that fuelled many male relationships often raised substantially greater difficulties when people sought to extend them across gender boundaries.

The literary and political radicalism of the period was the culmination of decades of relative stability coupled with a growing optimism about the possibilities of progress and the development of knowledge. This did not equip people well to handle the pressures introduced by government repression and loyalist reaction during the long and exhausting war with France or to appreciate and develop responses to the stubborn resistances of their political and social worlds. Their eventual fragmentation under the pressures of repression involved some degree of failure to recognise the deep embeddedness of many of their contemporaries (and themselves) in an order and ways of seeing the world that undercut their aspirations. That most people fell back on older ways does not mean that things remained wholly unchanged – but their experience testifies to the fragility of their deliberative ambitions and conduct when these came into conflict with the conventional practices of the social world. This is not a story of radical hubris, nor is it one only of government repression, although there are elements of both. It offers instead an account of the complex world of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century London in which people developed aspirations for a different sort of future and sometimes experimented with approximations to that future, but found their pasts and their present encroaching in ways that further alienated the wider community they had hoped to take with them.

My concern here is to try and tell a more subtle and convincing story about how men and women of the middling orders, arts and professions of the 1790s and 1800s (predominantly in London, but drawing on other evidence where relevant) sought to live their lives and to assess the obstacles and opportunities they faced or could create and to set this analysis in the context of increasing government repression and intolerance towards unorthodox political views.

The Structure of the Book

The book is structured in three parts. The first two chapters explore people's understanding of 'politics' and the changes this undergoes in the first thirty years of the nineteenth century. This involves recognising that for most people politics was matter for discussion, but it was not thought

about as something in which they were practically involved. This was partly because it was largely seen as a matter of private deliberation. In the 1790s, as John Barrell has shown, the traditional distinction between public and private was increasingly encroached on by government.¹¹ Over time the lines were re-drawn and a new understanding of political activity emerged. As part of this discussion I also contrast the idea that many radicals held, that deliberation would produce convergence with their ongoing experience of disagreement. Using Godwin, I examine how that played out, especially in cases in which the disagreement seemed to him to involve the apostasy of and betrayal by his friends. And I consider other dimensions of his radical conduct that generated further conflicts, especially in relation to debt, but also in relation to his relationship to Wollstonecraft and the publication of his *Memoirs ...* of her.

The middle section of the book (Chapters 3–7) turns to questions of sociability, friendship and acquaintance, particularly with respect to gender. In such relationships people argued and debated and did so in the belief that it was through deliberation that knowledge would expand and the world would change. As such, sociability was both the medium for their practice and the essential vehicle for societal change. The models we have of this world of sociability are often based on elite sources. In contrast I explore relatively middle class and professional circles and do so partly quantitatively, looking especially at differences between male and female circles and practices. To do that I begin by examining the diaries of Marianne Ayrton and Elizabeth Soane, before moving to look at the evidence for the existence of a radical sociability among some of the leading female proponents of reform. I will argue that male social circles were largely driven by ideas of disinterested friendship; female circles much less so. That leads me to a discussion of the problems that arose from attempts to practice that egalitarian model across the gender divide. In the final parts of this section I examine the changing character of Godwin's deliberative practice in relation to women and especially in relation to Amelia Alderson, Mary Wollstonecraft and Sarah Elwes. Here too, the conventional practices he encountered consistently complicated his attempts to establish more egalitarian and intellectually productive relationships.

In the final section (Chapter 8), I turn to examine music, dance and song, areas of activities that the more literary radicals were often resistant to and critical of. These practices deserve attention for the ways in which they embedded their participants in a particular narrative of the world,

¹¹ See Barrell, *The Spirit of Despotism*, chapter 2.

which consistently undercut the more rationalist aspirations of the radicals. This area should also encourage us to recognise that many of the earlier components of discussion, including ideas of public and private, the place of loyalist intervention in communities and the conventions of male/female conduct, were implicated in and reproduced in part through these more emotional and bodily practices.

Tools, Methods and Materials

This book is a work of history that draws on historical and literary materials and on the methods and the ideas of the social sciences. In that spirit, it is a set of inquiries that uses a range of ideas and tools from the social sciences to examine this particular historical period and to raise a series of issues that are historical – what happened?, how did this work?, why did this change? and in what way? – and methodological – how could we assess this?, what does it mean when people use particular words in certain ways?, how are what people say and what they mean related to what they would do?, what resources might we need from other disciplines to think about issues that strike us as surprising or discomfiting in certain ways? and how far might our picture of this world be too directed by our own certainties about what makes sense and what doesn't?

In making my case I rely on a number of tools and ideas that it is useful to set out briefly here. The first concerns the concept of politics; the second concerns sociability and the nature of acquaintance and friendship; and the third explores forms of talk that are not deliberative, but serve other functions, and here I am principally interested in practices of talking *about* others.

In considering 'politics' we need to consider the difference between, on the one hand, the exact character and local understanding of what was or was not 'political' in this period and, on the other, whether there are not components of this 'domain' that are invariable in various ways. The latter view sees a certain structure to the field of politics, involving attempts to establish authority and legitimacy in a context of conflict. It does not presume that every society has politics; but it does see politics as a domain that exists in many societies to order conflict through the exercise of authority and power that requires a degree of legitimation. Furthermore, political disagreement operates in at least two different dimensions – the substance of the differences and their claims and questions about the norms, rules and practices by which that difference is to be contested, negotiated and settled. Under what we might call 'normal politics' the second dimension is largely taken for granted; in less settled times, it too becomes a focus for contention. In so far as it does,