

The Scottish People and the French Revolution. By **Bob Harris.** Pickering and Chatto, *The Enlightenment World* series, no.6. 2008. viii + 340pp. £60.00.

Bob Harris's new book is a tribute both to his enormous capacity for research in a wide variety of archives and to his careful, thoughtful scholarship. This study of the popular political culture of Scotland during the 1790s is a detailed and perceptive analysis of a period in Scottish politics which has sometimes been characterised by general, sweeping assessments, reliant on the work of past scholars such as William Mathieson, and Henry Meikle, with whose seminal *Scotland and the French Revolution* (1912) the scholarly buck has for so long stopped. Harris's book builds not only on his own previous work but also the rapidly growing interest in Scottish responses to the French Revolution since two influential theses written in the 1980s by John D. Brims (on Scottish radicalism in the 1790s) and David J. Brown (on Henry Dundas). Since those theses there has been a wealth of new work, both in thesis and published forms, on different aspects of Scottish politics in the 1790s. Harris's book claims to be the first to analyse Scottish responses to the French Revolution across the political scale, investigating loyalism as well as radicalism, although, because of his emphasis on grass-roots political culture, examination of the advanced Whiggish section of the spectrum (mainly, so far as we know, represented by members of the middling and upper classes) is relatively slight. Elite and government responses are here treated only insofar as they were responding to popular politics, rather than to the French Revolution and the war.

The book begins with a chapter examining the eighteenth-century origins of radicalism in Scotland. Harris argues convincingly that, while these may not have been so

solid and clear as those in Ireland and England, it is nevertheless possible to see the development of necessary pre-conditions to the emergence of political radicalism in Scotland, earlier in the eighteenth century, in political structures, the impact of the Scottish Enlightenment, the influence of Presbyterianism, and the expansion of the press and public debate. This is followed by a chapter on newspapers and public opinion in the 1790s, in which Harris makes the case for the importance of newspapers and the impact of the French Revolution in stimulating political and ideological debate. Neither of these is, surely, contentious, but Harris traces the political course of all the main Scottish newspapers through the decade, showing that what they omitted to report and discuss was often as important as what they included, and that they cannot therefore be taken to have been completely reflective of public opinion.

The remaining four substantive chapters divide up the decade more or less chronologically, although the last, on the politics of scarcity, reaches back to the poor harvest of 1795 before extending to 1801. In these chapters Harris combines very careful, nuanced and subtle readings of the complexities of events which are already well known with a rich underpinning of freshly mined material. For instance, because Scottish historians have often been more deeply interested than students of English history in the correspondence between Scottish and English radicals in the 1792-4 phase of the movement, the sources which have usually been investigated are the Scottish sources; but Harris also uses English sources to detect connections and achieves a more precise and fine reconstruction of what the relationship may have been as a result. The examination of the Scottish experience of the 1790s in the context of the British course of events, and of the British element of Scottish politics, are an important feature of the book. Knowing,

for instance, that the food shortage of 1795-6 was not so serious in Scotland as it was in England (pp.195-204), and indeed was exacerbated by the English scarcity, which drove prices up in Scotland as well, is a very useful comparison. The shortage of 1799-1801, on the other hand, affected both Scotland and England equally, according to Harris, and his discussion of why the Scottish response of protest and unrest was less vociferous and violent than that in England is also illuminating. Here he argues persuasively that the explanation that the Scottish elite exhibited greater paternalism than did their English counterpart is difficult to sustain and suggests instead a range of contributory factors which may have been more important. Another instance of the entrance of English ways into Scottish society in this period was Dundas's application of the English system of lords lieutenant as an important layer of administration and government at county level from 1794, and Harris convincingly shows the significance of this system throughout the succeeding events of the 1790s.