

British Spectators of the French Revolution: the view from across the Channel

‘As to us here our thoughts of every thing at home are suspended, by our astonishment at the wonderful Spectacle which is exhibited in a Neighbouring and rival Country – what Spectators, and what actors! England gazing with astonishment at a French struggle for Liberty and not knowing whether to blame or to applaud!’¹

So the Anglo-Irish Whig politician, Edmund Burke, wrote to Lord Charlemont in August 1789; and, while Burke is famous for having declared his hostility to the Revolution in France unusually early and uncompromisingly, he was, as this letter suggested, not atypical in his early fascination with the Revolution. British newspapers were absorbed by events in France from the storming of the Bastille onwards, suggesting that their readers were avid for news of the upheaval.²

This in itself raises an interesting question regarding the manner in which the British public observed the Revolution in France. Some individuals did cross the Channel to France to witness events at first hand, especially during the early days. Those with radical reformist political views were particularly curious to see for themselves. Thomas Paine, who had previously taken part in the American Revolution, fled Britain in September 1792 rather than stand trial for seditious libel for his *Rights of Man* (1791-2), and, having already been elected an honorary French citizen in August that year and a deputy to the new National Convention, was able to take up his seat and so obtain as privileged a view of events as his very limited French

¹ Edmund Burke to Lord Charlemont, 9 August 1789, in *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, eds Thomas W. Copeland *et al*, 10 vols (Cambridge and Chicago: Cambridge University Press and Chicago University Press, 1967-70), vol. VI, 10.

² Norbert Schürer, ‘The Storming of the Bastille in English Newspapers’, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 29:1 (2005), 50-81.

language would allow him. Mary Wollstonecraft arrived in Paris in December 1792, by which time she found an established circle of British and American supporters of the Girondin revolutionaries ready to embrace her company, including Paine, Thomas Cooper, Thomas Christie, Helen Maria Williams and Joel Barlow.³ Opportunities to travel between Britain and France were all but closed after the outbreak of war on 1 February 1793 until the Peace of Amiens was signed in March 1802, but, since some British subjects were thereby trapped in France, a few British eye-witness accounts continued to be produced after this point. The merchant William Russell and his family were bound for a new life in the United States of America in 1794 when their American ship was stopped by a French warship, and they were detained in Brest and then Paris for a year until American diplomacy managed to free them to travel again. Moreover, some intrepid British travellers continued to explore elsewhere on the Continent, and those who journeyed through Germany and the Netherlands recorded their impressions of the impact of the French Revolution there.⁴ During the truce of 1802-3, many members of the British elite, who had been deprived for nine years of excursions to France, hurried to take up the renewed opportunity and, if possible, to see or even meet the new Consul, Napoleon Bonaparte.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of Britons “spectated” upon the French Revolution from Britain, at second, third or perhaps fourth hand, their experience of French events mediated at best by letters from eye-witnesses, and far more commonly by newspaper accounts. Some privileged individuals had French friends whose correspondence informed them: Burke, for

³ See Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: a revolutionary life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), 206-222; Michael Rapport, *Nationality and Citizenship in Revolutionary France: the treatment of foreigners 1789-1799* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴ See, for instance, Ann Radcliffe, *A Journey made in the Summer of 1794, through Holland and the West Frontier of Germany, with a Return down the Rhine* (Dublin: P. Wogan, et al, 1795); Dorothy Wordsworth, ‘Journal of a Visit to Hamburg and of a Journey from Hamburg to Goslar (1798)’, in idem, *The Continental Journals* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1995); and Tsai-Yeh Wang, ‘British Women’s Travel Writings in the Era of the French Revolution’, unpublished PhD thesis (University of Birmingham, 2010).

instance, was a great deal better informed in this way than has often been allowed.⁵ Church sermons, pamphlets, periodicals and graphic satires, however, which probably did a great deal to form the opinion of many British subjects on the French upheaval, were usually themselves fed by newspaper reports. Furthermore, while *The Times* had access to first-hand accounts during the war, few other British newspapers had foreign correspondents. Most acquired their material either from *Le Moniteur*, the French government newspaper, from British commercial and official sources such as diplomatic reports, or from other London newspapers.⁶ It is likely, therefore, that relatively few British contemporaries had a very thorough understanding of the Revolution in France.

Moreover, since the reports and commentaries which informed most British spectators about revolutionary events in France were largely written in Britain, their own opinions of the Revolution were also often heavily influenced by many layers of British domestic political debate. While many British observers took considerably longer than Edmund Burke to come to a settled opinion on the French Revolution, as the ebb and flow of the tide of events eventually forced them to change their minds, it is difficult to avoid the conclusions that most if not all of them saw in the Revolution what they wanted to see, and that they viewed it primarily through the prism of British political affairs. It suited conservatives to have a worked example of the ill effects of representative government and republicanism, while liberals wished to see the Revolution fitting into their own historical schema of liberal progress, and radicals hoped to see a model of *ancien regime* monarchy successfully replaced with democratic government. Similarly,

⁵ Preface, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J.C.D. Clark (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 43-53; Derek Beales, 'Edmund Burke and the Monasteries of France', *Historical Journal*, 48:2 (2005), 422-36.

⁶ Schürer, 'The Storming of the Bastille in English Newspapers', 58; Jeremy Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Croon Helm, 1987), 91. The graphic satirist James Gillray spent August 1793 in Flanders with Philip de Louthembourg, who had been commissioned to produce a large painting to honour the successful British siege of Valenciennes,

the British public often expressed opinions on France in relation to the impact of the Revolution on them, most commonly via the war of 1793-1815.

Government and conservative spectators

By October 1789 any hesitation and doubtful admiration Burke had felt were evaporating, and he was beginning to fear that “the Elements which compose Human Society seem all to be dissolved” in France, “and a world of Monsters to be produc’d in the place of it – where Mirabeau presides as the Grand Anarch”.⁷ Already the core of his view of the French Revolution had already crystallised: it was to him an assault on the basic foundations of European civilization, in its attack on the old social order and on the Church. At this stage, however, most government ministers and politically conservative commentators reacted to events in France only with mild interest and a degree of *Schadenfreude*. As William Grenville MP, cousin of the Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger, remarked in September 1789, “The main point appears quite secure, that they [the French] will not for many years be in a situation to molest the invaluable peace which we now enjoy.”⁸ Pitt himself remained resolutely neutral and detached, refusing to help prevent unrest in France by sending flour supplies in June 1789. Others approved of the early stages of the Revolution, believing them to replicate in French circumstances Britain’s Glorious Revolution of a century earlier, and assuming that a constitutional monarchy, a measure of political liberty and a degree of religious toleration were all that the French, similarly, aimed at. “We saw a great people reclaiming the inheritance of men, and boldly aspiring to be free”, as

⁷ Burke to Richard Burke, October 1789, in *Burke Correspondence*, vol. VI, 29-30.

⁸ William Grenville to the Marquess of Buckingham, 14 September 1789, in the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos (ed.), *Memoirs of the Court and Cabinets of George the Third*, 2 vols (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1853), vol. II, 165, quoted in John Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt*, vol. II, *The Reluctant Transition* (London: Constable, 1983), 47. Grenville became Foreign Secretary in April 1791.

Thomas Hardy, professor of ecclesiastical history at the University of Edinburgh later explained.⁹

In his abandonment of neutrality for hostility towards the Revolution, however, Burke merely prefigured the trajectory taken by the majority of other British observers of the Revolution in France. Other conservative British spectators were the first to follow. A small number of them were quickly persuaded by Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and his subsequent flow of writings on France, and a few had come to similarly negative conclusions about the Revolution themselves by 1791, such as William Paley and James Boswell; but most conservative observers changed their minds about the Revolution over the course of 1792, because of events in both France and Britain during that year. The increasingly violent and radical progression of events in France was clearly crucial – notably the abolition of the monarchy in August, the “September Massacres” in Paris, and the aggressive foreign policy pursued by the National Convention in November and December. Conservatives were horrified by the atrocities committed by the revolutionaries, and many who had previously sympathised with the Revolution, or had been indifferent to it, began to revile it. They were particularly shocked by the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793, and commemorated him in poems, sermons and prints. The British government withdrew its ambassador in August 1792 upon the deposition of the French monarchy, and expelled the French envoy in January 1793 after the execution of Louis XVI. It was forced to abandon its neutral stance more substantially by a direct French challenge to British strategic interests in the form of the threat to Dutch autonomy in November and December 1792. The Dutch Republic was Britain's ally; moreover, its coastline, if seized by the French, would add considerably to the French ability to threaten the British coast. War was declared by the French National Convention against both Britain and the Dutch

⁹ Thomas Hardy, *The Patriot* (Edinburgh: J. Dickson and G. Nicol, 1793), 4.

Republic on 1 February 1793, but had the French delayed declaring hostilities much longer, it is likely that the British would have resorted to arms themselves.¹⁰

Ministers' and loyalists' change of heart regarding the French Revolution, however, also had much to do with the alarm they felt caused by the surge of radicalism in Britain itself from as early as January 1792, inspired and emboldened by the French Revolution. They believed that the British system of a parliamentary monarchy and the rule of law, combined with a property-based social order, were what guaranteed British liberties and commercial prosperity. Inequality was both natural and divinely ordained, and hereditary power was necessary to ensure stability and order. The radical movement, stimulated by the French example, seemed to threaten the social and political order, and the security of property. Conservatives therefore came to agree with Burke that the French Revolution was "the common enemy of all governments, and of all establishments, religious and civil"; and that Jacobinism was a "spirit of restlessness and intrigue", a "tremendous monster".¹¹ In response, the British government both encouraged and prompted loyal Britons to help to quell radical activity at home by means of propaganda, loyal associations, militarisation and intimidation.

Furthermore, while they were deeply hostile to the French Revolution from 1792 onwards, the great majority of government ministers and loyalists in Britain were too preoccupied with British politics and society to be convinced that France must be returned to either its pre-1789 regime or one of the early revolutionary variants. So long as stability was recovered in France, ultimately they were prepared to endorse treating for peace with any form

¹⁰ Jeremy Black, *British Foreign Policy in an Age of Revolutions, 1783-1793* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 437-56.

¹¹ The *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine; or, Monthly Political and Literary Censor*, 2:7 (January 1799), 12; Henry Dundas to Sir James Murray, 12 September 1792, quoted in Harvey Mitchell, *The Underground War Against Revolutionary France. The Missions of William Wickham 1794-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 26; the Duke of Portland to William Pitt, 5 October 1798, in *The Later Correspondence of George III*, ed. A. Aspinall, 5 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962-8), vol. III, 135.

of government there, even if they did not approve of the successive French Revolutionary regimes. A small number of conservative British officials and commentators, however, supported Burke's view that the primary objects of the war ought to be the defeat of the Revolution where it had begun, in France, and the restoration of the ancient French monarchy.¹² Most ministers and loyalists were more exercised by the impact of Revolutionary principles on French foreign policy and British radicalism than they were by the principles of 'liberty, equality and fraternity' themselves; but Burke and other 'crusading' writers and politicians were fixated by the Revolutionary principles themselves, believing that only by stamping them out could their threat to the social order be removed, and that they could only be destroyed by counter-revolution in France. Writers such as John Bowles, John Gifford and John Robison believed that the French Revolution was based on false and abstract ideas of liberty and sovereignty. Abbé Barruel's conspiracy theory of the French Revolution, published in 1797, was highly compatible with Burke's own ideas on the genesis of the Revolution, and Bowles and other writers agreed that the Revolution was the result of "a deep and vast conspiracy against all the ancient institutions of Europe, civil, political, and religious" which had been brewed for decades by the propagation of Voltaire's infidel philosophy and "licentious" German writings.¹³ Its success in instituting a republican government in France was "the establishment of eternal hostility against all real liberty, and consequently that of Britain".¹⁴ Only a complete counter-revolution, restoring the ancient Bourbon monarchy to France, could cure the disease.

¹² Government ministers in this category included William Windham, the Duke of Portland, Lord Spencer and, increasingly, William Grenville.

¹³ Abbé Augustin de Barruel, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du Jacobinisme* (1797; London: Philip le Boussonnier & Co., 1798); [John Bowles], *Letters of the Ghost of Alfred, Addressed to the Hon. Thomas Erskine, and the Hon. Charles James Fox, on the Occasion of the State Trials at the Close of the Year 1794, and the Beginning of the Year 1795* (London: J. Wright, 1798), 49.

¹⁴ Arthur Young, *The Example of France a Warning to Britain*, 4th edition (1793; London: W. Richardson, 1794), 210.

Liberal opposition Whigs

Divided attitudes towards the French Revolution had a devastating effect on the main opposition grouping in the British Parliament, the Foxite Whigs, led nominally by the Duke of Portland and substantially by Charles James Fox. The Revolution had initially been welcomed with effusive joy by most, if not all, of the opposition Whigs. Like the conservatives, they had all initially assumed that the Revolution was the French equivalent of the Glorious Revolution of 1688-9. Some, such as Fox, did not ever deviate from this view, continuing to believe that it was a splendid addition to a long succession of totemic events – the Reformation, the English Civil War, the Glorious Revolution and the American Revolution – which all aimed, not so much to institute popular sovereignty, as to reduce executive power. As Samuel Whitbread asked the House of Commons in 1793,

‘What brought about that great event the Reformation? Not the theories or speculations of philosophers, but the impolitic avarice and injustice of the church of Rome. What brought about the catastrophe of Charles the first? – What the Revolution in this country? The oppressions of the executive govt. To the same cause America owes her freedom. Lastly, what brought about the Revolution in France? The misery of the people; the pride, injustice, avarice, and cruelty of the court.’¹⁵

The opposition Whigs were strongly committed to the limitation of crown power because of their own struggle against George III, who had ejected them from government in 1783, and who was still determined to keep them out of power ten years later.

The increasing brutality of the Revolution in France from 1792 onwards provoked doubts, however, and the extension of the European war to Britain in 1793 made the Revolution a matter of national security, forcing opposition MPs to decide the relative importance of the

¹⁵ Samuel Whitbread to the House of Commons, 7 May 1793, in *The Parliamentary History of England, From the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, 36 vols (London: Longman & co., 1806-20) [hereafter *PH*], vol. XXX, 881.

existence of a parliamentary opposition and the issue of national security. For some, such as Fox, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Charles Grey and Thomas Erskine, the existence of an opposition in Parliament was of such fundamental importance that it helped to shape their views on the Revolution and the war. For others, such as Portland, William Windham and Lord Spencer, national security came first, and between 1791 and 1794 these MPs gradually elected to leave the opposition benches to support (and, in some cases, to join) the government for the duration of the military conflict. They shifted sides only because of their ideological hostility to the Revolution, and their hatred of Revolutionary principles had had to be sufficiently great to overcome their considerable party political reluctance to move, so they were often among the most committed counter-revolutionaries on the government benches.

Equally, the rift in the party caused the Foxites (fewer than half of the old opposition group) to become still more deeply committed to their position in opposition and to their stance on the French Revolution and the war, which now became a significant factor in the early consolidation of this group of MPs as a parliamentary party.¹⁶ Although they were shocked by the events of August and September 1792 in France, the Foxites tried to explain these and other revolutionary atrocities, accusing conservatives of exaggerating their extent, and claiming that their causes were understandable if not legitimate. They often suggested that the Revolution had unleashed so immense a supply of energy, previously pent-up under absolutist oppression, that it could not immediately be brought under control. It was regrettable, but only natural, that those who had suffered great inhumanities at the hands of royal despotism should have to vent their fury when it became possible for them to do so. Moreover, the French were not the only aggressors in Europe. The Foxites condemned the continental war against revolutionary France as a war of plunder-hungry European despots against the very principle of liberty. Austria and

¹⁶ Frank O’Gorman, *The Whig Party and the French Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1967).

Prussia had declared war against France in April and June 1792 respectively, because of which the Revolution had quickly slid off the rails into horrifying violence. Britain had chosen to fight on the same side as Russia, Austria and Prussia – states which had carved up Poland between them – on whose side Britain ought to be ashamed to fight. As Fox put it to the House of Commons in April 1793:

‘If, as he [Fox] feared, this war was undertaken against principles, let us look to the conduct of Germany, Russia and Prussia and, if the spirit of chivalry was so alive amongst us, see if there were no giants, no monsters, no principles against which we had better turn our arms.’¹⁷

The opposition Whigs even expressed gladness when French armies defeated Coalition armies, earning them their portrayal in graphic satires as “fifth columnists” and “Jacobins”.

It is not surprising, therefore, that contemporaries were convinced that the Foxites were keen supporters of the French Republic throughout the 1790s. In fact, however, they too had been disillusioned by French politics and successive revolutionary regimes after 1792, though they approved of the overthrow of the monarchy and insisted that it could not and should not be restored, and that the war should be ended. They were initially open-minded about Napoleon Bonaparte, despite the fact that he had overthrown the existing constitution, and despite many other examples of illiberal actions and policies, because he pursued peace energetically. Fox wrote gloomily that, since there was now no political liberty left in the world, Bonaparte was “the fittest person to be the master”.¹⁸ But he, too, was a disappointment to Fox. When Fox travelled to Paris during the Peace of Amiens in 1802, he disapproved of the quasi-monarchical

¹⁷ Fox to the House of Commons, 25 April 1793, *PH*, vol. XXX, 724.

¹⁸ Fox to Thomas Maitland, 1801, in *Memorials and Correspondence of Charles James Fox*, ed. Lord John Russell, 4 vols (London: Bentley, 1853-7), vol. III, 345.

pomp and ceremony surrounding Bonaparte, and argued with him over the need to retain a large military establishment during peace, and over freedom of the press.¹⁹

Nevertheless, such was the Foxites' commitment to their mythology of progress against overmighty monarchies, that they remained committed to their view that the French Revolution, before the rise to power of the Jacobins and the institution of the Terror, had been a wonderful development. They saw it as essentially Whiggish and did not recognise its inherent radicalism and democratic purpose. Unlike Burkean conservatives, who came to believe that the Revolution was *in toto* the result of a dark and deep-rooted ideological conspiracy, and even more moderate loyalists, who changed their view of the early years of the Revolution because of its later trajectory, the Foxites continued to believe that the Revolution had begun gloriously and had had the potential to continue well. It had been instigated by heroes and acquaintances of theirs, such as the Marquis de Lafayette, and it had deviated horribly, not because of any integral defect, but because of the malign interference of despotic foreign powers.

Radical reformers

Radical reformers in Britain were even more enthusiastic about the Revolution in France than the Foxite Whigs. They admired its heroism and applauded its purpose.

'The People of France had for many centuries groaned under the most horrible despotism that the human imagination can conceive. ... To overthrow this villainous combination of the FEW against the liberty, property, and happiness of the MANY, in the year 1789, the whole Nation actuated as it were by one general impulse, rose up, 'hurled the Tyrant from his throne', and established the RIGHTS OF MAN'.²⁰

¹⁹ L.G. Mitchell, *Charles James Fox* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.123-5, 159-61, 165-9, 174-7. Bonaparte let Fox down finally by failing to agree peace terms with the Ministry of all the Talents in which Fox was Foreign Secretary in 1806. *Ibid.*, 234-5.

²⁰ [Daniel Isaac Eaton], *Extermination, or an Appeal to the People of England on the Present War, with France* (London: D. I. Eaton, 1793), 4-6.

They held dinners in towns in different parts of Britain to commemorate the anniversaries of the fall of the Bastille in Paris from 1790, and radical clubs and societies were established in such places as Manchester, Birmingham, Norwich, Sheffield, Derby, Dublin and Belfast in 1791 to discuss events in France. Many other societies emerged in 1792, more radical and with a higher proportion of artisans and tradesmen in their memberships. In a term clearly borrowed from the French, Scottish radicals held “national conventions” in Edinburgh in December 1792, May 1793 and October 1793, and a British Convention with English and Irish delegates in November-December 1793. They toasted “the Armies of Liberty”, and used French revolutionary phrases, songs and symbols – *Ça ira*, the *Marseillaise*, liberty trees, Jacobin oaths, and the title of “citizen”. Radical sympathy for the French project overflowed in practical measures of support such as the sending of addresses and delegates to encourage the National Convention, and clothing, shoes, blankets and ammunition to help the “soldiers of Liberty”.

Like the opposition Whigs, radicals saw the Revolution in France as the successor of the Glorious and American Revolutions, and proof that human progress was on the march; they believed that reform would now seize the rest of Europe. Richard Price, the Unitarian leader and economist, famously spoke in the sermon which provoked Burke to write his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, of “the ardour for liberty catching and spreading; a general amendment beginning in human affairs” as a result of the American and French Revolutions.²¹ Radicals recognised, however, unlike the Foxites, that the French Revolution was more progressive than either the Glorious or the American Revolutions. Conservatives had seen this too, but the radicals admired and welcomed it, at least until violence drowned the advantages won by the

²¹ Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country, delivered on Nov. 4, 1789, at the meeting-house in the Old Jewry, to the Society Commemorating the Revolution in Great Britain*, 6th edition (London: T. Cadell, 1790), 50.

political and social upheaval in France. Thomas Paine argued in *Rights of Man*, Part One (1791) that French revolutionary principles – the abolition of hereditary monarchy and aristocracy, and the natural right of all men to an active political voice – must now be applied not only to the old despotisms of Europe, but also to British politics and society. Many others added their voices and writings to this call. The London Corresponding Society informed the National Convention in 1792: “Frenchmen, you are already free, but Britons are preparing to be so.”²² Mary Wollstonecraft even urged greater social radicalism on France itself, dedicating her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) to Talleyrand, urging him to ensure that equal education was offered to girls and women in France as was available for boys and men.

The radicals were hostile towards the British war against France because of their support for the Revolution, although this resulted in the great weakening of their case among contemporaries, because it allowed loyalists to portray them as unpatriotic and even treasonable, and the government to pass a raft of legislation designed to repress their campaigns (which the radicals, without any apparent sense of irony, described as a British “system of terror”).²³ Nevertheless, they defended Jacobinism throughout the 1790s; like the Foxites, they explained atrocities by the magnitude of the cataclysm, and they tried to argue that they were not integrally connected to the political principles which had caused the Revolution. There is even some evidence that a few radicals asserted that, should the French successfully invade Britain, they would either refuse to resist them or that they might even join them in fighting British defending forces.²⁴

²² London Corresponding Society address quoted from the *London Chronicle*, 12 Nov. 1792, cited in Clive Emsley, *British Society and the French Wars 1793-1815* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 14.

²³ E.g. John Thelwall, *An Appeal to Popular Opinion, Against Kidnapping & Murder* (London: J. S. Jordan, 1796), 52.

²⁴ See Emma Vincent Macleod, *A War of Ideas: British Attitudes to the Wars Against Revolutionary France 1792-1802* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 124.

Napoleon Bonaparte became a stumbling-block to radical support for the French Revolution, however: his autocratic rule and his lack of respect for representative government such as that of the Swiss cantons disappointed British radicals. Some, such as the poets Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey and Blake reluctantly withdrew their opposition to the war for this reason; and by the time of the Peninsular War (1808-13), many British radicals supported Spanish and Portuguese resistance to Bonaparte.²⁵ Paine wrote to Henry Redhead Yorke in 1802, of France: “Republic! Do you call this a republic? I know of no republic in the world except America ... I have done with Europe and its slavish politics.”²⁶ However, many British radicals had been treating the French Revolution with greater caution since as early as 1793, even as they tried to keep defending it; they did not denounce it as it slid into extremism, as the conservatives did, but they did begin to stop holding it up quite so often as a model for imitation, in favour of the American example, which had so far proved a more stable and less bloodthirsty republican regime.

Mark Philp has demonstrated that, in Part Two of *Rights of Man* (1792), Paine was much more concerned to present America as a model republican government than he was to defend revolutionary France.²⁷ Paine may not have been the only writer to insert the United States into the British debate on France, but he did it at greater length and far more substantially than others had previously done, and, as the Terror in France took root, other radicals began to pick up his lead. The French Revolution proved that the revolution and the republic in America were not predicated on exceptional circumstances, and that their principles were relevant elsewhere; but,

²⁵ Peter Spence, *The Birth of Romantic Radicalism: war, popular politics and English radical reformism, 1800-1815* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1996).

²⁶ Henry Redhead Yorke, *Letters from France in 1803*, 2 vols (London: M. Jones, 1803), vol. II, 342, quoted in Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought* (London: Routledge, 1989), 34. See also Sheps, ‘The American Revolution and the Transformation of English Republicanism’, 8-9; John Cartwright, *The Constitutional Defence of England, Internal and External* (London: J. Johnson, 1796), 40-5.

²⁷ Mark Philp, ‘The Role of America in the “Debate on France” 1791-5: Thomas Paine’s Insertion’, *Utilitas*, 5:2 (1993), 221-37.

as the French republic became an increasingly dangerous model to promote and a disappointment to many radicals and reformers in Britain, the case of America could be much more easily deployed to demonstrate the viability of representative government in the face of criticisms based on the evidence presented by France.²⁸

Moreover, revolutionary France had become less than safe for foreigners, even those with known radical credentials. Paine himself was imprisoned in the Luxembourg prison for more than ten months in 1794, and apparently only escaped execution by a quirk of fate, but other British radicals were confined by the outbreak of war to France, and trapped by the Terror in frightening circumstances. Helen Maria Williams, novelist, letter-writer and chronicler of the French Revolution, was also confined in the Luxembourg Palace and then the English Conceptionist Convent, both turned into prisons, together with her mother and sister. It is not surprising that America sustained its role as the asylum of liberty in radical writing and practice in the 1790s, during which many British and Irish radicals emigrated to the United States.²⁹

Radicals in Britain were delighted by the outbreak of the Revolution in France, and they were extremely keen to see it succeed. To this end, they defended it, often at great risk to their own personal security, until it was clear that the representative republican government and society promised by its first few years had been replaced by a military autocracy.

British public opinion

²⁸ E.g. William Winterbotham, *An Historical, Geographical, Commercial, and Philosophical View of the American United States, and of the European Settlements in America and the West-Indies*, 4 vols (London: Winterbotham, Ridgway, Symonds and Holt, 1795), vol. III, 281.

²⁹ See Rapport, *Nationality and Citizenship in Revolutionary France: the treatment of foreigners 1789-1799* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Michael Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1997) traces 49 English, 18 Scottish and 152 Irish radical emigrants to the United States in the 1790s. See also Richard J. Twomey, *Jacobins and Jeffersonians: Anglo-American radicalism in the United States, 1790-1820* (New York: Garland, 1989).

It is clear, then, that even those British political commentators with clear ideological commitments or parliamentary loyalties changed their minds regarding the French Revolution as the 1790s progressed and the nature of the Revolution and the republican regime in France changed. Fox and the opposition Whigs clung to their conception of the Revolution as an essentially moderate phenomenon that deserved its place in their genealogy of constitutional re-balancing, and the radicals similarly tried to defend it even though acknowledging more robustly the scope and scale of its purposes, but, like government ministers and other conservatives, they were all forced to review their perceptions of the Revolution after it veered into the Terror and then military autocracy. Outside these groups of activists, other keen political observers also found themselves requiring to revise their opinions, and perhaps these individuals were more representative of most spectators of events: having less to lose by changing their minds, they were more able to acknowledge that they had done so.

The poet Anna Seward offers a fascinating example of this process. It is clear from her many letters to friends during the years between 1789 and 1807 that she took a lively interest in the career of the Revolution in France, but she admitted candidly in them that she had changed her mind about it at various points. Her letters also exemplify the manner in which many British people “spectated” on French events by reading a mix of first-hand accounts and partisan commentary. As a liberal Whig, she was inclined towards a Foxite view of events, but she was reluctantly convinced for a period by Burke’s pessimistic writings to reject the optimistic first-hand account of the Revolution offered by the radical *Letters from France* by her friend Helen Maria Williams. Some of the later radical replies to Burke caused her to question this stance, but by autumn 1792, as the Revolution became more sweeping and more violent, and as radical societies flourished in Britain, she had regained certainty of her opposition to the Revolution, and

she supported the British government's war against France for a year or so after it began in February 1793. By mid-1794, however, the war had proven both unsuccessful and enormously expensive, and Seward had returned to her usual stance of opposing Pitt. Discussing this change of mind, Seward told a correspondent in November 1796, in a comment which showed her unusual honesty and insight: "You will perhaps think I am wading beyond my depth, when I thus write to you of politics ... but I am not too proud to confess myself mistaken, beneath the force of such disastrous proofs of it exhibited by this ruinous war. Time is a broad mirror, which often shows us the fallacy of our own judgment."³⁰ It seems probable that such fluctuations of opinion on the French Revolution were very common among spectators in Britain and elsewhere.

Other members of the British public were unlikely to have had quite such substantial access to newspaper reporting and pamphlet commentary on revolutionary events, and may have taken much less interest in them until the Revolution was forced upon their notice by the outbreak of war which affected them directly, by way of military recruitment, increased taxation, its impact on manufacturing and trade, and the construction of coastal defences. War turned the impact of the Revolution in France personal for many in Britain and, while some sectors of society benefited from the war, it is unlikely to have disposed most people well towards the Revolution. Conservative activists, as H.T. Dickinson has argued, can be said to have 'won' the debate on the French Revolution in Britain, both in terms of the quantity and distribution of propaganda compared with that of the radicals, and as demonstrated by the reduction of radical

³⁰ Seward to Edmund Wigley, 19 November 1796, in in *Letters of Anna Seward written between the years 1784 and 1807*, 6 vols, ed. A. Constable (Edinburgh: Constable, 1811), vol. IV, 279–280. See Emma Macleod, "Thinking minds of both sexes": patriotism, British bluestockings and the wars against revolutionary America and France, 1775-1802', in *Gender, War and Politics: The Wars of Revolution and Liberation - Transatlantic Comparisons, 1775 – 1820*, editors Karen Hagemann, Gisela Mettele, and Jane Rendall (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), 247-64.

activity to limited middle-class or underground circles.³¹ The war, however, consolidated the efforts of conservative campaigners to blacken the Revolution in the eyes of the British public, by raising patriotic sentiments (however patchily throughout the long conflict) and by causing practical hardship and constraints for many people.³² British spectators of the French Revolution may have been informed in varying degrees about events in France, but almost all of them tended to react to it less on its own terms and more in terms of how it seemed to them to further or frustrate their own political and practical interests.

³¹ H.T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: political ideology in eighteenth-century Britain* (London: Methuen, 1977), p.272; idem, 'Popular Conservatism and Militant Loyalism', in *Britain and the French Revolution 1789-1815*, ed. idem (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p.124.

³² Macleod, *A War of Ideas*, ch.8.