

Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793-1796

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Dreaming about the royal family is a recognized historical phenomenon. In 1972 Brian Masters devoted an entire book to exploring it. Fifty per cent of the dreams he collected involved having tea with one or other member of the family. A minor and darker aspect of the phenomenon is the premonition in dreams of royal deaths. But imagining the king's death is a far more complex business than merely dreaming it, and imagining the king's death is the project of the latest book by Professor John Barrell.[\(1\)](#)

Professor Barrell has been at the forefront of interdisciplinary history in recent years, equally at home in the fields of poetry, painting, literature and history. His latest book, which involves all these disciplines, takes him also into the field of law. Oxford University Press have allowed him a generous length (737 pages) plus 19 illustrations and footnotes at the bottom of the page to pursue his investigations into the change in the definition and understanding of treason in just three years (1793-1796) at the end of the eighteenth century. No sign of publishers' 'dumbing down' here and God bless them for it. Professor Barrell has repaid them with a work that is formidably scholarly but compulsively readable, meticulously researched (55 pages of bibliography) and subtly argued.

His book is divided into four sections, titled respectively 'Sad Stories' dealing with the fantasies of regicide provoked by the death of King Louis XVI, 'The Invention of Modern Treason' on the trials of radicals and reformers in 1794, 'Alarms and Diversions' on the threats to the safety of King George III, and 'Phantoms of Imagination' on the debates surrounding the Treasonable Practices Act.

In what has recently become a primary consideration for historians, he begins with a lucid and instructive consideration of language, and the way in which it became a battleground, a subject that has previously been explored in depth by Steven Blakemore and Olivia Smith.[\(2\)](#) It all has a very topical ring. One work *A Political Dictionary for the Guinea-less Pigs* provided a glossary of words regularly used by the Prime Minister, William Pitt, "to conceal the corrupt intentions of his government". We are here almost in New

Labour territory for which my Lancaster colleague Professor Norman Fairclough has just produced a linguistic analysis, claiming something similar.[\(3\)](#)

Many radicals in the 1790s claimed that the conflicts of the period were at bottom conflicts over the precise meaning of words such as constitution, liberty and equality. The words at the heart of Barrell's discussions are 'imagination' and 'imaginary', words which were, he tells us, part of the common vocabulary of political discussion in the decade before the French Revolution. In the 1790s the word 'imagination' functioned as a 'sign by which all the apprehensions and misapprehensions of the opponents of the revolution in France, and reform at home, could be epitomised,' (p.8), or at least until 1798 when the alarms of loyalists which for years had been represented by reformers as 'imaginary' were more generally allowed to have become based on reality. 'Imagination' was a pejorative word, taken to mean something hysterical, unbalanced and irrational, and as such was applied to both supporters and opponents of revolution. Indeed the term was used to attack both Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man*.

In Barrell's book, and in his contention, 'imagination' is the crucial linguistic pivot upon which a change in the treason laws takes place. The 1351 Statute of Treasons specified seven different offences which amounted to high treason. The first was 'when a man doth compass or imagine the death of our lord the King'. In this context, both words mean to design or intend. By the 18th century 'imagine' had come to take on its modern meaning-to picture in the mind. The precise meaning of 'imagination' thus came to figure at the centre of debates about treason in the 1790s as the government sought to extend the application of treason charges to the radicals and reformers and they sought to resist this extension.

The object of the law's solicitude underwent a transformation during the reign of King George III as Linda Colley, Marilyn Morris and Simon Schama have all convincingly argued.[\(4\)](#) King George III and Queen Charlotte became the epitome of respectable bourgeois values, rejoicing in family life with their large family and being painted with that family to stress domestic virtue. George III achieved that combination of the ordinary and the extraordinary that came to characterize the monarchy: the family as symbol of decent middle-class values (modesty, duty, thrift, good works) and the crown as symbol of the nation celebrated in regular ritual and ceremonial. The fact that *The Times* could say when George III died in 1820 that 'It is an important truth that most of the qualities which George III possessed . were imitable and attainable by all classes of mankind' indicates how well-established was this view of the crown as domesticated and super-ordinary.[\(5\)](#) This transformation in the image of monarchy served to enhance concern about threats to the life of the King, a concern reinforced by depictions of the last days of Louis XVI. For as Barrell demonstrates, illustrations, engravings and accounts of the events leading up to Louis' execution, the parting from his family and the preparation for death, consistently depict him as a father and imbue him and his family with private and domestic virtues. In these circumstances, it is difficult to accept him as anything other than a blameless Christian martyr. It is worth reflecting that exactly the same process occurred around accounts and depictions of the deaths of King Charles I and Czar Nicholas II of Russia, their errors and misdeeds submerged in an aura of violated domesticity. Barrell argues with considerable validity that in the period from 1788 to the mid-1790s, the institution of monarchy had become so heavily invested in the language of sentiment that it heightened both the fears of loyalists and the fantasies of radicals. Barrell carefully analyses a plethora of songs, poems, handbills and pamphlets inviting the readers to envisage the death of kings. But he asks if regicidal imaginings meant a desire to establish a republic at once and concludes - as other scholars have - that there was a distinct lack of unanimity in radical circles on the future of the monarchy. There were revolutionists who wanted the immediate violent overthrow of the monarchy and the established order. There were evolutionists who saw the republic as the eventual goal to be reached after a long, slow process of popular education and enlightenment. There were transformationists who believed that the monarchy should be retained but should become elective. There were millenarians who believed and expected that the reign of earthly monarchs would shortly be replaced by the kingdom of Christ on earth. Barrell concludes that the majority of regicidal imaginings would carry the connotation of the abolition of the monarchy. But they were, as he admits, 'a small number and largely confined to the metropolis' (p. 124).

Part Two of the book is devoted to a detailed examination of the succession of treason trials in 1793-4, the

legal arguments advanced on both sides and the extensive pamphlet literature engendered. The leading radical groups, such as the Society for Constitutional Information (SCI) and London Corresponding Society (LCS), were pressing for constitutional reform, planning conventions and endorsing the views of Tom Paine. The government was particularly alarmed by a general convention of the Friends of the People in Scotland held in Edinburgh in 1793 and attended by delegates from the English radical societies. This convention which deliberately modelled itself in style, structure and language on the French National Convention, led to charges being laid against seven men who were accused of planning 'to subvert the limited monarchy and free constitution of Britain, and to substitute in its place, by intimidation, force and violence, a republic or democracy, as wild, as cruel, as despotic, and as abominable as that which at this moment desolates France'. They were charged not with treason but with sedition, because the prosecution did not believe a treason charge would stick. But the word treason occurs repeatedly throughout the proceedings and Barrell concludes that we are at the beginning here of the transformation of the nature of treason charges.

Three of the defendants were found guilty and sentenced to fourteen years' transportation. But most of the defendants in the subsequent trials, Thomas Walker in Lancaster, Thomas Hardy, John Thelwall and John Horne Tooke in London were acquitted. But Barrell traces with infinite care every nuance and every linguistic shift as the government's lawyers seek to extend the meaning of 'imagining the King's death' to encompass any conspiracy to overthrow the constitution and the defence lawyers seek to resist this extension. It was the difficulty of making this extension that was to lead to the passing of the Treasonable Practices Act in 1795, which superseded the 1351 Act, and redefined treason in the way the government had been seeking to do in the trials.

The political context of all this is that the government claimed that the radical societies were secretly arming and were now actively plotting the overthrow of monarchy and constitution. A secret committee of the House of Commons concluded that the leaders of the reform societies had been 'imagining the King's death', and the radical leaders were arrested. The question is how far were these fears justified? Barrell thinks the fears were misplaced. The LCS had no more than 800 members and very few weapons. Many of those who believed that there was a conspiracy thought it impracticable and doomed to failure. But Barrell depicts the government as seeking out occasions to give effect to the definition of treason. There was the 'Pop-Gun Plot', a conspiracy by two LCS committee members to assassinate the King with an airgun capable of discharging a poison arrow. Barrell believes that this was fabricated by disaffected LCS members and deliberately exaggerated by William Pitt in order to 'literalize' his redefinition of the charge of treason. It was then dropped when the case proved too flimsy. The pamphlets of millenarian prophet Richard Brothers, which predicted to death of George III, were another vehicle for 'imagining the King's death'. But Brothers was arrested and questioned by the Privy Council, certified insane and committed to a madhouse. Finally, on the day of the state opening of parliament the King's coach was mobbed and shot at and after he had left it, destroyed. This was the catalyst the government needed to put through the Seditious Meetings Bill, to regulate public meetings such as those of the LCS and the popular debating societies, and the Treasonable Practices Bill which effectively defined treason as any threat to the King, the throne, the realm or parliament. These acts, argues Barrell, effectively tamed the radical authors and booksellers and terminated the debate about the meaning of treason, which would 'never again be the subject of the kind of argument, fervent, inventive, paradoxical, often flippant but always deadly serious, that had characterized so much political and legal debate in the two years from January 1794 to December 1795' (p. 603).

Professor Barrell has given us what is probably a definitive analysis of the debates, legal arguments, pamphlets and literary squibs surrounding the treason debate. But what does it amount to in the wider political context? There was a time when the great burst of radical activity in the 1780s and 1790s was seen in effect as an English revolution. It was E.P. Thompson in his enormously influential *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), who argued that the period from the 1790s to the 1830s, saw the emergence, in the wake of the French Revolution, of a working class consciousness that was radical, revolutionary and republican, hostile to monarchy and aristocracy and committed to equal rights, representative institutions and popular democracy.⁽⁶⁾ That interpretation has been considerably modified in recent years. The radical activity is now regarded by many, though not all, historians as far more limited in extent and effect.

Thompson, as he subsequently admitted, underestimated the countervailing importance of religion, loyalty to the crown and patriotic hostility to the French within the working class. And Craig Calhoun in *The Question of Class Struggle* (1982) challenged the whole basis of Thompson's argument by claiming with a good deal of justification that Thompson merely charted the rise and fall of the radical English artisan and not the making of the English working class at all.⁽⁷⁾ Calhoun argued that many of the discontents Thompson saw as manifestations of radical class consciousness were better interpreted as affirmations of an older and tradition-based populism, which was conservative rather than radical. How else was one to explain why a movement apparently so radical and republican should be appealing and petitioning so constantly to the King?

Gerald Newman has taken this even further and argued persuasively that the radical movement was divided and that mainstream radicalism, populist, monarchist, anti-aristocrat, anti-foreign and anti-republican, was developed from specifically English rather than French influences and was a movement not just for political but moral, social and cultural reform, strongly nationalist and compatible with both the monarchy and the Anglican Church. The strand of the movement which was atheist, cosmopolitan, republican and Francophile, was therefore peripheral.⁽⁸⁾

So it may well be that Barrell is dealing with a minority of a minority. It might be asked, as indeed Iain McCalman, whose excellent book *Radical Underworld* takes up the story at the point at which Barrell stops, does ask of himself:

Why write about a circle of radicals whom a variety of historians have dismissed as harmless cranks or destructive loonies? Certainly they were obscure, numerically few and sometimes silly. For most of our period they probably numbered around sixty dedicated activists, fanning out in post-war years to 200-300 committed followers and perhaps 2000-3000 attendees of meetings. Apart from some intermittent provincial links, their influence was confined to the metropolis, and - like most London radical groups - they were chronically fissiparous ⁹.

He answers his own question by saying that they are intrinsically interesting as a small but continuous revolutionary-republican underground, that they intersect with plebeian culture and with crime, and that they provide a fascinating sidelight on the rough/respectable cultural divide. Some though not all of the same arguments apply to Barrell's subjects.

But what is remarkable about the laws the government passed to remedy the defects in the treason laws is their subsequent fate. The Seditious Meetings Act was due to run for only three years and it was rarely used and the Treasonable Practices Act only until the death of George III, and it was never used. So was there ever a threat to the King and the constitution? Barrell argues that most of the threats were chimerical and the government deliberately exaggerated them in order to increase its powers. This was the view argued at the time by the radicals and the opposition. But the effects the government went to ensure the successful prosecution of radicals suggests that they had real fears. It should not be forgotten that in France 'the Terror' was raging, the King and Queen and great sections of the aristocracy had been beheaded and that it only needed one well-aimed bullet to put an end to the life of the British monarch. It would be criminally irresponsible and complacent for the government to sit back and do nothing. There was a policy of repression which saw the Habeas Corpus Act suspended, 200 men prosecuted for sedition and the clutch of acts passed to punish such sedition. But radicals and reformers were just as much victims of internal splits as external attacks, and Pitt's repression was a far cry from 'The Terror' across the Channel. Reading Barrell's account puts one in mind of the McCarthyite period in America. There was a policy of repression, liberals claimed that there was no real threat but the release of information from post-Soviet Russia has revealed that while many of McCarthy's victims were innocent, some of the victims of the repression were genuinely spies and subversives. It is easy enough to assume that the authorities are always in the wrong when they crack down-but sometimes there really is a threat to the constitution.

Notes

1. Brian Masters, *Dreams About H.M. the Queen and Other Members of the Royal Family*, London, Blond and Briggs, 1972.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Steven Blakemore, *Burke and the Fall of Language: the French Revolution as Linguistic Event*, Hanover, NH, University Press of New England, 1988, and Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language 1791-1819*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Norman Fairclough, *New Labour, New Language?*, London, Routledge, 2000.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992; Marilyn Morris, *The British Monarchy and the French Revolution*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998; Simon Schama, 'The domestication of majesty: royal family portraiture, 1500-1850', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 17 (Summer 1986), pp. 155-183.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Colley, *op.cit.* p. 232.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1982.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. For Thompson's modification, see Thompson, *Making*, p. 916; Craig Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1982.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism, 1740-1830*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: prophets, revolutionaries and pornographers, 1795-1840*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 2.[Back to \(9\)](#)

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