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Unrespectable Radicals? Popular Politics in the Age of Reform

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Once, radicals of the late 18th and early 19th century appeared as distinctly respectable. They were earnest, improving, and mindful of the public good, which was all of a piece with the sober Dissenting stock from which many of them sprang. There was, of course, a revolutionary fringe, but this was inhabited by the overwrought or the immature. That revolutionary extremists made their foolhardy grabs at power was regrettable, but the insurrectionary attempts of these years ? two parts tragedy to three parts farce ? were a measure of the ruling elite?s selfish and shortsighted obstinacy; they did not detract from the essential rightness of the radical critique. In this view, which was not entirely dispelled by E. P. Thompson, the radicals of unreformed England were Gladstonian liberals *in utero*. All they lacked was the whiskers.

That was before Iain McCalman?s *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge, 1988). McCalman lifted the lid on an altogether seamier side of radical endeavour. In the taverns and alehouses of the capital?s lowliest neighbourhoods he located a ?blackguard? tradition, nourished by irreconcilable enemies of the established order. These were people who had no notion that they were living through an age of reform ? to use the phrase employed rather incongruously in the title of the collection under review. Even if they had, they would have wanted none of it. The denizens of the radical underworld were treasonable by instinct. They aspired to overturn, not to ameliorate. They were

rancorous millenarians, scurrilously abusive utopians. They inhabited a criminal *demi-monde* where extortion, pimping or the publication of obscene squibs were admired ways of turning a penny. They scoffed at self-improvement. For them, ?un-respectability? was a badge of honour. Needless to say, they despised Francis Place, the arch-exponent of artisanal respectability. The feeling was mutual.

Although savage mockery of all that was holy was the stock-in-trade of this radical underworld, its activists were deadly serious about what they were doing. Like Francis Place, many of them were veterans of the London Corresponding Society (LCS). The ?Two Acts? of 1795 made public agitation of the democratic cause, which the LCS had pioneered, a virtual impossibility, and in 1799 the organisation was proscribed outright. In the face of this legislative pounding, the democrats of the 1790s dispersed in different ideological directions. For Thomas Evans and a clutch of others who were to embody the ?blackguard? tradition the writings of Thomas Spence became pivotal. Spence (1750?1814) had been a down-at-heel presence on the London radical scene in the 1790s, but he was no orthodox democrat. Political equality, he decided, would be of little value to the poor and dispossessed as long as the land remained the private reserve of the aristocracy. The Spencean panacea was therefore the communal ownership of land. Given that Britain?s rulers had baulked at the most minimal reform of the electoral system in the 1790s the chances of them acceding to a redistribution of their estates were nil. In such circumstances Spencean politics were necessarily putschist. A determined hard core of revolutionaries would have to assault the heart of the state, hence the Spa Fields riots of 1816 and the Cato Street conspiracy of 1820, both Spencean enterprises.

The numbers involved were tiny ? perhaps only 200 to 300 committed individuals in the post-war years ? but it is not difficult to see why McCalman?s vivid portrait of their milieu was greeted with acclaim by his fellow historians. The Spenceans exhibited features that historians and critics of the late 20th century found irresistible. Cultural theorists who looked for acts of transgression that could illuminate a wider moral landscape were delighted with the rich pickings to be had in the radical underground, for the Spenceans transgressed in every way they could. They were violent in word and gesture. Scorn, rage, and defiance were the principal shades of their emotional palette. Blasphemy and provocation was their habitual resort, and raucous parody their response to the solemnities of conventional political and spiritual life. They seemed to live in perpetual Rabelaisian tumult.

Unrespectable Radicals? returns to this territory 20 years on. It brings together a dozen of McCalman?s colleagues, collaborators and former pupils in a festschrift that reflects on the categories and insights of *Radical Underworld*. None of the essays disappoint but it cannot be said that the collection offers ?a coherent and integrated treatment? of popular politics in the age of reform (the promise made by the publishers on the back cover). That is too much to expect from a slim volume that starts in the London Benjamin Franklin knew and closes in mid-Victorian New Zealand. The editors make the more reasonable claim that the thematically and methodologically diverse contributions they have commissioned can be marshalled under the headings of performance and marginality (p. 2).

Iain McCalman repeatedly drew attention to the theatricality of the ?blackguard? tradition: its habitués were devoted to boozy ritual and highly dramatised declamation. But such theatricality was not restricted to a shunned subculture. Gillian Russell highlights the extravagant courtroom manner of Thomas Erskine, the lawyer who, besides acting for the defence in the Treason Trials of 1794, specialised in trials for ?criminal conversation?. These were civil actions in which a cuckolded husband sought damages from his wife?s lover. Unlike divorce proceedings in the ecclesiastical courts, which turned on the fact of illicit sex, ?crim. con.? actions centred on the emotional disruption brought about by adultery. They provided, therefore, an opportunity for a commanding performer like Erskine to appeal to the modish sentimentalism of contemporary culture. He did so to great effect, persuading juries to award enormous sums in compensation to aggrieved husbands. Erskine was egged on by the Lord Chief Justice, Lloyd Kenyon, a dour moral conservative, but most conservative observers were unimpressed by his histrionics. Erskine struck them as egotistical, self-indulgent and unmanly; he touched upon fears of creeping effeminacy in the revolutionary age.

Jack Fruchtman Jr addresses a quite different style of performance, that of Benjamin Franklin. What drove

this respected public figure into rebellion against the crown? Fruchtman focuses on the American?s appearance before the Privy Council at Whitehall in January 1774, when Franklin was subjected to an hour-long harangue by the solicitor general, Alexander Wedderburn. The violence of Wedderburn?s invective stunned all those present, causing several recent historians to conclude that it was this shameful mauling that destroyed Franklin?s faith in the British government. Not so; Franklin held out lingering hopes of reconciliation even as he sailed for America in March 1775. But, to return to the Privy Council hearing, it was not just Wedderburn?s fury that stuck in the memory of observers, it was Franklin?s reaction. He remained immobile throughout, maintaining an Easter-Island impassivity. Why? Fruchtman does not speculate, but could it have been a wish on Franklin?s part to indicate that it was the ministry that was disruptively innovative, not the colonists?

Michael Durey?s ?Loyalty in an age of conspiracy: the oath-filled civil war in Ireland 1795-1799? looks at performances that were far from the artful confections of Thomas Erskine; the actions in which he is interested were driven by fear and desperation. In 1790s Ireland both loyalists and United Irishmen sought to cement political allegiances through the use of oaths. Swearing fidelity to the United cause was the fundamental step for recruits to the revolutionary organisation. It committed them to a secret and unbreakable obedience; it required them to risk all when called upon. Both sides of the political divide recognised the gravity of these undertakings, which was why the Insurrection Act of 1796 made it a capital offence to administer an illegal oath and prescribed transportation for the taking of such oaths. The government was appalled at the numbers being sworn into the United Irishmen in the mid-1790s, but should the oaths be taken at face value? In an essay that shows little regard for nationalist pieties, Durey stresses that oaths were often contingent and conditional. The thousands that were administered by United Irish agents may be as much as index of the intimidation that local activists could bring to bear as a genuine reflection of committed insurgency. In a society in which ?civil consensus? had broken down duplicity became a tool of everyday survival.

Durey?s insistence on the elusive and often liquid character of political loyalties in these vexed years sits awkwardly alongside the other contribution that deals with matters Irish: Ruan O?Donnell?s essay on the Military Committee of the United Irishmen. O?Donnell makes a cogent case for seeing the secretive Military Committee as providing organisational continuity between the rebellion of 1798 and Emmet?s rising in 1803. That the Committee?s core personnel remained in place over the intervening five years is clearly demonstrated. Some major assumptions are made about the health of the wider organisation, however: ? *No more than 30,000* had been killed of an organization which boasted in excess of 300,000 sworn adherents? (p. 137: my italics). This is to accept that oath-bound rebels were unwaveringly staunch ? precisely what Durey warns against. The 30,000 deaths that are talked of so lightly must have included a disproportionately high number of the most committed militants, and the effect of such a slaughter on the morale of those who escaped can only be guessed at. Such things haunt the memory.

Memory is the subject of Paul A. Pickering?s ?Betrayal and exile: a forgotten Chartist experience?. William Griffin and James Cartledge were both dedicated Manchester Chartists. Both were embroiled in the strike movement of 1842 and both were arrested. Facing charges of sedition and conspiracy, both agreed to testify against their former comrades. Needless to say, they were reviled in the Chartist press. ?If on earth there can be a name more hated than another?, pronounced Bronterre O?Brien, ?it is the name of a TRAITOR, A spy is as bad as a devil; but a TRAITOR is a bishop of devils? (p. 205). In fear for their lives, the two turncoats disappeared as soon as the state trials were concluded. They fled, Pickering has discovered, as far as they could go: James Cartledge resurfaced in Tasmania, William Griffin in New Zealand. Here, surely, was an opportunity for the fugitives to demonstrate the capacity of political and personal identities to mutate ? a capacity that is a recurrent feature of the essays in this volume. Jonathan Mee?s piece on Robert Merry and the ?political alchemy of the 1790s?, for example, follows the poet?s switchback ride through that decade, during which time he sloughed off his fashionable Della Cruscan persona and emerged as an ardent supporter of the French Republic. An odyssey that began in the salons of the Whig grandees ended in the bracingly raw democracy of the young United States.

Turbulent times, it would seem, necessarily gave rise to personal transformation. Consciously or

unconsciously, many who were caught up in the political and cultural upheavals of the age embraced new identities. Yet nothing of the sort happened in the case of the Chartist traitors. They displayed a striking constancy in outlook and identity. Neither Griffin nor Cartledge troubled to so much as change their names. And once installed in antipodean exile they picked up the threads of their earlier political and social activism as though nothing had altered. They continued to be temperance campaigners and trade unionists, and they retained a highly class-conscious interest in the land question. The ease with which they did so prompts Pickering to suggest the presence of a ?convenient colonial amnesia? in 19th-century Australia and New Zealand. In colonies where displaced and not infrequently disgraced persons of one kind or another were common, he suggests, an unspoken willingness to overlook past lives and misdemeanours was an essential social lubricant.

The imperial context informs some of the most instructive essays in *Unrespectable Radicals*? James Epstein?s study of Pierre Franc McCallum, a shady radical journalist who fetched up in Trinidad in 1803, stands out. McCallum found an island caught up in the wash of the Haitian revolution and the revolutionary/counterrevolutionary conflicts that had spilled out of Europe. Formerly a Spanish colony, British conquest had made Trinidad into ?an open frontier, attracting ambitious planters and a motley crew of casualties from other islands looking to revive their fortunes? (pp. 148?9). Presiding over this confused and factionalised society was the unsympathetic figure of Brigadier-General Thomas Picton, Trinidad?s military governor. McCallum soon fell foul of the Picton regime, but, unbowed by a spell in the notorious prison at Port-of-Spain, he thumbed his nose at the colonial authorities using every literary device at his disposal. Giving the radical underworld a colonial twist is a valuable step. Epstein shows McCallum appealing to British constitutional liberty as a safeguard against the abuse of power on the Atlantic periphery. Nimbly, McCallum also used colonial abuses as a mirror of elite misrule in the metropolis.

David Worrall?s ?Islam on the romantic period stage: Hyder Ali, Tippoo Saib and beyond the captivity narrative? also considers the ways in which over-mighty colonial authorities were subject to metropolitan radical critique. Tippoo Saib, the Mysore ruler who had been an antagonist of the East India Company in the 1790s, had been systematically denigrated by the Company?s propagandists in the years immediately before and after his defeat and death in 1799. But within 20 years Tippoo Saib enjoyed a literary rehabilitation. Plays such as *Tippoo Saib; Or, The Storming of Seringapatam*, staged in the early 1820s, presented the Indian warrior-prince in a far more sympathetic light. Worrall suggests that drama hostile to the East India Company was commercially viable because of a plebeian and multicultural public in London. As is so frequently the case, however, when considering the reception of cultural products, audience response has to be inferred from slender evidence.

The extension of the questions originally posed by Iain McCalman into the colonial world is laudable. After all, by 1820 Britain had the largest maritime empire on earth. London, the imperial capital, was notably cosmopolitan; so too its radical netherworld. Edward Despard, whose insurrectionary career was cut short on the gallows in 1802, had witnessed the inequities of British rule first-hand in Honduras. And Robert Wedderburn, one of the most memorable characters in *Radical Underworld*, was well-placed to attest to the evils of slavery, being the Jamaican offspring of an enslaved African woman and her Scottish master. That said, the focus of the volume under review is resolutely Anglophone. What of other national and imperial experiences? McCalman acknowledged the influence of Robert Darnton?s work on the literary underworlds of the French Enlightenment, but the broader continental dimension is missing from this festschrift, even though McCalman himself has since explored the darker side of Enlightenment culture across Europe. Could a less Anglophone approach pay dividends? The Europe-wide paranoia about the subversive machinations of the *illuminati* suggests it could.

There are some commendable attempts here to move the experience of the marginalised to the centre of historical attention. Members of the radical underworld were unquestionably marginalised, both at the time and later, but republican women were doubly excluded, for the underworld was a masculine environment, often aggressively so. Christina Parolin?s moving essay on Susannah Wright, whose unquenchable hostility to Christianity brought her repeated court appearances and imprisonment, is therefore welcome. Like many ?infidel? activists, Wright exploited the courtroom as an arena in which to publicise her views and to defy

her persecutors. The bravura skill with which she did this prompted applause from within the free-thinking circles in which she moved, but those circles were small. The extremism of her views and her association with Richard Carlile, an advocate of birth-control as well as blasphemy, ensured her isolation.

The radical underworld, it is worth remembering, was a small world. Nevertheless, the contributors to this volume make a good case for seeing some of its practices and emphases as having a more pervasive presence in the political culture of the time. Perhaps the implications of this could have been drawn out more explicitly? McCalman?s 1988 book concluded with a *tour de force* speculation on the place of the underground tradition in the trajectory of working-class culture in the 19th century. There is no equivalent here. This is a collection of case studies, after all. All are soundly researched and well-delivered. The most intriguing are those that self-consciously meditate on their own conceptual foundations. Michael Davis?s essay on the ?Mob Club? is exemplary in this respect, using a range of sociological literature to tease out the contradictions in the short life of the LCS. Democrats had to fight hard against the sneers of their opponents, who stigmatised the LCS as an emanation of the ?mob?: irrational, hysterical and monstrous. The organisational structures of the LCS should not, therefore, be seen simply as functional; they were intended to demonstrate the civility of democrats, to underline their status as practitioners of open, dispassionate discussion. The difficulty for the LCS was that its constituent divisions all too often gathered in an uproarious tavern environment that was in constant tension with the self-consciously upright stance of the Society.

Is the radical underworld, despised and beleaguered, of continuing importance for historians? Emphatically yes. The essays gathered in *Unrespectable Radicals?* successfully broaden out the terms of debate. The best of them make the early 19th century appear as something far more complex, tangled and contradictory than a simple age of reform. This is salutary. A major historiographical tendency of the 1990s was to insist on the essential continuity in popular radical traditions in Britain. There was little to distinguish Jacobins from Chartists, Chartism slid seamlessly into liberalism, and the labour-socialist tradition grew smoothly out of a liberal seed bed. The recovery of a more pervasive and knotted ?underground? tradition speaks a little differently. A stress on the deep continuities in ?progressive? politics has its dangers: it can all too easily collapse into simply registering the stately march of progress. The ruffians of the underground tradition, together with a far wider cast of characters than might at first have been guessed at, stand guard against that.

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