

ART. XIV. – *Freedom and Liberty: Cumbria and the Borders during the period of the French Revolution 1789-1802*

By JUNE C. F. BARNES, B.A., PH.D.

THE French Revolution of 1789 is one of those historical landmarks which live in the mind as decisive turning points at which the course of history somehow changed, and which had wide-reaching repercussions touching on everything which followed. In the longer perspective, of course, the Revolution of 1789 was but one in a series of upheavals stretching much further back in time. In 1789, as the citizens of Paris stormed the Bastille, many in England had recently been celebrating the centenary of their own Glorious Revolution of 1688, in which Parliament had finally established control over the Monarchy. In England, too, many had hailed the revolt of the American colonists in 1778 for much the same reasons. As Thomas Paine was to observe in 1791, “nothing of reform in the political world ought to be held improbable . . . this was an Age of Revolutions from which everything was to be looked for”.¹

The complexity of the British response to the French Revolution is best understood if seen in the context of the people’s increasing desire for political reforms which would give them the right to elect their own Parliamentary representatives. This had been the subject of serious discussion over the previous two decades, when the “Wilkes and Liberty” agitation of the 1760s and the American War of Independence in the 1770s placed it in the forefront of men’s minds. But the idea that all “free-born Englishmen” should have the vote as of right was an issue which, although it might appear entirely reasonable today, many in an 18th-century property-based government saw as being revolutionary enough. Therefore, although the fall of the Bastille and the setting up of the French National Convention were welcomed by many who now saw France joining America and Britain as bastions of liberty, for others, the initial enthusiasm turned to perturbation, particularly after the execution of Louis XVI. Fears grew that a similar political upheaval might be about to take place in Britain, and those calling for Parliamentary reforms were seen as being tainted with French Jacobinism by those who believed that any reforms would be dangerously levelling. Thus in Britain a distinct polarising of attitudes became apparent. This state of affairs continued when war broke out between Britain and France in 1793: many were against the war from the start, and it became increasingly unpopular as privations and hardships resulted in growing popular unrest. Before long, the British Government was obliged to take strong measures to control the lower orders, particularly in the developing industrial districts, by billeting troops across the country, controlling the press, and prohibiting the holding of public meetings and trade unions. And so, by 1796, the British movement for Parliamentary Reform, which hitherto had been essentially legal and moderate, was gradually forced into undercover organisations which were to function sporadically for the next half-century, while growing all the while in popular support. It is against this background that the occurrences here described must be viewed.

This paper sets out to show how even in Cumberland and the Borders people were affected by and responded to the events of this time. The intention is to examine the

ways in which the first triumphs of the French Revolution were hailed by leading local party politicians, to be followed by the later responses of the lower orders in explosions of popular unrest, and in movements driven to operate secretly, as anti-Jacobin propaganda swept the country in the disturbed years which followed the outbreak of hostilities with France in 1793.

“Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive . . .”. As everyone knows, the best description of the joyous atmosphere prevailing in the heady, first days of the Revolution comes from the pen of William Wordsworth, who had been in France at the time:

Twas a time when Europe rejoiced,
France standing on the top of golden hours
And human nature seeming born again . . .
. . .all hearts were open, every tongue was loud
With amity and glee; we bore the name of Englishmen
And hospitably did they give us hail
As their forerunners in a glorious cause.

(*The Prelude*, Book 6)

And Wordsworth was not the only notable north-countryman to have experienced the great event at first hand. The Cumbrian M.P., John Christian Curwen, also visited France at this time, as did James Losh of Woodside, Carlisle. Both of them had welcomed the Revolution as members of the aristocratic Whig *Society of the Friends of the People*, an organisation dedicated to achieving a measure of Parliamentary reform - which had sent a fraternal address to the French National Convention, partly composed by Losh and delivered by him in person.² Losh could claim acquaintance with no less a revolutionary than Jean-Paul Marat, “*L’Ami du Peuple*”, who had been a frequent visitor at the Losh family homes in Carlisle and Newcastle. Marat had served his political apprenticeship in the twenty years before the Revolution, studying English electoral politics,³ and seems to have associated himself with Losh’s father and his Cumbrian friends in the election of 1774.⁴ Indeed, this intriguing link between Cumberland and Revolutionary France may serve to illustrate the ways in which the minds of those Cumbrians who were foremost in welcoming the revolution had been prepared over the previous decades.

In Cumberland, the political situation in the latter half of the 18th-century revolved on the epic electoral contests between the “Blue” Whigs and the “Yellow” Tories, as the Blues strove to prevent the Carlisle constituency from falling into the hands of Sir James Lowther, afterwards first Earl of Lonsdale. These struggles have been described at length elsewhere:⁵ for present purposes it is sufficient to state that in contemporary accounts the Blue party believed that they represented “Freedom and Liberty” while thanks to the notorious electioneering tactics of Sir James, the Yellow Tories were seen as the party of “Tyranny and Corruption”. A political cartoon of the time shows Sir James Lowther hacking down the Tree of Liberty, with the city of Carlisle in the background, surrounded by the 1400 “Mushroom” electors illegally enrolled from amongst his tenantry, while his cousin Jacky Lowther, always known as “Punch”, sets off towards Westminster down “Corruption Lane”.⁶ However, on the other hand, a Tory supporter, writing in the 1820s, claimed that the Blue party in Cumberland had always been “the child and cradle of Jacobinism”,⁷ and given the acquaintance of some of the leading Blues with the revolutionary, Marat, it may be supposed that this electoral

gibe was well-founded. In his introduction to his political tract, *The Chains of Slavery*, Marat claimed to have set up political clubs in 1774 in Carlisle, Penrith and Newcastle, and it is intriguing to conjecture that he may have practised his demagoguery on the citizens of Carlisle before rousing those of Paris.

It is not possible now to point with any certainty to Marat's political clubs, but we do know that at this time a club met at the Grey Goat in Carlisle, and another at Workington whose members met "to read the newspapers and to discuss the progress of Liberty in the Kingdom",⁸ and that people connected with them were behind the production of a short-lived publication entitled *The Carlisle Magazine*, directed to "tradesmen, farmers, merchants and gentlemen" which strongly supported the American Colonists in their struggle against the Crown, and published part of Tom Paine's radical tract, *Common-sense*.⁹ However, given Marat's interest in electoral matters, his clubs may well have been little more than short-lived "associations", set up for election purposes. We know of one such group operating during the Carlisle election of 1774 from a letter intimating that "the Cry of Freedom echoes through the streets, and an association has been entered into by the Trade Guilds . . ." the writer going on to observe that "the common people was making a great bustle".¹⁰ Marat's own contribution to this election was a handbill directed *To the Freeholders of the County of Cumberland*, one of a series of election tracts which he signed, "An Englishman", purporting to come from one of themselves, which were later published in *The Chains of Slavery*. It ends in a manner which foreshadows his later activities:

When the dreadful hour of Reckoning shall arrive, when the People, provok'd by repeated Injuries shall call their spoilers to their fatal Account; we may, then, having kept ourselves pure and undefiled, with a clear and approving Conscience, inflict on those Betrayers of the Liberty of their Country, Punishments, if such can be devis'd, equal to their Demerits.¹¹

"Freedom and Liberty" was still being used as the Blue watchword at the election of 1786, when the Freemen of Carlisle's tent at the Carlisle Races was decorated with the Standard of Liberty,¹² and in the same year at the annual dinner of the Trades Guilds on Ascension Day, toasts were drunk to "Liberty the World O'er", and hopes expressed that the example set by the citizens of Carlisle in their resistance to the Lowthers' attempts to limit their electoral freedoms "should lead to some permanent regulation of the security of national Liberty".¹³ In the General Election of 1790, which took place against the background of the revolutionary events in France, such democratical sentiments were still very much to the fore in the Blues' campaign as their supporters demonstrated their enthusiasm for the Revolution. At the commencement of the campaign the *Cumberland Pacquet* carried an article on "The Progress of Liberty", beginning, "At the name of Britain, of America, of France, shall the friend of Freedom feel his heart palpate with joy, and his eyes fill with delicious tears . . . Ye Patriots of the World, rejoice!"¹⁴ And the same issue reported a dinner held on the top of Cross Fell, which had been attended by fifty Cumbrian gentlemen, all notable Blues, to celebrate the anniversary of the Fall of the Bastille. They joined in the singing of a rousing song specially written for the occasion, in which the sentiments combined to celebrate the Glorious Revolution of 1688 with that in France and their own hoped-for victory over the Lowtherite Yellows:

The Crown is the Goblet. We'll hail the Great Day

When Liberty triumphed o'er Tyranny's sway.
 The Glorious Memory to pledge we hold it no crime,
 With the Sons of Fair Freedom in every clime.

At the declaration of the Poll in the 1790 election, the cry of "Freedom and Liberty" was well to the fore as large numbers of Carlisle citizens combined to forcibly eject the rioting Yellow "mushroom" Electors and the Lowther army of West Cumbrian bludgeon-men from town.¹⁵ This suggests that in Carlisle's own electoral struggles with the Lowthers the local townspeople saw many similarities with the situation in France, and in supporting the Blue cause believed that they were associating themselves with the wider political issues of the time. Though here it must be said that despite their "Freedom and Liberty" slogan, the leading Blue Whigs were democratic only to a limited extent. Some may have favoured a reform of Parliament, but only in limited measure: universal suffrage was never mentioned.

By 1792, however, demands for a Parliamentary reform which would include at least universal manhood suffrage and annually-elected Parliaments were being heard from "inferior people" all over the country, as with the French example before them they enthusiastically joined political reform societies aiming to achieve full rights of citizenship. But now, too, the expressions of joy at the liberty gained by the French were giving way to fears amongst the British ruling classes that a similar upheaval was about to take place at home. Rumours were rife that French spies and agents were infiltrating the country, and the widespread popularity of Tom Paine's political tract, *The Rights of Man*, with its anti-monarchical sentiments, caused the propertied classes considerable alarm.

As Britain moved towards war with France, a government-backed loyalist upsurge led to the formation of Associations for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers, known from their founder as Reeves' Associations. Such associations were set up in Carlisle, Kendal and Appleby, with the stated objectives of "supporting the laws, suppressing seditious publications and defending persons and property against the threat of Jacobins and French principles".¹⁶ And the Loyal Association of Kendal added the resolution that the magistrates should not grant licences to innkeepers allowing seditious meetings or assemblies to be held on their premises.¹⁷ There is hardly an edition of the *Cumberland Pacquet* at this time which does not carry some indication of local "loyalist" activities, such as the report of a meeting of the masons and joiners in the Border area, called to regulate the prices of their work, who "thought it their duty, soberly and religiously to declare their steady loyalty to the King and the Constitution established in 1688 - which is decidedly preferable to any other kind of government".¹⁸ Loyal Addresses were also sent to the King from the Principal Inhabitants of Cocker-mouth, Whitehaven and Kendal, and from the Protestant Dissenters of Carlisle.¹⁹ The Rev. Sproule of Appleby wrote to the Home Secretary expressing the fear that the rise of revolutionary principles was leading to popular tumult amongst those in the northern manufacturing towns, and in reply was requested to make a note of any societies existing in the neighbourhood and the circulating of inflammatory publications, and of any suspicious people in the district. These observations were to be transmitted privately, "to prevent your correspondence with the Government being known".²⁰ And as Britain went to war with Revolutionary France, public burnings of Tom Paine's works took place throughout the country. At Ulverston, after loyal sermons, "the members of the

Friendly societies burnt Tom Paine in effigy, fastened to the rogue post in the market place . . . the ceremony concluding in a multitudinous chorus of God Save the King".²¹ Just across the Border, however, a group of men were tried at Dumfries for

. . . Having gone to the market cross at Langholm armed with muskets, erecting a bonfire there, and enciting the mob to parade the streets, proclaiming certain seditious toasts, erecting a Tree of Liberty, with a tendency to create a spirit of disaffection to the King and Government, having paraded the town with a fife and drum, and ordering a general illumination of the windows of the town by way of celebrating the success of the French army . . .

They were ordered to be imprisoned for four months, fined fifty pounds each and bound over for two years, having to deposit 600 merks each as proof of their good behaviour.²²

When war broke out in 1793, the Government introduced strong measures to curb every public expression of dissent against its policies, while building barracks all over the country to keep the people in order. The headquarters of the Northern Army command were set in Carlisle under General Grant, troops were stationed at Annan, Dumfries, Maryport, and Whitehaven,²³ and constantly moved around from one place to another to prevent them getting too friendly with the local populations. And the Government's massive campaign to stiffen the loyalty of the people went on unabated. The King's Birthday celebrations were lavishly orchestrated with loyal processions and proclamations; in 1794 the display was such that the guns used for the Birthday salute in Carlisle could be heard, it was said, as far off as Temple Sowerby!²⁴

Up to this time in Cumberland the local people seem to have been content in political matters to follow the "Freedom and Liberty" calls of the local Blue leadership, who, as we have seen, had been in the forefront to welcome the French Revolution. Now, in 1795, they came forward once again, organising protests to the Government against the effects the war was having on trade, coupled with demands for peace. These petitions were sent to the House of Commons from three Cumbrian towns, Carlisle, Whitehaven and Workington. Curwen based an excellent speech on them in the Commons, but some irregularities were found amongst the signatures, and after this leading local politicians seem to have drawn back, as in connection with their activities the smear of Jacobin and "revolutionary tendencies" was widely bandied about. Curwen particularly remembered one instance of a hundred Northern gentlemen of respectability, meeting in 1794 to celebrate the anniversary of the Revolution of 1688, where

A spy of Mr Reeves was present, and every word that was uttered by the gentlemen present from affection to the revolution which placed the present royal family upon the Throne, was noticed. What then happened? The spy reported to his employer that there was a great deal of disaffection and treason . . .²⁵

Henceforth the action went forward in the sphere of lower class protest, in reform clubs and societies driven to operate in secret, but whose influence may be detected in the food rioting and anti-militia demonstrations which were to disturb the years that followed.

The year 1795 was a peak year for popular unrest - a year of famine and scarcity when, according to the *Annual Register* "the Revolutionary spirit, like a lighted torch, moved rapidly around", and crowds in London were shouting, "No War, No Pitt, no King". The view persisted that ministerial incompetence and greed was to blame for the great scarcity, and rumours abounded of grain having been sent to France by Prime Minister

Pitt, to support a counter-revolutionary rising in Brittany. Hunger and unemployment helped to turn people's minds towards the acceptance of radical ideas now being widely circulated in such pamphlets as *The Rights of Man*, and food riots occurred all over the country.

Unrest seems to have been brewing in the Carlisle area as early as April 1795, when many desertions were reported from naval and military recruiting parties operating in the town,²⁶ and by the 15th of the month, Sir William Maxwell was complaining that "emissaries of Sedition" were active in the Borders, "who by infinite address, artifice and falsehood, were operating on the credulity of the people, affirming that the King and his family were useless and burdensome" . . . and had been distributing letters containing medals inscribed with "Liberty and Equality".²⁷ As a counter-measure, in the same week, the Carlisle authorities ordered public burnings of the works of Tom Paine and Benjamin Franklyn to take place on the following two market days - though as the City Treasurer's receipts show that they spent only 4d on peats on each occasion, the events can hardly have generated much heat and excitement.²⁸

Throughout the following weeks the Borders continued restless. Disturbances broke out at Dumfries where a Highland regiment mutinied, ostensibly over meal supplies, though it was believed that they had been encouraged to rise against their officers by radicals in the town who had been actively spreading their doctrines amongst the troops in the local public houses.²⁹ Significantly, too, in a year when the Government was seriously alarmed by the number of regular troops participating in the country-wide food riots,³⁰ 300 Ulster Light Dragoons, also stationed at Dumfries, were immediately sent to Carlisle to be removed from subversive influences. They remained quiet while billeted in Carlisle, but mutinied in Newcastle some months later, when it was claimed that, for some time, "ill-disposed people" had been "urging disaffection and fomenting grievances in their midst".³¹

In early June, the *Cumberland Pacquet* reported the success of the King's Birthday celebrations in Carlisle, an occasion stage-managed as before to stiffen the loyalty of the lieges, but the same publication also carried the previous month's Treasury returns for the prices of grain, showing that these were rising alarmingly.³² Not surprisingly, the rising prices and apparent scarcity of grain now led to irregularities in the market. On the market day of 18 July, a farmer was sentenced to one month's imprisonment and fined £50 for having sold in Carlisle market "two bushels of corn in one bag, the top part good corn, the rest inferior".³³ James Nixon, a leading innkeeper, and William Scott, a carrier, were indicted for fighting in the market place with three other men, and at the Quarter Sessions, one Michael Keler "was fully convicted" for "uttering treasonable and seditious words". He had shouted, "Damn the King. Down with the King".³⁴ The Aldermen's Court suspended the Clerk of the Markets,³⁵ an indication that the authorities in both the Quarter Sessions and the Aldermen's Court, were aiming to tighten up the conduct of the markets by punishing both the farmer who cheated and the official who allowed all the irregularities to take place - a prudent move dictated by the fact that Assize Week was almost upon them, when it was desirable that the Judge, the High Sheriff, the Lord Lieutenant and the Members of Parliament for the local constituencies should find the people peaceable and the town's affairs in good order when they arrived. Assize Week was Carlisle's most brilliant social occasion when all the local nobility, the lesser gentry, farmers and others engaged in trade came into town

for the balls, races and other entertainments laid on at this time. This brought an enormous increase in trade, especially in the local inns and hostleries, which were said to have been packed out twenty-four hours a day from the beginning of the week to the end.

On Saturday, 25 July, as the town prepared for the influx of visitors, little grain reached the market. Rumours were rife that the grain had been sold outside the market to dealers from Liverpool as well as to local innkeepers who were hoarding it for their Assize Week customers. Rioting broke out outside the premises of Nixon, the Scotch Arms in Rickergate, where most of the horses entered for the Carlisle races were stabled. The rioting had every appearance of prior organisation: following the classic pattern of food rioting, the crowd, mostly women, gathered outside the inn, demanding to know what quantity of grain Nixon held, and demanding that it should be sold to them "at a certain price". When Nixon refused, the crowd became "clamorous", attracting the attention of a magistrate who tried to pacify the people, assuring them that the grain should be purchased and sold to them at reasonable prices, at the same time promising Nixon that "the Gentlemen of the Town" would endeavour "to keep regularity in selling it" and would deliver all the cash it produced to him. However, as Nixon hesitated, the crowd forced their way into the granaries, seized and loaded carts with the grain and carried it to the Town Hall amid the acclamations of a great crowd of spectators. In the course of the evening "some thousands of people" were supplied with a stone each of oatmeal at a reduced price. But the townspeople were not satisfied. All the other public houses were searched, and the grain confiscated, as was all the grain in the warehouses at Sandsfield waiting to be shipped out. A ship loaded with grain was emptied and the cargo brought back into town to be lodged in the Town Hall under guard - the crowd only pausing as they passed along Caldewgate to break the windows in the house of Lonsdale, the grocer, whose name had been on the sacks of grain they had unloaded.³⁶

Significantly, the 300 Ulster Dragoons in the town were not called out - presumably they were already suspected of being tainted with Jacobinism and it was feared they might side with the townspeople. The following day the Chancellor of the Diocese, Dr Carlyle, continued to supervise the sale of grain, undertaken by men employed by the Corporation for the purpose, to keep the people quiet until military reinforcements, summoned from Dumfries and Annan by "a forced and hasty march", could arrive.³⁷ The Mayor immediately wrote to the Home Office, explaining that the disturbances had been the result of

the great rise in the price of grain which had been occasioned by forestallers from Liverpool, buying up large quantities before it came to town . . . and the conduct of several ill-disposed persons upon grain being sent out of the county.³⁸

But a Cumbrian correspondent to the Home Secretary pointed out that

the Democrats are taking pains to persuade the people that the scarcity is occasioned by the bad management of the Ministers,³⁹

while another correspondent from Cumberland warned him of "how serious the times grow and how discontented the people are", noting the widespread popular actions concerned with the movement of grain,⁴⁰ at a time when political and economic protest was being dangerously joined with local protests against the continuation of the war with

France. And if the Carlisle people wished to express their disapproval of the way in which the Government and Ministers were handling affairs, then this was the best time to make their protest - during Assize Week when the local members of both Houses of Parliament would be present, as well as everyone else of local consequence.

The Assize Judge prudently delayed his arrival, conveniently finding another prisoner to try in Newcastle, which detained him for sufficient time to allow order to be restored in Carlisle. In view of the great unrest, Sir James Graham and Lord Lonsdale arrived in town guarded by private armies of their own tenantry: Sir James brought four hundred men, who, we are told, made a "brilliant and respectable appearance".⁴¹ Greatly alarmed by what was such a serious threat to the established authorities, the Northern aristocracy now also took unprecedented steps to appease the local populations by advertising in the local press to emphasise the extent of their charity. Lord Lonsdale's steward paid for an announcement on the *Cumberland Pacquet* indicating the amounts of food he had distributed *gratis* to the poor, and the Earl of Carlisle was pleased to announce that he "had graciously waived his tolls in Brampton Market".⁴²

The Carlisle food riots of 1795 provide an interesting example of the ways in which the patterns of popular protest were changing at this time. As in earlier food rioting, that of 1795 took place at the end of summer, when shortages usually occurred in the months prior to the harvest, and at a time when prices were prone to rise rapidly. In times of scarcity the presence of dealers from outside the county, buying up grain supplies that the local people believed were theirs by right, could be relied on to foment disorder, as Cumberland was not a grain-exporting county. But political motives may also be detected underlying these protests: serious rioting, involving "several thousands" of the townspeople, with "ill-disposed" persons amongst them, at a time when all the leading establishment figures were present, in a year when there had already been considerable stir over the anti-war petitions, the public burning of seditious literature and disaffection amongst the military, all point to the unrest being more than a traditional protest over grain.

The widespread disturbances which rocked the country in 1795 underlined the failure of the civil authorities, lacking a properly constituted policing force, to keep public order. They had to depend largely on the armed forces: and now, with so many men serving abroad, the Government, in 1796, was obliged to establish a Supplementary Militia, to keep the peace at home and to protect the shores from foreign invasion. But the scheme was unpopular from the outset: the force was to be raised by a ballot, and great numbers were required to be raised in the counties to supply the necessary quotas. As a further indication of the mood of the local people at this time, in the Border area serious rioting took place on balloting day at Carlisle, Penrith, Kelso, Shap and Ulverston, and though in Penrith a hundred of the principal inhabitants were summoned as special constables to keep the peace, very few were prepared to turn out. Nor were any citizens prepared to come forward to identify the rioters.⁴³ Many balloted men ran away and other recruits took the half-bounty money and deserted as soon as they had been paid.⁴⁴ The Cumberland Militia, too, proved to be "defective both in numbers of ordinary recruits and of trained officers" and was notorious for insubordination in the ranks. In February 1798, they mutinied at Liverpool.⁴⁵ A few months later, when the Scottish Militia Act was implemented, in Dumfries-shire the people were reported as saying "they will rather die to a man than be pressed for soldiers",⁴⁶ and rioting against

the balloting occurred all along the Solway coastal area, at Wigtown, New Galloway, Dumfries, Dunscore, and Kirkpatrick Fleming, and further along the Border at Boreland, Lauder, Selkirk and Jedburgh. From everywhere in the Borders the explanations offered were that either the Jacobins were behind the disturbances or that the people themselves had become "infected with French principles". It was reported that "the Militia business is but a pretext, for it is clear it is the gentlemen they wish to destroy according to the French plan".⁴⁷

Who were the "Democrats" and "ill-disposed persons" causing unrest in the area at this time? Everything suggests that, given the activities of the United Irishmen, Scotsmen and Englishmen societies which were to emerge in the Borders just twelve months later, it may well be that a United Irish society had already commenced operations in the area by mid 1795. An account of the United Irish movement, given in *A History of the Rebellion in Ireland*, published in Cumberland in 1808,⁴⁸ records that after being outlawed in 1794, it was reformed as a militaristic, underground organisation. The original aim had been to unite Catholics and Protestants in a non-violent movement for Parliamentary Reform, but the Irish authorities regarded the society as a nest of sedition, and for their part, the United Irishmen, under their leader Wolf Tone, then turned to revolutionary France for aid. They also set out to make contact with Jacobin supporters and parliamentary reformers in mainland Britain, and by April 1795 "were assiduously employed in bringing over to their views persons of activity throughout the United Kingdom", and to this end they were distributing *The Rights of Man* and similar material, and aiming to subvert the armed forces by every possible means.⁴⁹

But undercover organisations are, of their very nature, difficult to pinpoint, and not until 1797 does clear evidence emerge of United movements operating in Cumberland and the Borders. By this time, the United Irishmen had produced off-shoots in the United Scotsmen and United Englishmen, whose aims were broadly similar, tending, the Government believed, "to excite a spirit of disloyalty to the King and of disaffection to the laws and constitution of Great Britain". Their delegates moved between Manchester, Bolton, Preston, Kendal, Carlisle and Glasgow, where the executive committee of Scotland and England held their meetings.⁵⁰ In Cumberland, the United Englishmen movement appears to have arrived by way of Scotland, although the authorities were always aware of a strong element of Irish influence, too, as a Cockermouth magistrate pointed out to the Home Secretary:

yr. Grace knows the opportunity of communications between this coast and Ireland, and a suspicion has for some time been seriously entertained that a body of men in the neighbourhood of Maryport have been associated for treasonable purposes, inflamed by Irish publications . . .⁵¹

In September 1797, Joseph Saul, the well-known Quaker schoolmaster of Green Row Academy, near Abbeytown, received a letter from one "W.R." (thought to have been William Rooke, a local Quaker from Maryport), styling himself the Secretary to the County Committee of the United Englishmen. Enclosed with the letter were the rules of the United Scotsmen, but the writer, in apologising for sending these rather than those of the United Englishmen, said that they differed immaterially. Saul was asked to sign the Oaths of Secrecy and Federalism if he thought proper to join the society. Saul declined, but reported that thereafter he had often been stopped by strangers and asked for copies of the proposals. The society's aim had been directed to Parliamentary Reform,

but the leadership doubted the capability of Parliament to reform itself and had decided to form secretly until its power "should be adequate to the accomplishment of this design". Saul reported that the Society was formed of parochial, provincial and national committees, with the provision that no local group should be large enough to attract the attention of the magistrates. He believed that the Society could have consisted of 100,000 men without any of the groups exceeding twelve persons. No one seems to have had any idea of the numbers involved in Cumberland and the Borders: probably not many were,⁵² though given the number of disturbances in the area, it would be rash to discount their influence. Carlisle was mentioned as being the centre of the local United Englishmen, with groups in Wigton, Maryport and Whitehaven. It appears that in Cumberland a plan of revolution amongst the United Englishmen emerged: their strategy was to have included the taking over of all the banks in England, and the assassination of the Ministers and the Royal Family.⁵³ Attempts were made to raise money for arms, by means of threatening letters sent to local gentlemen, including John Christian Curwen, Humphrey Senhouse of Netherhall and Sir Wilfred Lawson. Given that the country was at war at the time, and that French invasion attempts had already been made in Ireland, they must have made chilling reading for the recipients, though we may smile at the spelling and punctuation today:

It is decreed at a meeting of acomatee at Wigton that you shall pay £500 sterling for the purpose of purchasing arms and other articles as a resolution is already affected in the minds of the Loer Orders and peasantry and it must be finished at the Expense of Blood. there are several Gentlemen who has paid and who will recieve their Reward as no man shall Lose any thing if the Fortune of War be in our Favour, but those who Refuse to comply shall fall the first Victims to our fury and Vengeance. before Six months a stroke will be struk in this Cuntry to the surprise of Eurupe and if you do not deposit the above Sume . . . your noble Building shall be laid in ashes in a very short time and your property confiscated to the Benefet of the New Order of Things . . . We United Englishmen therefore charge you . . . to lay the above sume below a stone about four or five stone weight Lying at the Foot of agait post about half way Betwixt the Abby and Skinburness, it directs the road for Alonby, there to ly till convenient to lift . . .⁵⁴

Curwen was asked for £1,000: his letter suggested that there were secret manufacturers of arms in the county,⁵⁵ and T. Holliday of Mowbray was sent an anonymous letter in which the writer related that he had overheard "Two men threatening destruction, asserting that they had sworn upon the Bible, that one of them would burn Holliday's house about his ears and the other would shoot him at the first opportunity".⁵⁶ In the face of such serious threats the authorities were obliged to act, and though they were unable to convict any agitators, they seized on a scapegoat, George Rooke, the brother of the Quaker, William, who was suspected of being the "W.R." who had sent the United society's proposals to Saul of Green Row. (By this time William Rooke was confined for debt in Liverpool gaol.) George Rooke was acquitted at the next Assizes, however, and ordered to be discharged "by proclamation".

During these years, when faced not only with a great swell of popular discontent, and an active radical movement operating on both sides of the Irish Sea, the authorities developed a system of local surveillance which went far to obviate the need for many arrests. Strangers were noticed and constantly watched and public houses were closely observed, and the Home Office circulated relevant information between the counties and

between the authorities in Scotland and Ireland. In 1798, West Cumberland magistrates reported that of thirteen people landing at Whitehaven, six proved on examination to be United Irishmen and were committed to gaol, and twenty-seven disembarking in the Isle of Man were sent back to Ireland.⁵⁷ In 1803, they were still writing to the Home Secretary that

As several persons concerned in the late rebellion in Ireland came over to this place, some of them were apprehended . . . We are strict in our examination of all vessels coming to Whitehaven, and every lodging and public house is visited . . . three men of suspicious appearance were yesterday committed to Carlisle gaol.⁵⁸

And following the discovery of seditious pamphlets lying in the streets, Carlisle was being patrolled by the military to discourage radical activity.⁵⁹

However, from this time forward, popular radicalism seems to have gradually merged with trade unionism, particularly amongst the handloom weavers and other textile workers in Carlisle and in the surrounding villages. In spite of the 1799 Act against the Combination of Workmen, we know that local men were active in this respect from an advertisement in the *Carlisle Journal* of 21 August 1802, which indicated that a “dangerous and illegal combination of workmen had been entered into by several journeymen weavers of Carlisle”. The cotton printers, too, were engaged in a wider sphere of action, as a Leeds magistrate reported:

There arrived here two delegates from Carlisle on their way to Manchester, summoned by the Lancashire cotton printers, to agree to an advance in their wages who made no secret of their mission.⁶⁰

Much has been written on this subject: many social historians have argued that a secret revolutionary movement did exist amongst the workers’ organisations at this time with the declared intention of organising an Anglo-Irish rebellion in support of a French invasion: others have dismissed the suggestions as being over-sensational. What does seem likely is that the United movements did utilise the network of trade combinations which were already well established before the legislation of 1799 to promulgate their views and extend their activities at a very troubled time. The trade union and radical activities amongst the Carlisle weavers have been discussed in two earlier articles in these *Transactions*.⁶¹

Historians have been careful to emphasise that the events of the 1790s in the United Kingdom should be seen in the longer perspective, and not merely in the reflected glow of the storming of the Bastille: but the agitation of these years could not but be influenced to a great extent by the French Revolution, and the results were intensive and far-reaching, initiating traditions of popular political activity which stretch forward to the present day.

Notes and References

¹ Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man* (1791) Pelican ed., 168.

² Dr Henry Lonsdale, *The Worthies of Cumberland* (1867) vol.1.

³ S. Phipson, *Jean-Paul Marat; his life in England* (1924). See also *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 25 October 1873, which also investigates Marat’s connections with the Losh family, in an article by Jas. Clephane.

⁴ Dr H. Lonsdale, *The Worthies of Cumberland* vol.4 186-188.

- ⁵ See Brian Bonsell, *Parliamentary Elections in Cumberland and Westmorland* (1969).
- ⁶ Election material pamphlet, 'Boletarium', Jackson Collection, Carlisle Library, Ref. 132 M.
- ⁷ Wilson Ledger Esq. letter to the *Citizen Magazine* (Carlisle) 17 April 1824.
- ⁸ *Cumberland Pacquet*, 15 Feb 1775.
- ⁹ *The Carlisle Magazine* (1776) Jackson Collection, Carlisle Library.
- ¹⁰ Correspondence from Portland Mss. quoted in B. Bonsell, *Sir James Lowther and the Cumberland and Westmorland Elections* (1960), 135-137.
- ¹¹ CRO (Carlisle) 13/11 DLons/misc.elec/1774 Handbill: *To the Freeholders of the County of Cumberland*. For Marat's activities in this Election see S. Phipson *op cit*.
- ¹² *Cumberland Pacquet*, 18 May 1786.
- ¹³ *Cumberland Pacquet*, 31 May 1786.
- ¹⁴ *Cumberland Pacquet*, 23 June 1790.
- ¹⁵ *Cumberland Pacquet*, 28 March 1791.
- ¹⁶ Reeves Mss. Add Mss. 16.931 folio 38. British Library. Reeves Associations for preserving Liberty and Property.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *Cumberland Pacquet*, 19 Feb 1793.
- ¹⁹ PRO HO 42/22 Rev. Sproule of Appleby to Home Office 24 Nov 1792.
- ²⁰ *Cumberland Pacquet*, all issues for January 1793.
- ²¹ *Cumberland Pacquet*, 15 Jan 1793.
- ²² *Cumberland Pacquet*, 29 Jan 1793.
- ²³ *Cumberland Pacquet*, 26 Feb 1793.
- ²⁴ *Cumberland Pacquet*, 16 June 1794.
- ²⁵ *Carlisle Journal*, 18 March 1817.
- ²⁶ *Cumberland Pacquet*, issues for April 1795.
- ²⁷ Sir William Maxwell to Dundas 15 April 1795 in H. Meikle, *Scotland in the French Revolution* (1912), 95.
- ²⁸ CRO. Ca/Vouch/1795 Carlisle City Treasurer's Vouchers 1795.
- ²⁹ For this riot and for the riot in Newcastle, see John Prebble, *Mutiny: Highland Regiments in Revolt 1742 - 1804* (1975) also Kenneth Logue, *Popular Disturbances in Scotland 1780 - 1815* (Edinburgh, 1979), 117.
- ³⁰ C. Emsley, *British Society in the French Wars 1793 - 1815* (1979) 42.
- ³¹ *Cumberland Pacquet*, 25 Sept 1795.
- ³² *Cumberland Pacquet*, 9 June 1795. Grain prices taken from Treasury Returns are given in the first issue of every month.
- ³³ *Cumberland Pacquet*, 21 July 1795.
- ³⁴ *ibid.*
- ³⁵ CRO. Carlisle/2/10 - Aldermen's Court Minute Book 1795.
- ³⁶ *Cumberland Pacquet*, 4 August 1795.
- ³⁷ *ibid.*
- ³⁸ PRO. HO 42/35 Mayor of Carlisle to Portland 29 July 1795. And for northern food rioting at this time see Alan Booth, "Food Rioting in the North of England 1790 - 1801", *Past & Present*, No. 77 (1977), 84-107. I am indebted to Dr Booth for several references relating to Carlisle at this period, which he generously passed on to me.
- ³⁹ PRO. HO 42/35 Anon. Correspondent to Portland 6 July 1795, Cumberland.
- ⁴⁰ PRO. HO 42/35 Anon. Correspondent to Portland 15 July 1795, Cumberland.
- ⁴¹ *Cumberland Pacquet*, 11 August 1795.
- ⁴² *Cumberland Pacquet*, 11 August 1795 and 1 Sept 1795.
- ⁴³ PRO. HO 50/35 Lonsdale to Portland 28 Dec 1796. HO 50/51 J. King to Brownrigg 6 Jan 1797 and 29 Dec 1796. HO 50/6 J. King to Brownrigg 2 Jan 1797.
- ⁴⁴ PRO. HO/50/338 Lonsdale to Portland 24 Apr 1797.
- ⁴⁵ PRO. HO/43/10/254 Lonsdale to Portland 12 Feb 1798.
- ⁴⁶ K. Logue, *op. cit.* 108.
- ⁴⁷ PRO. HO/Corres/RH/2/4/80 ff224-235 Robt Hay to Buchanan.
- ⁴⁸ Anon., *A History of the Rebellion in Ireland* (Harrop, Alston 1808), vol 1, 234-7.
- ⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 237.
- ⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 253 and PRO. PC/1/42/A142 J. Dixon's Examination 7 May 1798.

- ⁵¹ Thos Benion of Cockermouth to Home Sec. Feb 1799, a communication from the United Englishmen C.R.O. (Carlisle) D/Sen 6/43.
- ⁵² PRO. HO 42/47 Saul of Greenrow to Home Secretary 16 Feb 1799.
- ⁵³ PRO. HO 42/47 Senhouse to Portland 28 April 1799. See also Alan Booth (PhD Thesis Lancaster University) *Radicalism and Repression in North West England and Cumberland and Westmorland* (1979), 289.
- ⁵⁴ CRO. D/Sen/Misc. Corres/23/1799.
- ⁵⁵ *Cumberland Pacquet*, 16 Apr 1799.
- ⁵⁶ *Cumberland Pacquet*, 28 Mar 1799.
- ⁵⁷ PRO. WO/1/769/559 W. Huddleston and C. Church to Portland 17 June 1798.
- ⁵⁸ PRO. HO/50/65 Lowther to Home Secretary 3 Sept 1803.
- ⁵⁹ PRO. HO/43/198 C. Yorke to Mayor of Carlisle 10 Sept 1803.
- ⁶⁰ PRO. HO 43/66 1 Mar 1802 W. Cookson, Leeds to Earl Fitzwilliam.
- ⁶¹ June C.F. Barnes, "Trade Unionism and Radicalism amongst the Carlisle Handloom Weavers". CW2, lxxviii, 149-161 and "Liberty or Death", CW2, lxxxiv, 205-213. For a wider discussion of this subject see Marianne Elliot, The 'Despard Conspiracy' Reconsidered. *Past & Present* No. 75 (May 1977), 46-62. J. Baxter, F. K. Donnelly and J. Dinwiddy. Debate in *Past & Present* No. 64 (Aug 1974), 113-136.

