

1-1-2015

London Calling: The London Corresponding Society And The Ascension Of Popular Politics

Frank L. Petersmark
Wayne State University,

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/oa_dissertations

Recommended Citation

Petersmark, Frank L., "London Calling: The London Corresponding Society And The Ascension Of Popular Politics" (2015). *Wayne State University Dissertations*. Paper 1161.

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in Wayne State University Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.

**LONDON CALLING: THE LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY AND THE
ASCENSION OF POPULAR POLITICS**

by

FRANK L. PETERSMARK III

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

2015

MAJOR: HISTORY

Approved By:

Advisor

Date

© COPYRIGHT BY
FRANK L. PETERSMARK III
2015
All Rights Reserved

DEDICATION

This paper was a labor of love for the author, and could not have been completed without an equal affection for the love of labor, particularly for those in my life who toiled so that I might someday do something like this. For that I thank my parents, Pat and Frank, and my other parents, Bob and Kay.

For everything else – inspiration, patience, encouragement, persistence, and even proofreading – I thank my kids Caitlin and Chris, and most especially my wife Jerilyn. She above all others helped to keep me on the track that would become this paper, even as she willingly participated in research trips and tolerated piles upon piles of notes and books in one particular corner of our house. For this, along with countless other things, she has my everlasting gratitude and love.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would very much like to acknowledge several people without whom this project would never have been completed. I have had several classes and professors in and from the Wayne State History Department that provided the intellectual inspiration and academic guidance for this dissertation. Chief among them are those that agreed to serve on both my Masters and PhD committees: Professor Philip Abbott, Professor Eric Ash, Professor Denver Brunzman, Professor Janine Lanza, Professor Aaron Retish, and Professor Brad Roth. Professors Ash, Brunzman, and Lanza were kind enough to shepherd me through my early graduate career and Wayne State and for that they have my sincere gratitude and thanks. In particular, Professor Ash has been a steady hand on the tiller for me, playing both good and bad cop as needed, but always encouraging me to carry on. For that, and all of the countless hours at Traffic Jam, he has my eternal thanks.

Finally, I'd like to thank the too numerous to thank colleagues of mine along the way – fellow students, section leaders, graduate assistants, and all the rest, who each in their own way has provided inspiration by example. In particular, I'd like to thank our small but powerful PhD writing group – John Moore, Sue Ward, David Hopkins, and Dave Collins – for their support, encouragement, and for occasionally picking up the tab.

Godspeed to you all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
List of Figures.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One - Fertile Ground.....	16
Chapter Two – The French Connection	62
Chapter Three - The LCS Introduces Itself.....	96
Chapter Four - Membership & Decorum.....	135
Chapter Five - The “Order of the Day”.....	163
Chapter Six - Accusations & Recriminations.....	215
Chapter Seven - Trial by Fire.....	247
Chapter Eight – The LCS After the State Trials: Philosophies & Finances.....	293
Chapter Nine – The LCS in Decline: Radicalizations, Recriminations, and Reputations.....	338
Conclusion – The LCS in History: Lessons Learned, Lasting Legacies, and the Ascension of Popular Politics.....	376
Epilogue.....	405
Appendix A: Chronology of the London Corresponding Society.....	411
Historiography & Research Comments.....	413
Bibliography.....	423
Abstract.....	435
Autobiographical Statement.....	438

LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1. *Thomas Hardy*. A print of LCS Secretary Thomas Hardy at his trial for treason in 1794. Image from the British Library, London.....205
- Figure 2. *Citizen Maurice Margarot*. Officer of the London Corresponding Society, and delegate to the British Convention at Edinburgh. Margarot was convicted in the Scottish sedition trial following the convention. Image from the British Museum, London.....206
- Figure 3. *Copper half-penny*. A token issued in the name of the London Corresponding Society depicting the fable of the bundle of sticks, 1795. Such coinage was another form of propaganda for the LCS and other reform societies, and served to quickly identify fellow members. Image from the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.....207
- Figure 4. *John Thelwall*. From a portrait attributed to William Hazlitt. Thelwall was a leading spokesman for the LCS, and an LCS member for a time. He was one of the defendants acquitted in the state treason trials of 1794. Image from the National Portrait Gallery, London.....208
- Figure 5. *Copenhagen House*. A 1795 caricature by James Gillray of the meeting held by the LCS at Copenhagen Fields on November 12, 1795, to protest the Twin Acts legislation. Gillray has portrayed the three platforms used by the LCS at this meeting, with John Thelwall speaking in the right near foreground, John Gale Jones to the left, and William Hodgson on the center platform in the center background of the caricature. Image from the British Museum, London.....208
- Figure 6. *Petition*. A cover sheet from an LCS sponsored petition to the King arguing For parliamentary reform in April of 1793. The LCS created, sponsored, and delivered many such petitions during the 1790s, however there is no evidence that any of them ever reached the King. Image from the University of California Davis.....209
- Figure 7. *The Cobbler Turned Preacher*, A satirical caricature depiction of Thomas Hardy upon the founding of the LCS by Isaac Cruikshank, 1792. The image depicts Hardy using his cobbler's bench as his pulpit, and his tools and materials for oratorical emphasis. Image from the British Museum, London.....210

- Figure 8. *Copenhagen House*. An alternate depiction of one of the Society's large outdoor meetings from the artist James Gillray, 1795. This is part of the same depiction as Figure 5, but was cropped to fit into the many newspapers covering the event. It also provided a more detailed view of the sorts of citizens in attendance. Image from the British Museum.....211
- Figure 9. *The Reformers Dinner*, 1809, by Samuel de Wilde. This is a depiction of the interior of the Crown and Anchor Tavern, where many of the early LCS meetings were held, particularly in 1793 and 1794. The Tavern was actually quite large compared to the smaller pubs the LCS initially met in, and was used for general membership meetings as the Society grew in London. Image from the Newberry Library, Chicago.....212
- Figure 10. *Le Coup De Maitre* by James Gillray, 1797. This is a print drawn by Gillray from the original that ran in several French newspapers. It depicts Charles James Fox, a reformist Whig who supported the LCS, dressed as a French revolutionary sans-culotte, taking aim at the constitutional target of the Crown, Lords, and Commons. This image, along with many others, was used by opponents of the reform movement to connect the LCS and other reform societies and politicians to the French Revolution. Image from the British Museum.....212
- Figure 11. *Debating Society (Substitute for Hair Powder)*, Isaac Cruikshank, published by Laurie & Whittle, May 5, 1795, etching and engraving. In yet another satirical stab at the LCS and the kinds of men who were members, this etching depicts the scene at a generic debating society meeting whose members are vigorously debating the proper finishing touches for a man's wig. The members are portrayed as unruly and undisciplined, and the triviality of the topic is meant to suggest the lack of political seriousness and consequence such men were capable of. Image from Yale University.....213
- Figure 12. *London Corresponding Society alarm'd, -Vide Guilty Consciences*. James Gillray, hand-colored etching and aquatint, 1798. In this satirical caricature Gillray portrays LCS members as brutal and coarse, as they listen intently to the newspaper's account of the arrest of several of their colleagues at Margate in 1798 and plot their next moves. The figures are almost non-human, and on the wall behind them hang portraits of John Horne-Tooke and Thomas Paine. Image from British Museum.....213

Figure 13. *The Hopes of the Party, prior to July 14th. – “From such wicked Crown & Anchor dreams, good Lord deliver us.”* James Gillray, July 19, 1791, Print from hand-colored etching. Published by S. W. Fores. This print casts a satirical lens on the dinner at the Crown & Anchor Tavern and on the political radicals who extolled the French Revolution. Charles James Fox raises an axe to strike the neck of George III, whose head is held by Sheridan, and legs by John Horne Tooke. Joseph Priestley and Sir Cecil Wray stand behind Sheridan. Image from the British Library, London.....214

Figure 14. *The Rights of Man; or Tommy Paine, the little American Taylor, Taking the Measure of the Crown, for a New Pair of Revolution Breeches.* James Gillray, May 23, 1791, hand-colored etching. In this widely reproduced print, Gillray pokes fun at one of the inspirations for the political reform movement in Britain, the American Thomas Paine. Image from the British Museum.....214

INTRODUCTION

*Do you imagine, my fellow citizens, that we can sit still, and be the idle spectators of the chains which are forging for our brethren in America, with safety to ourselves? Let us suppose America to be completely enslaved, in consequence of which the English court can command all the money, and all the force of that country; they will like to be so arbitrary abroad, and have their power confined at home; especially as troops in abundance can be transported in a few weeks from America to England; where, with the present standing army, they may instantly reduce us to what they please. And can it be supposed that the Americans, being slaves themselves, and having been enslaved by us, will not, in return, willingly contribute their aid to bring us into the same condition?*¹

- Joseph Priestly, London, 1774

*The glorious revolutions in America & France have propagated truths which will never be extinguished for Truth is like a spark of Fire which flyeth up in the face of those who attempt to tread it out.*²

- Joseph Priestly, London, 1791

*This great end however we believe attainable, solely, by the whole nation deeply impressed with a sense of its wrongs uniting, and as it were with one voice demanding of those to whom for a while it has entrusted its Sovereignty, a Restoration of, ANNUALLY ELECTED PARLIAMENTS, UNBIASED AND UNBOUGHT ELECTIONS, AND AN EQUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE WHOLE BODY OF THE PEOPLE.*³

- London Corresponding Society, 1792

*CITIZENS! The critical moment is arrived, and Britons must either assert with zeal and firmness their claims of liberty, or yield without resistance to the chains of ministerial usurpation is forging for them. Will you co-operate with us in the only peaceable measure that now presents itself with any prospect of success?*⁴

- Thomas Hardy, LCS, 1794

¹ Joseph Priestly, *Works*, 496. Excerpt from Colin Bonwick, *English Radicals and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 120-121.

² Priestly, *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestly*, 1791, 19:416.

³ Michael T. Davis, ed., *LCS Papers: Address From the London Corresponding Society to the inhabitants of Great Britain, on the subject of parliamentary reform, 1792*. 6 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2002), I:4.

⁴ Thomas Hardy, *LCS Papers*, 1794, II:361.

There is something important to be said about the London Corresponding Society, and about the kind of men described in this dissertation who participated in the fight for political reform. This statement does not emanate from any sort of intellectual or historical conceit, nor does it emanate from a misguided hubris or inflated perception of self-importance on this author's part. It also does not emanate from a suggestion that the London Corresponding Society necessarily achieved, delivered, or suffered more than some or many other similarly constituted political associations or corresponding clubs that were so pervasive in late eighteenth century Britain. Nor is the statement meant to suggest that the London Corresponding Society was somehow fundamentally different from other political associations or corresponding clubs, or that some of its leaders or membership went on to live historically impactful lives the results of which historians continue to discuss and debate.

Rather, the London Corresponding Society is important for what it represents. Before the London Corresponding Society, the memberships of political associations consisted primarily of specific socio-economic classes of individuals who had similar backgrounds, influences, educational experiences, and political views. There was a comfortable sameness of experiences and ideas. The debates in these associations were most often in the context of similar and particular political and economic perspectives, and while some of the thoughts and ideas of such associations might have been deemed radical in the context of the prevailing political and economic status quo, the association and club members generally had a common set of experiences and understandings upon which their respective platforms were built. The British government often viewed these

associations and clubs as particular kinds of special interest groups that required particular, and generally more measured, responses to their ideas and activities.

After the London Corresponding Society that all changed. From their establishment in 1792 until their legislated demise in 1799 the London Corresponding Society occupied a new and unique place in British political and social history. For within the membership and chapters of the London Corresponding Society were the widest ranges of political, economic, and social classes ever conjoined in Britain came together to discuss and debate the trajectory of British constitutionalism. This happy circumstance, in and of itself, suggests that there is indeed something historically important about the London Corresponding Society that merits the continued attention of historians.

There is, however, much more in the story of the London Corresponding Society and its aftermath that commends itself to our attention. Rather unintentionally the London Corresponding Society created a template for British political participation that persists to the present day. After the London Corresponding Society it was the norm, rather than the exception, that politics and the impact politicians had on one's station in life became a common discussion topic amongst those who remained disenfranchised. This development effectively, exponentially, and irreversibly widened political dialogue and participation (participation defined here as the active and ongoing discussions and activities of British citizens who sought to change the political status quo) in Britain.

Despite their leader's best efforts to act and be perceived otherwise, the London Corresponding Society represented a grave threat to the British Government of the 1790s. Why, we might ask, should that have been the case when almost all of the political associations and corresponding clubs that preceded them were not viewed that way by the

British government? Unlike other radical political groups of this era the London Corresponding Society was the only one to have its leaders put on trial for high treason (they were acquitted). One possible answer might be found in the observation of Francis Place, a contemporary of many of the founders and leaders of the Society and a future leader of the Society himself, who suggested that the political climate and tension in Britain in the last decade of the eighteenth century was akin to the Terror that was occurring in France.⁵

More than that observation, however, recommends us to a further analysis of the London Corresponding Society. Upon reflection some years later it was again Francis Place who asserted that the Society was responsible for the “moral and intellectual improvement of hundreds of its members.”⁶ Historian Mary Thale, in the introduction to her *Selections From the Papers of the London Corresponding Society* first published in 1983, suggested that the machinations of the Society added immeasurably to our understanding of eighteenth century reformist and protest groups, including the “conditions which enable one society to outlive similar societies, the dogged persistence of some members” as opposed to others, and the critical correlation between the financial health and management of a society and its ability to survive to fulfill its mission.⁷

Unlike many of the reformist associations that came before it, the London Corresponding Society was a divining rod for radical and conservative politics in the final decade of the eighteenth century. Edmund Burke, William Pitt, Henry Dundas, and

⁵ Francis Place, from Mary Thale, *Selections From the Papers of the London Corresponding Society* (Cambridge, 1983), p. vii.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mary Thale, *Selections From the Papers of the London Corresponding Society* (Cambridge, 1983), p. vii.

many other conservative politicians and thinkers publicly proclaimed that the Society was a dragon to be slain, whose membership consisted of “evil-minded men” whose ultimate goal was the overthrow of the British government and constitution by replacing them with a government modeled after the French Revolution.⁸

Conservatives both inside and outside of the government went to considerable lengths to portray the Society and its members in the most base and uncivil manner possible. As much as this was an era in which a more liberal, or radical political culture developed in Britain, it was likewise the era in which a considerably more united and organized conservative political culture developed and matured. These opposing political forces served to sharpen each others’ proverbial political saws, requiring each side to improve their recruiting, organizing, and sustaining skills and processes. The Society appeared in the political consciousness of the nation at the same time that the French Revolution was devolving into the Terror, and just a little more than a decade after the Gordon Riots of 1780, a disorderly and violent period of unruly crowds in which London was essentially ruled by the mob for a week until order was restored.⁹ No less a conservative than Edmund Burke had already characterized the French crowds specifically, and by association all unruly crowds, as “a swinish multitude.”¹⁰

In his 2008 essay, *The Mob Club? The London Corresponding Society and the Politics of Civility in the 1790s*, historian Michael T. Davis suggests that conservative Tories specifically and systematically referred to the Society as a mob as a way of constructing and wielding “a powerful and useful tool within the discursive constructions of

⁸ Ibid., p. xv.

⁹ Carl B. Cone, *The English Jacobins – Reformers in Late 18th Century England* (New York, 1968), p. 63.

¹⁰ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford, 1993), p. 173.

radicalism by conservatives in the 1790s.”¹¹ Indeed, villain-izing the London Corresponding Society along with the many other plebian and nascent political associations of the last decade of the eighteenth century was an important part of creating and solidifying a reenergized conservative political culture.¹² The struggle for a growing British political consciousness was thus set, and the stakes for Whigs, Tories, Radicals, and everyone in between was nothing less than the political future of the nation into the new century.

By contrast many of the Society’s more liberal contemporaries were great admirers of the Society’s “...courage to resist the system of oppression adopted in this country.”¹³ To Francis Place the Society was nothing less than “the very best school for good teaching which probably ever existed” and “a great moral cause of the improvement which has taken place among the People.”¹⁴ And even a generation or more after the demise of the Society saw the work of the Society as fundamental to the Reform Bill of 1832: “That Society certainly can claim the glory of first organizing the moral power of the people in support of those principles of constitutional liberty which I trust are now approaching their consummation.”¹⁵

Further, the Society was the first group to merge the political principles and lessons of the Glorious Revolution, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution into a cohesive set of political guiding principles creating a political platform for public

¹¹ Michael T. Davis, *Unrespectable Radicals? : Popular Politics in the Age of Reform* (Abingdon, Oxon., UK, 2008), p. 23.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Letter, J.D. Collier to Thomas Hardy, September 6, 1802, from Mary Thale, *Selections From the Papers of the London Corresponding Society* (Cambridge, 1983), p. vii.

¹⁴ Letter to George Rogers, January 15, 1832, *Autobiography of Francis Place* (1972), p. 200.

¹⁵ Letter, R.C. Fair to Francis Place, March 9 1831 from Mary Thale, *Selections From the Papers of the London Corresponding Society* (Cambridge, 1983), p. vii.

consumption. That simple yet powerful platform – universal male suffrage and annual parliamentary elections – was grounded in the Society’s perceptions of the political principles at stake during the Glorious and American Revolutions, and what they viewed as the continuation of those principles during the early stages of the French Revolution. The Society’s seeming relationship and engagement with past, present, and future events has presented a bit of dichotomy for historians – was the Society politically conservative or radical? Did the Society espouse an era of new and different political rights, or was it simply attempting to broaden long-existing political rights into a larger franchise? Should the Society be viewed as oriented toward the past or toward the future? The answer may be that the Society was *both* a past and future oriented group. That is, they referred to long held political and constitutional principles and rights as they attempted to achieve their goals, but they did so in a forward-looking manner in the areas of organization, public and media relations, and engagement with an increasingly politically literate public sphere.

And what a public sphere it was. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century there was an explosion of newspapers, pamphlets, broadsheets, coffee houses, pubs, and other public places that together combined to turn Britain into the most politically literate nation in the world. This was the era in which what we now consider to be ‘public opinion’ was born, as Charles Fox recognized and acknowledged in a speech given in the House of Commons in 1792:

It is certainly right and prudent to consult the public opinion...If the public opinion did not happen to square with mine; if, after pointing out to them the danger, they did not see it in the same light with me, or if they conceived that another remedy was preferable to mine, I should consider it as my due to my king, due to my Country, due to my honour to retire, that they might persue the plan which they thought better, by a fit instrument,

that it is by a man who thought with them...but one thing is most clear, that I ought to give the public the means of forming an opinion.¹⁶

As Jurgen Habermas indicates in his *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Fox's speech was an "indirect sanction" of "the public that was involved, in its function as the carrier of public criticism, in the critical debate of political issues" in the crucial year of 1792.¹⁷ For Habermas, expressions like "the sense of the people, or even vulgar, or common opinion were no longer used. The term now was public opinion; it was formed in the public discussion after the public, through education and information, had been put in a position to arrive at a considered opinion. Hence Fox's maxim "to give the public the means of forming an opinion."¹⁸

This dissertation will focus on the short but historically important life of the London Corresponding Society (LCS) in Britain in the last decade of the eighteenth century, from 1792-1799. The intent of such a focus should serve as a way to better understand the spread of political participation in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century and the key role that the London Corresponding Society played in that phenomenon. This dissertation will also suggest and argue that the London Corresponding Society effectively leveraged and even accelerated an existing trend toward widening political participation through the use of a growing mass media, a more politically sophisticated public sphere, and a language of political engagement that was carefully constructed to represent a reconciliation with British constitutional traditions and ideals, rather than any radical break from the past as was the case in France during this period. To that end, this dissertation will attempt to answer the following historical questions:

¹⁶ *Parliamentary History*, 29:974

¹⁷ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Ma., 1991), p. 65.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

1. What role did the London Corresponding Society play in the widening of political participation in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century?
2. What approaches, methods, and tactics were utilized by the London Corresponding Society in their quest to achieve their objectives of parliamentary reform and universal manhood suffrage?
3. To what extent did the London Corresponding Society and other such political associations contribute to a widening public sphere in late eighteenth century Europe?
4. To what extent was the London Corresponding Society influenced by the events in America and France in the late eighteenth century, and how did that impact the methods the London Corresponding Society used to achieve their goals and objectives?
5. What is the historical legacy of the London Corresponding Society?

The rise and fall of the LCS, while short in duration, marks another important mile marker in the evolution of British politics, and can and should be used as a prism with which to view the changing nature of political culture in Britain and its empire during this period. Founded primarily by Thomas Hardy, a shoemaker, the LCS began as a group committed to political education, but quickly evolved into something that was much more politically and publically aggressive, leading to the arrests and deportations of many of its members. The fact the LCS and other such groups were established as the French Revolution radicalized was not lost on British conservatives and authorities, and connections were drawn between what had happened in America beginning in 1776, what

was happening in France beginning in 1789, and the threat these events posed to political, social and economic stability in the British Empire.

The British government watched the development of these radical groups closely, including the use of local police officials and spies, and officials had access to most of the correspondence of the LCS, as we now do. One cannot read too far into the correspondence of the LCS without divining the Society's support for the ideas of Thomas Paine, its congratulatory letters to the new Jacobin leaders of France, and its attempts to organize groups in Scotland in preparation for a British convention of radical reformers. All of this resulted in harsh crackdowns by the British government, including the suspension of habeas corpus in 1794, and part of the story of the LCS is its ability to persist and survive, at least temporarily, in such a politically charged environment. The LCS managed to hold huge rallies in London in 1794 and 1795, and there are some estimates that a rally led by LCS co-founder John Thelwall was attended by 100,000 people. LCS founders Hardy, Thelwall, and others, were arrested and tried for treason and sedition in 1794 and 1795, and the LCS was ultimately put to an untimely death in the 1799 with the passage of the Corresponding Societies Act.

Hardy and his fellow founders conceived the LCS "as a means of informing the people of the violence that had been committed on their most sacred rights."¹⁹ Comments such as this were consistent with the radical political and social tones of the time, and represent a continuing thread of political rhetoric in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe that the LCS used to widen political participation across class and geographic (city and country) boundaries. The LCS appealed to a surprisingly broad swath of British social and economic classes. Its core constituency was the under-

¹⁹ Thomas Hardy, *Memoir*, p. 43.

represented laboring classes in England, but they also drew some members from an emerging middle-class of new small business-owners, and, although less so, even from the new commerce-based aristocracy. Much of their appeal lay in the Society's rhetoric regarding the restoration of political rights that a series of governments had denied them. In tone and delivery, much of this rhetoric drew from historical and contemporary revolutionary traditions – among others the Glorious, American, and French Revolutions – but much of the rhetoric and its distribution was also part of innovative LCS approaches in an attempt to broaden its political tent.

The historiography of the Glorious, American, and French Revolutions is a rich one, particularly with respect to the political and economic drivers and aspects of each. In each instance, much has been written about the radical elements involved and the characteristics of those radical elements in the context of each revolution – after all, one man's radical is another man's patriot. This dissertation will suggest that the London Corresponding Society effectively utilized the political and cultural legacies of these revolutions as way to frame and communicate their goals and in so doing was able to appeal politically to a wider and more diverse audience than any other political association had up to that point in time. In this context the LCS was successful in leveraging a literate and socially broadening public sphere that was receptive to its particular political messages and, as importantly, the way in which those messages were delivered into the broader political discourse of the public sphere.

More parochially, and as historian Mary Thale has suggested, an analysis of LCS goals and methods in this period also provides insight into the “workings of protest and

reformist societies.”²⁰ Our study of such groups contributes to our understanding of why certain men joined such societies and others did not, how they organized themselves and related to each other, and how such groups oriented and reoriented themselves as circumstances dictated during the tumultuous last decade of the eighteenth century. More mundanely but no less importantly, studying such groups, and in particular the LCS during this period, can help illuminate why some reformist groups persisted as opposed to others, how and why they did or did not accomplish that, and how they organized and conducted their various affairs, including financially.

To date too little historical attention has been devoted to the LCS and its place in the history of British politics. Even less has been done with the complementary sets of volumes of LCS correspondence accumulated and aggregated by Michael T. Davis (2002) and Mary Thale (1983), and a secondary purpose of this dissertation is to explore and offer some insight into what is contained therein, and to assess its applicability for future research on the part if this author and others. Davis’s volumes were published quite recently, in 2002, and many historians whose focus is British political culture are just beginning to mine what Davis has aggregated. That said, the short history of the LCS in a period of great import in Europe, combined with Davis’s and Thale’s primary source accumulation of one of the groups that had a front row seat to the tumult, seems to suggest that the historiographical focus on the LCS is just beginning. Although the LCS was effectively finished as a radical group in 1797 (but continued to exist in name until 1799), its legacy proved an important one. The LCS never achieved its primary goal of parliamentary reform, but it did provide a lasting impact on the rise of political

²⁰ Mary Thale, *Selections From the Papers of the London Corresponding Society* (Cambridge, 1983), p. vii.

participation and education, and from a historiographical perspective, that may be the area in which the legacy of the LCS is ultimately framed. As Francis Place, a radical contemporary of Thomas Hardy reflected upon some years after the demise of the LCS: “The moral effects of [the] Society were considerable. It induced men [such as himself] to read books, instead of wasting their time in public houses...It gave new stimulus to an immense number of men who had been but in many instances incapable of any but the grossest pursuits.”²¹

In late eighteenth century Britain, the bulk of the economic and social inequities fell primarily, but not exclusively, on the laboring classes. They found a voice for their complaints through the LCS and like-minded political associations (as historian Pater Clark has suggested, the late eighteenth century was nothing if not an “associational world”),²² and Hardy and other LCS leaders turned those voices into a platform that espoused parliamentary reform in the forms of annual elections and parliaments, uncorrupted elections, and the establishment of universal suffrage for men. Perhaps the best evidence of the political importance of the LCS is the number of people that were attracted to their meetings and subsequently joined as members. By mid-1792, just a few months after its establishment, LCS membership had increased from just a few to several hundred, prompting Hardy to declare that the society had grown “rapidly in number and respectability.”²³ More than anything, the LCS drew from a burgeoning class of what Edmund Burke termed “political citizens,”²⁴ and Burke’s own figure of roughly 80,000

²¹ Francis Place, *Autobiography*, p. 198-9.

²² Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580 – 1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000), esp. pp. 94-140.

²³ Hardy, p. 811

²⁴ Edmund Burke, *Letters On a Regicide Peace* (1796-7), in *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, 12 volumes (Boston, 1889), V: 284-5.

political sympathizers in London during this period may have been a low estimate.²⁵ The LCS regularly attracted thousands of people to their outdoor meetings and rallies, but it is difficult to know how many of those people were actually LCS members, non-members but sympathetic to the cause, merely curious onlookers, or even government-planted operatives put there to monitor LCS activities. In any event, a closer examination of the LCS correspondence provided by Davis may help to illuminate answers to these questions further.

Among European nations, Britain had perhaps the longest tradition of political participation and radicalism, due in no small part to its progressive, albeit problematic, history of attempting to balance the rights of the individual with the requirements of the state. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 legitimized the template for political participation and parliamentary sovereignty, and served to reinforce that British citizens had individual and political rights that included the ability to agitate against a tyrannical government. British radicalism blossomed during the American Revolution, when fundamental questions were raised about the meaning and depth of British constitutionalism, and just who was entitled to participate. The relatively short period of political stability following the American Revolution had been a time of diminishing political power for radical and reformist groups, but the French Revolution provided an opportunity to reverse this decline.²⁶

In the aftermath of the American Revolution, many British political groups and associations worked to strengthen their respective organizations, and to hone their

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Stephen Prickett, *England and the French Revolution* (Macmillan Education Ltd., London, 1989), p. 5.

messages for a more palatable public consumption.²⁷ The United States Constitution demonstrated to many British radicals that a government that was elected by, and served the will of the people was possible. That combined with the early days of the French Revolution and the publication of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, provided the necessary ingredients for a brief yet important burst of radicalism onto the British political stage in the 1790s. Further, interest aroused by Richard Price's 1789 sermon *Discourse On the Love of Our Country* and Price's subsequent addresses to these political groups and associations, the Revolution Society and the Society for Constitutional Information in particular, served to galvanize and electrify British politics – both for Reformists and Loyalists. All these things combined created the opportunity for a new political entity to emerge that had as its focus the political rights and education of working men in this revolutionary and rapidly industrializing era, and that entity was the London Corresponding Society.

²⁷ Jerome Reich, *Friends of the American Revolution* (M. E. Sharpe, Inc., Armonk, NY, 1998), p. 63.

CHAPTER ONE – Fertile Ground

...we have numberless assemblies, clubs and societies in this kingdom.

The Times of London, January 8, 1785.

Background: Political Principles and Foundations

London had a reason to celebrate in 1788. That auspicious year marked both the bicentennial of the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and the centennial of the Glorious Revolution. The former represented perhaps the greatest moment to date in British naval history, and the latter perhaps the greatest moment to date in English political history. Taken together both events also represented important landmarks in the ascent of Britain as the preeminent imperial power by the year 1788. And what a couple of centuries it had been. Just before the Armada sailed for England in 1588 Spain was at the height of its powers. Spain had a population double that of England, and had the largest and most lucrative colonies in the New World. Spain was united behind King Philip and Catholicism, and had the best equipped and trained army and navy in the world. England by contrast was little more than a small island nation on the come, and with a woman as its monarch no less. Yet the Royal Navy prevailed, as is well documented, and that victory contributed in no small way to the next century of British ascension in Europe and beyond.

By 1688 and the Glorious Revolution, England was still a nation on the rise that had experienced its share of domestic tumult. Since the defeat of the Armada the English had deposed and executed one king, suspended their monarchical system and installed a Lord Protectorate, and in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution reinstated another king along with a constitutional monarchy that recognized the law above all things, even

kings. The seventeenth century in England was an era of religious and political strife, and indeed a civil war was fought to decide who should rule and what the nation's religion should be. In 1642 King Charles I led an army of British citizens who supported the monarchy against another army of British citizens led by members of Parliament that believed that the power of the monarch should be limited in scope, and subordinate to the laws that applied to all people. In January of 1649 the victorious members of Parliament voted to put their king on trial to determine whether or not he had committed treason against "the ancient laws and liberties of this nation."²⁸ And how deeply held was this belief in the natural laws of personal liberty and freedom from tyrannical governance? In the middle of the seventeenth century it was so strong that the House of Commons, on January 4 1649, adopted the following resolution that became the legal and moral basis for the trial of King Charles:

Resolved, that the Commons of England in Parliament assembled do declare that the people are, under God, the original of all just power, and do also declare that the Commons of England in Parliament assembled, being chosen by and representing the people, have the supreme powering this nation; and do also declare that whatsoever is enacted or declared for law by the Commons in Parliament assembled hath the force of law, and all the people of this nation are included thereby, although the consent and concurrence of King or House of Peers be not had thereunto.²⁹

The waters of natural rights did indeed run deep. In 1688 Parliament once again invoked their collective and institutional belief in the rights of the individual and the limitations of the King by rebuffing James II efforts to re-legitimize Catholicism in the country. James had succeeded his brother Charles II to the throne in 1685 and immediately began to take actions designed to reverse the momentum of England's Protestant Reformation. More than anything James was adept at alienating almost all of

²⁸ David Lagomarsino and Charles T. Wood (ed.), *The Trial of Charles I* (Hanover, 1989), p.1.

²⁹ House of Commons, January 4, 1649.

those in power – political, religious, and military – who might have otherwise been inclined to give the new monarch the benefit of the doubt. However when James unilaterally imposed the Dispensing Power Act, an act that granted royal prerogative to suspend existing laws and statutes, Parliament took notice. James further exacerbated an already smoldering political situation when in 1687-88 he issued the Declaration of Indulgence, allowing religious Dissenters and Catholics to worship without the fear of penalty or persecution, convincing many in Parliament that James was indeed attempting to reestablish Catholicism in the realm. In June of 1688 James was blessed with a son and the fears of a Catholic dynasty that might include the diminishment of long established natural rights induced key members of Parliament to prevail upon James son-in-law, William of Orange, to travel to England and challenge James's authority. William did so, landing an army at Torbay in June of 1688, and unlike forty years earlier when a protracted civil war broke out between king and parliament, James fled to France while William and his army marched to London unopposed. Parliament then and unequivocally reestablished its legal and political authority by offering the throne to William and his wife Mary, and by establishing significant constitutional constraints on the power of the monarchy.

In the political context the celebrations of 1788, the events of the prior two centuries represented a codification of the British belief in the notion of natural rights and limited government, a view of British history most familiarly associated today with the Whig party. In Clark's "associational world," these notions were increasingly manifested through voluntary clubs, societies, and associations that existed only because there were people whose particular self-interests were served at some level by their existence. The

middle of the eighteenth century saw a proliferation of debating clubs throughout Britain, who were in many ways precursors to many of the political societies of the late eighteenth century. Debating clubs such as the Robin Hood Society survived and thrived for decades during the middle of the eighteenth century by discussing an eclectic mix of political, religious, economic, and social topics. Interestingly, many debating clubs survived longer outside of London than in the city, perhaps because outside of the urban environment the options and forums for intelligent and rational discourse were much more limited. There were also many debating societies in London, as Michael Davis has suggested, and they were viewed more as a form of local entertainment, and even as tourist attractions for visitors.³⁰

These debating societies were an important influence on the political clubs and associations that emerged in Britain during the American and French Revolutions, and among other things for the for the orderly and formal manner in which many of them conducted meetings.³¹ Debating societies were among the first non-aristocratic forums for political discourse, and they persisted at least partly because of how they conducted themselves. Many of the men in debating societies sought to mimic the manners and conduct of their social betters as a way to improve their own stations, and those of their families. This led to a code of conduct in debating societies that was structured and formalized, and many of the men who formed or participated in the more radical societies of the 1790s were familiar with how these debating societies were run. That the debating societies of the middle of the eighteenth century played an influential role in the development of the radical political societies of the end of the century was widely

³⁰ Davis, xxv.

³¹ Ibid.

acknowledged well into the nineteenth century: “The debating societies, which...have [been] suffered to propagate the most seditious and mischievous notions among the lower classes of people in the metropolis, and its vicinity, without let or molestation, have dared to propose some discussions of a most dangerous and inflammatory nature.”³²

In the first half of the eighteenth century important seeds were planted regarding the institutionalization of oppositional politics in Britain. As the Whigs and Tories solidified, switched, and re-solidified political positions and platforms, they contributed greatly to the notion of public political discourse and aligning oneself politically, as opposed to hereditarily and socially (although we will not carry that point too far – social status still counted for much in the eighteenth century), with a set of political, and by extension often economic, ideas and principles. The larger point is that this period marked the end of political and economic factionalism in a feudal sense, and the beginning of political and economic factionalism in an industrial and urbanizing sense. It was in the first half of the eighteenth century that no less a Jacobite than Lord Bolingbroke, in his essay *The Patriot King*, furthered this move toward the notion of oppositional politics by expanding the idea to include the relationships between public and private interests, and the idea of the political relationship between court and country. Bolingbroke further developed these notions to include the concepts of “in power” and “out of power,” and that those on the country somehow represented a more pristine, or less tarnished political pedigree, as opposed to those in court who would inevitably be corrupted by the influence and power peddling that occurred there.³³

John Wilkes and the Political Debate Over the American Revolution

³² *Anti-Jacobin Review*, BL, 36 (1810), p. 106.

³³ William D. Liddle. “*A Patriot King or None:*” *Lord Bolingbroke and the American Renunciation of George III* (*Journal of American History*, Vol. 64. No. 4), p. 27.

While the debating societies tended to be more structured and formalized, there were many other sorts of politically radical groups and organizations that emerged during the long eighteenth century in Europe. The American Revolution had provided renewed radical energy to many groups in Britain who believed that the colonial Americans were agitating and then fighting over the very same concerns they shared about political representation and participation. Even before that Revolution such groups as the Wilkite Society in the 1760s were able to organize and engage the working-class in political discourse. The Wilkites were organized around a political platform that supported a working-class Bill of Rights, and they took as their mission the dissemination of political information and the political education of a working-class audience. The Wilkites were founded on the political activism and radicalism of John Wilkes, and early and consistent critic of the political establishment in Britain, and a tireless activist for political reform. A brief rehearsal of Wilkes's influence on the emergence and institutionalization of political reforming groups is important to our understanding of the foundations of the London Corresponding Society and other like-minded late eighteenth century reformists.

Born in 1725 the second son of pious and well-to-do parents, Wilkes was educated in the classics by a mother who was by all accounts an unapologetic nonconformist.³⁴ As a young man, Wilkes learned that social connections and pandering to the middling sorts were the grist of London politics. Wilkes excelled at both and was elected to Parliament in 1757 with the help of William Pitt and seven thousand pounds in paid votes. In 1762, Wilkes and Charles Churchill founded the *North Briton* newspaper as joint editors.³⁵ The paper and Wilkes soon gained a following and a reputation as an exceedingly radical

³⁴ George Rude, *Wilkes and Liberty – A Social Study* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1962), p. 17.

³⁵ Rude, p. 20.

voice that exposed, ridiculed, and disparaged the government, Scottish interests, and other opposition leaders who happened to disagree with Wilkes with equal venom.

From early in his career, Wilkes wrapped himself in the cloaks of liberty and proclaimed to any and all who would listen that he was its most fervent champion. On April 23, 1763, Wilkes published what would be the last edition of his *North Briton*, number 45, in which he was accused of calling the King a liar: “Every friend of this country must lament that a prince of so many great and admirable qualities, whom England truly reveres, can be brought to give the sanction of his sacred name to the most odious measures and the most unjustifiable public declarations from a throne ever renowned for truth, honour, and an unsullied virtue.”³⁶ As innocuous to our modern sensibilities as this statement might appear, it was not so to the political and loyalist sensibilities of eighteenth century British politics, and Wilkes and all those associated with the paper were accused of seditious libel. In truth, the charges lay much more in political expediency than in any threat to the empire, as it became an opportunity for Tories to discredit opposition radicals in general and divert the attention of the nation from the problems in the colonies.³⁷ Wilkes was arrested but subsequently released and exiled to France and Italy, while his reputation as the champion of liberty only grew in his absence.

Wilkes became emblematic of the difficulty George III and his ministries had in creating a politically stable center upon which a foundation for rational and coalescing policies could be constructed and implemented to deal with the many issues the empire faced. Wilkes was a rake and a cad who knew how to play a crowd to suit his purpose,

³⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

³⁷ Ibid., p.23.

but at his core he was symptomatic of a deeper dysfunction in British politics in this period, a dysfunction that contributed to a series of short-lived ministries that could not garner the broader political support required for effective policy making. Consequently, British governments during the Revolutionary period can be seen as reacting to events more than proactively managing them, and the policies that emanated from them as a series of disjointed and non-contiguous attempts, ultimately unsuccessful, to somehow control the events that confronted them.

It is no wonder then, that George III fretted so about “that Devil Wilkes” and spent a great deal of time and energy dealing with Wilkes and his followers relative to the enormous issues in the empire at that time - not the least of which were the issues in the North American colonies. Wilkes represented but one branch of a diverse and complex collection of political opposition that distracted British political energy and will during this period and in no small way contributed to the policy formulation, implementation, and execution regarding their American colonists. In the colonies, Wilkes had the opposite effect. The Wilkite movement became part of rallying cry in the colonies for liberty and constitutionality – but not necessarily for independence. For many American colonists, Wilkes and his movement personified the struggle for the restoration of British constitutionalism as they understood it, and as Hardy and the LCS would come to understand it - a constitutionalism that was being threatened by George III and his governments. The colonists put the image of Wilkes on almost anything, from china to rum barrels, and used that image to rally support for retaining the relationship of “benign neglect” from their mother country that they had enjoyed, and prospered from, for so many years.

In London there was wide support for Wilkes amongst the political clubs and societies. These political reform groups began to emerge under the rule of George III, as the political ideals behind the problems with the American colonists caused many in Britain to reexamine their own political beliefs and frustrations with the state of British political society. Driven in part by early industrialization and urbanization, these voluntary associations, political and otherwise, became a regular and important part of a rapidly emerging urban culture.³⁸ In the early 1780s *The Times* took notice as well, commenting that “we have numberless assemblies, clubs, and societies in this kingdom.”³⁹ Prior to the French Revolution, many nascent French political reformists visited London, Manchester, Birmingham, etc. to meet with and observe the many clubs in action. Francois de la Rochefoucauld was one such visitor, noting that the nature of the many clubs and societies he visited seemed ‘one of the most sensible institutions, the best mark of confidence felt in society in general.’⁴⁰ The Americans colonists believed this as well, and their efforts to assert what they believed to be their inherited political rights felt as natural to them as it did to the political clubs and societies in Britain.

The issue of who British political rights belonged to and how they might be politically exercised was at the core of the fundamental misunderstandings between a series of British governments and the American colonists over just exactly what rights the colonists had as British subjects, and the corresponding implications the answer to that question had with respect to how they were to be governed. While nothing about the Revolutionary period is simple, one approach to a causal argument for the stupefying changes during this period might be: As part of an imperial management rehabilitation

³⁸ Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1500-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 94.

³⁹ *The Times*, January 8, 1785, p. 404.

⁴⁰ *A Frenchman's Year in Suffolk*, Suffolk Record Society, 30 (1988), p. 188.

effort, the British government changed their “benign neglect” approach to the American colonists after a century and a half ; the colonists reacted by attempting to protect the rights they believed they had as British subjects; the British reacted clumsily and inconsistently to the American reaction; and events escalated hence as each side became entangled in a cycle of reacting to the perceived provocations of the other party.

Regrettably, the simplest explanations are often not the most satisfactory, and historical events of the depth and complexity of the American Revolution in the context of British politics in the late eighteenth century can rarely be analyzed with any finality. Centralized themes are often a bit easier to discern. Time, distance, and an Americanized acculturation of events have created a mythology around the events of the Revolution and have had the cumulative effect of casting the Revolution as an inevitable event – the fight for liberty against tyranny, or the struggle for independence as a natural human right. The Revolution and the events leading up to it were of course much more complicated than that, and at the root of those complications was the vigorous political debate that was occurring in both Britain and the colonies at this time.⁴¹

That political debate became a driver for the themes that have become familiar in the historiography of the Revolution: the imperial management difficulties the British were faced with at the end of the Seven Years’ War; the new approach to governing in the colonies; and the British need for revenues to help address the debt incurred while fighting the French and the Spanish in the New World. The subtext for those themes however, lies in the larger political struggle for the British on a variety of fronts, not the least of which were, as historian John Derry surmises: “The prolonged struggle between

⁴¹ John W. Derry, *English Politics and the American Revolution* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976), p. 3.

the House of Commons and John Wilkes, ...the quarrel with America, the crisis in Ireland, the rise of the petitioning movements and the clamor for economical and parliamentary reform.”⁴² Indeed, the quandary for the British and the Americans proved particularly problematic in this context, as in a large sense the political debate between them was over the same thing – British constitutionalism as each side understood that to be. That debate would be renewed by the LCS and their contemporaries as the eighteenth century progressed.

That said, the century after the establishment of the British constitutional platform in 1688, as well as the physical distance between Britain and America and the different socio-economic circumstances of each society, led to the evolution of differing interpretations of rights and responsibilities, and this became the basis, ultimately, for a revolution. For the British, constitutional principles were a careful balance of compromise and conciliation, and much care was taken and ambiguity purposefully expended to avoid any constitutional showdowns between the King and parliament. In that context, the British constitution can be viewed as less rigid and unbending, and more as a framework or a set of guidelines for the rationalization of enlightened governance.

For the colonists in the New World, the constitution was something rather different. Immersed in Enlightenment and Classical republicanism literature and ideals, the constitution was the foundation upon which a virtuous and free society was built. It was by its nature inviolable and absolute – a cherished and natural proclamation of a human belief and value system, and consequently worth fighting for, or at least saying that it was worth fighting for. It was the difference between a general set of shared ideals that were

⁴² Ibid., p. 5.

never quite documented, but were nonetheless passed along through an oral tradition as a birthright of being English; and a written and explicit statement that served as a civic faith, a roadmap for right and wrong, just and unjust, and for what it meant to be a citizen of the nation.

In the period from 1688 to 1776, the British learned to apply and adapt their constitution as a practical matter. In that same period, the colonists in America learned to apply their *same* constitution as a principled matter, lending credence to Sir Lewis Namier's assertion that America in this period is "...a refrigerator in which British ideas and institutions are preserved long after they are forgotten in this country [Britain]."⁴³ To follow Namier's splendid metaphor further, the Americans pulled those ideas and institutions out of the refrigerator when the British begin to upend the status quo, and the British responded by pointing out that the 'use by' date had long since lapsed.

The British would have preferred that the refrigerator that was colonial constitutionalism stay closed indefinitely, and for much of the eighteenth century they acted as if it would always be so. As suggested earlier a series of British governments had no shortage of issues to deal with. It is no wonder then that many British actions during the pre – Revolutionary period seemed contradictory and indecisive. At its core, that was reflective of the inability of a series of British ministries to establish a strong and stable base of political support over a period of time. Lacking that, it was problematic at best to develop and implement any sort of coherent and consistent colonial policy.

The American colonial policy of the Rockingham government is a case in point and illustrative of the disjointedness in British politics during this period, a disjointedness that

⁴³ Derry, p. 14.

would prove politically encouraging to the LCS. In a few short years, this policy at various times asserted: the supremacy of the Parliament over the colonies; the difficulty in ever exercising that authority; the repeal of the Stamp Act and the passing of the Declaratory Act to prove supremacy; the accusations from Whigs that Tories loyal to George III were trying to re-institute royal despotism and turn the clock back on constitutional liberties; and the opposition belief that this constitutional attack was the root cause of problems with their American brethren.⁴⁴ For the empire, the Revolution was part of a larger issue of imperial management at a politically ambiguous time in England as George III and Parliament sparred over legislative and executive authority.

For Wilkes and others, the pre – American revolutionary period was an important and formative period in the development of British radical politics. For it was in this period that the radical movement really began to find its voice, as if from puberty to at least young adulthood. The messages of enfranchisement and participation became clearer, the organizational techniques sounder, and the critical mass of discourse in the public sphere, particularly amongst the working-class, slowly but surely grew, as did the perceived threat they were becoming to the established political order. That threat was eloquently, if not facetiously, articulated by Tory politician and Secretary of State for the colonies, Earl of Hillsborough in May of 1770:

Let our patriots therefore, if they would arrive at eminence by their conduct, go over to America, and demand the confidence of the colonies. They may have real merit to plead there in their attempts to overthrow the Constitution of Great Britain; they may have merit there by endeavoring to render the impudent resolutions of a provincial committee, superior to our lawful ordinances. But here, my lords, I trust they will ever be held contemptible, that their characters will be as mean, as their proceedings have been flagitious, and that their

⁴⁴ Bernard Donoghue, *British Politics and the American Revolution – The Path to War, 1773-1775* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1964), pp. 144 – 145.

machinations to destroy the importance of the British empire, will always make them detestable to every good Englishman.⁴⁵

Dr. Josiah Tucker and the American Revolution: A Voice Alone

If the English Civil War and Glorious Revolution can be seen as the first cogent bellwethers in the shifting of British political culture from the framework of feudalism to the framework of a more modern and representative form of governing, then the American Revolution was certainly the event that confirmed that a fundamental political shift was afoot. Many historians argue that the slow and arduous radicalization of British politics began in earnest after the Glorious Revolution, but accelerated considerably during the reign of George III.⁴⁶ It was during this long reign that the disparity between the theory and practice of the British Constitution and constitutionalism widened considerably, a phenomenon that did not go unnoticed in colonial America.⁴⁷ It was also a phenomenon that helped to set the stage for the fundamental changes in British political culture that would ferment between the American Revolution and the French Revolution, and that the LCS and other reformist groups would continue in the 1790s.

In the lead-up to the American Revolution, there were a few in British politics who recognized that the colonial Americans would not react well to the shifts in British political culture, and the subsequent changes to their status quo as a result. In 1766, Dr. Josiah Tucker, an Anglican minister who served as dean of the cathedral of Gloucester, published *A Letter from a Merchant in London to His Nephew in North America, Relative*

⁴⁵ Earl of Hillsborough to the House of Lords, May 18, 1770, from: Jerome R. Reich, *British Friends of the American Revolution* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1998), p.3.

⁴⁶ Clark, p. 119.

⁴⁷ Lawrence S. Kaplan *The American Revolution and "A Candid World."* Carl B. Cone - Essayist (Kent State University Press, 1977), p.3.

*to the Present Posture of Affairs in the Colonies.*⁴⁸ In it Tucker supported the supremacy and rights of Parliament to legislate and tax in the colonies. He also refuted the American argument of excessive taxation as a result of the Stamp Act by comparing the tax burden of the average Englishman with that of the average American merchant.⁴⁹

From there, however, Tucker diverged from even the most radical British opposition views when he posited that the American psyche would never accept anything less than independence, and to oppose it politically and militarily would only prolong the inevitable. In effect, Tucker proposed independence for America long before radicals and patriots in America espoused it in any great numbers. In his letter, Tucker spoke directly to the colonists when he said “...you wish to be an empire by itself, and to no longer be the Province of another. The spirit is uppermost; and this principle is visible in all your Speeches, and all your writings, even when you take some pains to disguise it.”⁵⁰

Tucker further proposed that it was in fact in the economic best interests of the empire to grant the American colonies their independence as soon as possible – an idea that was on the extreme radical fringe of British politics. While the notion may have seemed radical, there was a soundness to Tucker’s logic that was difficult to argue with for any who cared to examine it. Tucker surmised that given the propensity towards the ideals of liberty the Americans held so dearly, the British government essentially had three choices: (1) coercion, (2) procrastination, or (3) separation.⁵¹ Tucker reasoned that coercion and procrastination, while workable solutions over the short term, would eventually run out of political and economic will so why not take the shortest route to the

⁴⁸ Reich, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Reich, p. 11.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 12.

most cost efficient and longest term, if not inevitable, solution? Tucker believed that in this way Britain would have the economic benefit of unfettered and leveraged trade with each of the colonies, and drive the colonies to compete ruthlessly with each other, all to the benefit of the British empire. Further, Tucker saw other collateral economic benefits, not the least of which were stopping the migration of skilled British workers to America, saving on colonial administration costs, and facilitating the collection of debts owed to British merchants because refusal to pay could no longer be used as political and economic leverage against Parliament.⁵²

Tucker was one of the first in British politics to recognize the difference in interpretations of British constitutionalism between the colonists and the mother country and how that shaped the character of the maturing American psyche and the changes afoot in British political culture. For Tucker, it was the difference between practice and theory: “the Parent-State grounds her present claim of Authority and Jurisdiction over the colonies on Facts and Precedents...the colonists, who are all disciples of Mr. Locke, have Recourse to what they call Immutable Truths – the abstract Reasonings, and eternal Fitness of Things, - and in short to such Rights of Human Nature which they suppose to be unalienable and indefeasible.”⁵³

If Tucker represented the most radical of thoughts and ideas about how to handle the difficulties with the North American colonies, he was certainly not alone in offering opposition solutions that ran the gamut from reconciliation to independence. In early 1766 William Pitt advocated for repeal of the Stamp Act (1765 – required American colonists to pay a tax on every piece of printed paper they used), perhaps based in equal

⁵² Riech, p. 13.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 15.

parts on his disdain of the former ministry of George Grenville and for the implications he felt the Act held for the erosion of British constitutional principles. In the Parliamentary debate on the colonist's petition for repeal of the Stamp Act, a resolution was brought to the floor that would become the Declaratory Act (asserted Britain's exclusive right to legislate for, and tax its colonies). The new head of the government, the Marquis of Rockingham, saw the Declaratory Act as a compromise with hard liners in Parliament in order to garner enough votes for the repeal of the Stamp Act. While well intentioned, Pitt knew that the Americans would react poorly to its implications that Parliament had the authority to levy internal taxes if it chose to do so, and prophetically remarked:

Bind them with golden cords of equity and moderation. Cords of iron will never hold them. If you have this [declaratory] resolution like an eagle hanging over them I believe they will never go to rest. Lenity, humanity, magnanimity. They held the world by more than their legions.⁵⁴

In this context then, the American Revolution might be seen as part of a larger evolution in British politics, one in which the rise of substantive opposition political parties splintered traditional British party politics, together with the development of a rising and politically influential public opinion. That, combined with George III's obstinacy in reasserting the executive and legislative supremacy of the monarchy at a time when perceived threats to the British constitution were many and manifest, all combined to radically skew the prism through which British politicians viewed the American colonial situation. The years between the outbreak of the American

⁵⁴ Reich, p.25.

Revolution and the outbreak of the French Revolution fostered the continuing development of the British radical political movement.

The Society for Constitutional Information and the Growth of Political Groups

In 1781 the Society for Constitutional Information (SCI) was formed by Major John Cartwright in London. The SCI played an important role in developing the political agenda for radical reformist societies and groups. During the 1780s, in the years before the French Revolution, the SCI ran a political campaign promoting electoral reform, (something the LCS would take up - Hardy cited the efforts of SCI as part of the inspiration for establishing the LCS), the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, and the abolition of the slave trade.⁵⁵ Importantly though, the SCI was not a society composed of working class men, but rather was composed mostly of land holders, politicians, and business owners, who believed in political reform but attempted to effect that reform from within the existing political structures.

The SCI and the many other associations and societies that emerged in between the revolutions were part of a wider trend that deserves some consideration. Both the American Revolution and early industrialization and urbanization had the effect of consolidating and focusing British voluntary associations into very specific categories and specializations. This trend mirrored what was occurring in British society and culture overall.⁵⁶ Early industrialization had begun to move the British economy, and therefore society, from a more agrarian and generalists labor force concentrating on specialized skills. Before the outbreak of the French Revolution the notion of a society

⁵⁵ Davis, p. xxv.

⁵⁶ Clark, *British Clubs*, p. 94.

filled with specialized clubs and associations was generally viewed as something beneficial and reflective of an open and learned people. A Scottish visitor in the 1780s noted that “there are few circumstances which have contributed more to the advancement of useful knowledge than the establishment of academies or societies of learned men.”⁵⁷

While clubs, associations, and societies had been a British institution for some hundreds of years, the phenomenon seemed to really take off after the American Revolution, in both the sheer number of such groups, and in the number of men participating in them. What conditions and circumstances spurred this rapid increase in their growth? In his book *British Clubs and Societies 1500 – 1800*, Peter Clark has suggested that there were three related trends that seemed to drive this rapid increase of clubs and societies in the 1780s: first, a greater and accelerating stress on associational formality and even institutionalization through the use of charters, the elections of officers, and increased bureaucracy; secondly, a growing increase in the national networking of societies that saw local chapters of societies create more formal networks with their brethren in other parts of the country; and thirdly, a new emphasis on social discipline that sought to regulate and moderate the behavior of the membership in an effort to bring credibility and civility to those societies formed mostly from the lower and working classes.⁵⁸ All of these trends were symptomatic of other forces in British society, forces that help to explain the proliferation of so many clubs and societies.

The accelerating pace of industrialization and urbanization at the end of the eighteenth century has already been mentioned, but bears repeating due to its influence on all matters of societal change in Britain in this period. As factories that supported new and

⁵⁷ *Aberdeen Magazine*, I (1796), p. 4.

⁵⁸ Clark, *British Clubs*, p. 95.

more mechanized industries grew, so too did the need for a labor force that had the requisite skills and abilities to perform such jobs. That labor force did not exist, but was created through an unprecedented shift of labor from the agrarian jobs of the country, to the urban jobs of the city. Suddenly new urban areas were flooded with an eclectic mix of social and economic classes, including those from other countries looking for work in these new industries, and that tended to fuel the engines of associations, clubs, and societies. The common thread for many of these men was that the social and economic constructs they were so accustomed to had been severely disrupted. The formation of these organizations, whether for political, cultural, or other circumstances, served to connect people of similar interests, but not necessarily the same backgrounds. It was one thing for a club of Danish emigrants to form for the purposes of discussing current events back home and providing support for new arrivals, but quite another thing for a political association to form whose goal was legislative or economic reform – the two clubs attracted wholly different memberships. In this new cauldron of urbanization, it was not as unusual as it might have been in the past for newly prosperous factory managers and owners to join the same political clubs as some of their workers might join as well. In some cases their political goals might even have been aligned, particularly when some of the factory managers shared the same socio-economic backgrounds as some of the laborers. Between 1783 and 1790 this trend increased unabated, and in some instances new voluntary organizations were formed for specific social reasons to deal with the emerging social problems of rapid urbanization and the influx of hundreds of thousands of workers and their families into the growing industrial cities.

Interestingly, such groups might be seen as a shifting of the informal and organically formed rural social safety nets that had existed for centuries in the countryside, to the new paradigm of the formalization of the much the same sort of social safety nets but in the context of an urban environment, and as outlets for what the British government could not yet provide in terms of social support for unfortunate individuals and families.

The divisions between the political and the religious were less rigid in eighteenth century Britain than they are today, and the religious reaction to industrialization and urbanization contributed to the rapid growth of clubs and associations.⁵⁹ Many churches and religious groups were appalled at the sudden societal shifts and quickly formed societies and associations of their own to support the new urban needy, and to work for the kinds of societal reform that would prevent the displacement and alienation of those making the shift from rural to urban less successfully than others. In the 1780s the congregations of many churches grew rapidly – the ranks of Anglican evangelists doubled, Baptist membership tripled, and Methodists saw their congregations quadrupled – in part as a reaction to the growing breakdown of traditional societal and religious structures and behaviors. In fact many of the political associations that would continue to form in the 1790s and beyond had their roots in religious groups and congregations.⁶⁰

As part of this shift to urbanization and an urban working class, an appetite grew for political discussion and debate that was fueled by the American Revolution, and benefitted from the urbanization of the country as that provided for a regular influx of potential members. The American Revolution created and exacerbated the division among political reformists and loyalists, and by some counts there were as many as one

⁵⁹ Clark, *British Clubs*, p. 96.

⁶⁰ A. D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England, 1770 – 1970* (London, 1976), p. 31.

hundred of these political clubs and societies before the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789.⁶¹ Reformist and loyalist clubs and societies played a tit-for-tat game throughout the 1780s as no sooner did a political reformist group organize than a pro-government club would organize as a counter measure. One such example is the formation of the Association for Preserving Liberty and Property at the Crown and Anchor tavern in London in 1792. An attorney, John Reeves, became alarmed at the formation of the LCS and other such groups, and as a response formed a group to provide alternative political messages, supportive of the current government, into the political public sphere.⁶² All of these factors had the effect of increasing the number and diversity of clubs, associations, and societies in Britain by the end of the 1780s.

Importantly, it was in the 1780s that many of the voluntary associations, clubs, and societies developed the management skills and abilities to network more effectively with other groups in other parts of the country, and in some cases in other parts of Europe and even America. This was an important development in the maturation of such groups as it allowed them to expand their public reach and recognition to areas of the country where that might not have been possible or practical before, and it allowed them to communicate their particular messages to a wider public audience.⁶³

The requirements and by products of industrialization and urbanization – better roads and carriages, improved communications, more regular delivery systems and methods of goods and people – all enabled many of the associations and societies to network with each other more effectively. Such networking usually took the form of a hub and spoke

⁶¹ Clark, *British Clubs*, p. 96.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Clark, *British Clubs*, p. 98.

approach. The main chapter, often the originating or largest chapter, would hold regular business meetings in which a bi-directional flow of business and information would occur. The outlying chapters would submit their concerns, proposals, motions, questions, etc., to the main chapter, often sending local chapter representatives along with them, where they were added to a meeting agenda and discussed in due course. Reflections of those discussions, and any other actionable outcomes, would be sent back to the outlying chapters to be acted upon accordingly. This often included a public reading of the proceedings and/or minutes of the meeting to all interested parties, and in that way that group could effectively extend the reach of its message, whatever that might be.

The 1780s was an important time for the growth of the political nation in Britain, and for the expansion of that political nation into a growing public sphere for political discourse. This was really the period in which an emerging political consciousness began to form amongst the working class, and that resulted in political reformation societies composed almost entirely of the working class for the first time in the political history of Britain. Part of the reason for this development was the ability of working class men to congregate and fraternize more easily as they been able to do before, as they came together in new urban areas to find jobs and provide for their families in the new economy. These political congregations, at least initially, worked much like traditional religious congregations, where like-minded people gather to share common beliefs and values. In the case of political congregations, however, rather than discussing the Bible and worshipping together, these working class men discussed the political events of the day, their particular lots in life, and the general hardness of it all. Such discussions often led to the kinds of discussions that imagined different outcomes to their lives, and the

circumstances required to effectuate different outcomes. Chief among the obstacle to such changes, as indicated by the newly formed SCI in 1781 was “two intolerable grievances – inadequate Representation and long Parliaments...”⁶⁴ In this way they began, however modestly, to create their own sort of political public sphere of discourse, at first a bit distinct from the larger public sphere in the country, but one that over time began to be exposed to the larger public sphere of political discourse in the nation.

The Emergence of a Wider Political Public Sphere

As Jurgen Habermas has suggested, the evolution of a more coherent and conscious political public sphere in Britain occurred throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, culminating with the de facto establishment of public opinion as a political force during the French Revolution. It was, however, the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that established the political preeminence of Parliament, and with it the beginnings of a nascent Protestant middle class that formed something of an extra-parliamentary forum for the purpose of political discourse, irrespective of their specific representation or lack thereof in Parliament.⁶⁵ As important as the Bill of Rights and the King in Parliament concept that emerged from the Revolution were, it was rather more important for the evolution of the public political sphere that henceforth the deliberations of Parliament would be printed and released to the public at large. It is in this period that one might begin to see something that resembled our concept of a more modern political campaign as the King and Parliament, both of whom had essentially lost control of what political

⁶⁴ SCI Meeting Minutes, Collection of Francis Place, BL, MS # 27811, 1781 (month and date indiscernible).

⁶⁵ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Ma., 1991), p. 62-3.

news was being released in the public sphere, fought to control an increasingly politically powerful public opinion. This phenomenon would have broad and lasting implications for the growth of alternative political voices in Britain over the next century, and would provide fertile ground for working class political groups to become involved in political discourse in a direct manner. As it is today, content was king for the media of eighteenth century Britain, and the more political discourse, conservative or radical, the better the opportunity to sell newspapers into the public sphere.

Moreover, the emergence of the Whig and Tory political factions following the Glorious Revolution created a completely new level of political discourse from the traditional King vs. Parliament battle, providing a more granular and detailed form of political discourse, and one in which new members to the forum of political discourse could identify themselves with. This development also cemented the notion of a discrete and specific kind of political factionalism in the public sphere of political discourse, one in which an increasing number of ‘political citizens’ could align themselves along a for or against political axis.⁶⁶ In many respects this new political public discourse served as an outlet for political and even economic frustration. Rather than resorting to civil unrest and violence as a means to voice ones displeasure with the status quo, there was now a public sphere that allowed, or at least tolerated, the discussion of opposition views and opinions.

The development of political factionalism in the public sphere also contributed to the notion that there was and would now be, at all times, a party in political power and a party in quest of political power. This had the effect of further establishing the political concept of an Opposition faction in whatever form that might take. The salient point is

⁶⁶ Habermas, *Public Sphere*, p. 63.

that there would be a permanent entity that was opposed to whatever entity held political power, and that would dedicate time and resource toward dislodging that power. This contributed to the development of the kinds of political clubs and associations that the London Corresponding Society would come to represent, and to a number of cottage industries, such as political newspapers and pamphleteers, that evolved to support an increasing amount of political activity by an increasing number of political citizens in Britain. As importantly, the new public sphere became a forum for political debate and in many senses this was when the proverbial genie was released from the bottle and all things political were now fair game for public discourse. As Habermas quite succinctly suggests: “The discussion in principle went beyond the issues of the day to include the “topics of government”; the separation of powers, British liberties, patriotism and corruption, party and faction, the question of the legality of the opposition’s new relationship to the government – and even basic questions of political anthropology.”⁶⁷

As the latter half of the eighteenth century progressed, it became increasingly common for newspapers and other political publications to evaluate the results of each election in detail, and to mark a distinction between that actual results and what was perceived to be “sense of the people.” Also referred to as “the common voice,” and “the general cry of the people,” as well as “the public spirit,” all of these monikers provided credibility and substance to the notion that the political public sphere not only existed, but that it was something worth paying attention to and tracking as best as one could. This is not to say that the influence of a public opinion became preeminent in all things political, as such would not be the case until at least the nineteenth century, but it demonstrates that there

⁶⁷ Habermas, *Public Sphere*, p. 64.

was now something other than the voices of elected or royally appointed officials in the arena of political discourse.

After the Seven Years War but before the American Revolution, the efforts of Wilkes and his followers contributed to the continuing legitimacy of the voice of the public in political matters. Between 1768 and 1771 Wilkes and his followers presented a series of petitions for the dissolution of Parliament that came from counties, cities, towns, and villages from all over the nation. And although these petitions were summarily ignored by King George, they nevertheless added to the momentum and trajectory of political discourse in the public sphere.⁶⁸ When Parliament was dissolved in 1784 (more as a political expedient for the King rather than from the influence of the public opinion) the King nevertheless told the House of Commons that he felt obligated “to recur to the sense of the people.”⁶⁹

This period between the wars also saw the growth of many of the large daily newspapers such as the *Times*, and part of that growth was due to an increasing emphasis on the political issues of the day. Early political reformists, including Wilkes and his followers, became quite adept at using the newspapers to get their messages out into the public sphere, and in a business where content and readers was everything, many of the papers were only too happy to print the proceedings, minutes, and meeting schedules of many of the newly formed political clubs and associations. In 1779 there were twenty-six county associations that formed using the model of the Yorkshire Association, whose purpose was to work politically for economic and parliamentary reform. The members were mostly country gentlemen who were tired of two decades of taxation to fight wars,

⁶⁸ Habermas, *Public Sphere*, p. 65.

⁶⁹ C.S. Emden, *The People and the Constitution* (Oxford, 1962), p.

and who wanted to be more directly represented in Parliament. However, while there was some semblance of organization and unity, it was never focused enough to bring enough political pressure to bear to effect any sort of substantial change. It would take nothing less than the French Revolution for the phenomenon of political public opinion to grow permanent roots and to become a political force to be reckoned with.

Political groups such as the LCS would recognize the 1790's as their opportunity to participate in this discourse in a more substantial way than ever before. In 1791 Fox found himself in a political fight with William Pitt and his supporters over whether or not to continue preparing for a potential war with Russia. Pitt had curtailed those preparations under the pressure of public opinion, and Fox, while acknowledging the role the public voice now had in such matters, did not agree with Pitt's actions. This episode is a good example of the organizational progress that popular political clubs and associations had made over the prior decades, so that by the 1790s they were a political force to be reckoned with.

While this development would not lead to immediate political recognition in terms of voting rights, representation, and reform, it nevertheless created the necessary foundation of discourse and participation that would lead to such things. Fox seemed to be mindful of such matters in his 1791 speech by explicitly referring to this new third leg of the political stool as 'public opinion' rather than as the more abstract terms of the prior decades such as "the sense of the people" and the "common opinion."⁷⁰ When Fox says "...but one thing is clear, that I ought to give the public the means of forming an opinion" he is referring to a specific, organized, and informed body of political citizens in the

⁷⁰ Habermas, p. 66.

public sphere who have, more or less, educated themselves in the matters of the most pressing political issues of the day.

Political Discourse in France

In the wider sphere of European politics, a couple of corollaries might prove instructive. A similar phenomenon was occurring in France from roughly the middle of the eighteenth century up until the French Revolution. One crucial difference, however, was that everything published in France had to go through an elaborate censorship process, tightly controlled by a ministerial bureaucracy that effectively circumscribed the dissemination of any sort of substantial political information into the French public sphere. France's official paper, the *Mercure de France*, had only 1600 subscriptions in 1763, less than even the most unpopular papers and journals in Britain.⁷¹ However there was there was a flourishing media and publication underground in France for most all things, including political discourse, right up to the outbreak of the Revolution.

Further, there was no ongoing tradition of political participation that included a representative body of the people; absolute monarchies tend to have little use for such things, and as is well known the Estates General had not been convened since 1614. Any quasi-representative political bodies that did exist, namely the courts and the clergy still existed at the pleasure and for the purposes of the King. Additionally, France lacked, or at least lagged behind, in the sort of progress that England had experienced with industrialization and urbanization. This made it more difficult for disenfranchised voices to organize themselves in France toward a platform of common political goals. In the latter half of the eighteenth century France had a thriving merchant and business class

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 67.

who shared some common political interests, yet the foundations were not in place as they were across the Channel for sufficient organizational momentum and support.

France had not as yet produced the kind of capital generating and accumulating socio-economic class structures as had developed in England, and therefore lacked a politically powerful motivation to organize and congeal as a cohesive political force that represented something other than France's hereditary nobility.⁷² In many and important respects, class differences were more deeply ingrained in France than they were in Britain, and that tempered France's ability to develop the sort of political oppositional groups and forces that were developing in Britain. Further, there was little to no public sphere in France that was not dominated by either the king or the nobility before the middle half of the eighteenth century. By comparison, the British had at least a one hundred year start, and probably more, on the development of a public political sphere. This began to change in France with the Enlightenment and the *philosophes*, and the salons of the eighteenth century in Paris began to resemble the taverns and coffeehouses of London, at least in discourse if not in amenities.

Besides the literary underground that existed in France before the Revolution, the printing and distribution of the *Encyclopedie* of Diderot and d'Alembert was an important step in creating a more public and focused sphere of political discourse in France. Here information and general knowledge were available directly the public, at least those who could afford to buy a set of the books. It had the important political effect, however, of democratizing the accumulation of information so that access to information, and the knowledge and intelligence that often accompanied it, were less and less in the strict

⁷² Habermas, p. 68.

purview of the government, including the nobility. This was, in its own way, a revolutionary development in France, and did much to encourage the establishment of some of the same sorts of clubs and associations that had formed in Britain. To name just one example, there were a small number of gentleman's societies that met at the Club d'Entresol for the purposes of some political discourse, along with the discussion of arts and letters. Most of these clubs formed in the decade just prior to the Revolution, and it was purported that the French statesmen Turgot and Malesherbes participated in some of them on a fairly regular basis.⁷³

The Revolution in France accelerated the process of establishing the environment and foundations necessary for the public to participate in political discourse. By way of comparison it had taken the British well over a century to establish a self-perpetuating political public sphere, and in France it had appeared virtually overnight as the Revolution began.⁷⁴ As soon as the Estates General was recalled it began publicizing the minutes from its meetings and deliberations through its own designated secretaries. After the Revolution started a myriad of political clubs and associations formed rapidly as several hundred years of political stability splintered into dozens and perhaps even hundreds of newly born political factions. In August of 1789 the new daily *Journal des Debates et des Decrets* began printing the results of the meetings of the Estates General and making them widely available to the public. This further codified the growing notion in France that there was now a political public sphere that those newly engaged in politics could participate in.

⁷³ Habermas, p. 69.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Interestingly, the English example was pre-imminent during the early part of the Revolution, and the French basis for the legitimacy of their Revolution was couched in constitutional terms, as opposed to something more social or economic. In France the public sphere was born as if fired from a cannon, and in short order much of the rest of the European continent was paying close attention. In the constitution adopted by the newly formed French parliament of 1791, which was essentially the whole of the *Declaration des Droits de l' Homme et du Citoyen* written in 1789 plus addendums, the new political public sphere was explicitly addressed: “The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious rights of man. Everyone can therefore speak, write, and print freely, with the proviso of responsibility for the misuse of this liberty in the cases determined by law.”⁷⁵ As history would reflect, the proviso of “determined by law” would quickly become a slippery slope in the French Revolution, one that would lead to the suppression of such rights in the interest of the state, especially during the Terror.

In 1793 the newly adopted French Constitution extended these political rights, though, as it turned out, only on paper: “The right to communicate one’s ideas and opinions, whether through the press or in any other manner, the right to assemble peaceably...cannot be refused...The necessity to promulgate these rights arises from the presence or fresh memory of despotism”⁷⁶ However, these rights were only selectively applied for political purposes as the Revolution radicalized from 1792 and beyond. Once the new French citizens’ army declared war on other European nations as a way to export the Revolution, it became politically dangerous to allow opponents of the Revolution to

⁷⁵ The Constitution of 1791, September 3, 1791, Title I, *Fundamental Provisions Guaranteed by the Constitution*.

⁷⁶ The Constitution of 1793, June 24, 1793, *Of The Guaranty of Rights*.

assemble and speak freely, especially in the press. In August of 1792, prior to the adoption of many of the articles of the 1793 Constitution, the Paris Commune declared all opponents of the Revolution as *empoisonneurs de l'opinion publique* whose exercise of their political rights as French citizens posed a danger to the state.⁷⁷

In effect, the French went directly from several centuries of absolute monarchy to a Republic of representative government. There was no opportunity for incremental change and no time for political or social absorption of new forms of political participation. The French were essentially working without a net politically, and the results of such a state of political disruption is historically evident. That is not to say, however, that the British experience was somehow better than was the French, or that the French experience was somehow better than that of the British, it is just to say that their political experiences were quite different, and therefore the way each of their public spheres evolved and embraced politics was entirely different. That said, the French just did not have the political experience to deal with the massive political, social, and economic disruption caused by their Revolution. What they did have, however, was the example of the British, and to a lesser degree that of the Americans. It seems curious then, that the French, particularly as the late eighteenth century was awash with British political literature in the French public sphere, did not leverage more of the British experience for their own purposes.

Britain and the French Revolution

Nevertheless the growth of political reform movements in Britain, and across much of Europe for that matter, in the late eighteenth century often included the nascent political

⁷⁷ Habermas, *Public Sphere*, p. 71.

voices of the working class, and that was an altogether new phenomenon. Historian Terry Eagleton has described this development as a “counter-public sphere,” and to the extent that these working class political reform groups were organized and sustained, they did represent something new and different, or an “oppositional network of journals, clubs, pamphlets, debates and institutions.”⁷⁸ The outbreak of the French Revolution during the final decade the eighteenth century acted as an accelerant for political reform groups in Britain, including the LCS, and the fervor and excitement over the French Revolution in Britain, particularly amongst the working and middling classes, cannot be overstated. The political public sphere in Britain was awash with news of the revolution and overly optimistic speculation over its impact in France specifically, and across Europe more generally.

In Britain the prevailing public opinion at the start of the French Revolution was generally favorable and supportive, and across Europe it seemed that the continent was ready to adopt the Revolution in its earliest days. Illustrative of this spirit, French journalist Jacques Mallet du Pan opined that “...every European today is part of this last struggle of civilization...The Revolution being cosmopolitan, so to speak, ceases to belong exclusively to the French.”⁷⁹ Even Edmund Burke, writing in 1789 and a year before the publication of his political condemnation of the Revolution in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, commented when he heard that the Bastille had fallen that the British attentively watched “with astonishment at a French struggle for Liberty and

⁷⁸ Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism, from the Spectator to Post-Structuralism* (London, 1984), p. 36.

⁷⁹ J. Mallet du Pan, *Considerations sur la nature de la Revolution de France, et sur causes qui en prolongent la duree* (London and Brussels, 1793), p. 67.

not knowing whether to blame or to applaud!”⁸⁰ Burke had sharpened his gaze and his views concerning the Revolution just a year later, and that greatly contributed to the political factionalism in Britain concerning the Revolution that the LCS and many other political reformist groups would become a part of as the decade progressed.

While some of the enthusiasm in Britain over the Revolution was no doubt attributable to a certain kind of anit-Gallicanism and even anti-Catholicism, and in the hope that the political and social turmoil caused by the Revolution would weaken France’s military power and position in Europe, most in Britain saw it as a hopeful sign of a Europe in which liberty might finally flourish. The political excitement in Britain in 1789 over the developments in France was palpable, and added considerably to the momentum of an already growing interest in political participation amongst the working classes. Many viewed the events across the channel as a kind of repeat of Britain’s own Glorious Revolution, surmising that the outcomes would be much the same and that France would have a constitutional monarchy.⁸¹

Thomas Hardy and the other founding members of the LCS were at least as caught up in this liberating political furor as anybody else. It seemed that politics and events in France were being discussed everywhere one went in London. A combination of newspapers, pamphlets, coffee houses, taverns, debating clubs, and political reform groups made it seem that anyone not discussing politics was an outlier. As history would reflect, however, those who believed that the British political model would take root in France would ultimately be quite disappointed. As historian Hedva Ben-Israel has

⁸⁰ Edmund Burke to the Earl of Charlemont. August 9, 1789, in *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. T. W. Copeland, Alfred Cobban, and Robert A. Smith, 10 Volumes (Cambridge, 1958 – 70), VI: 10.

⁸¹ Davis, I: xxvii

observed, "...in England, even more than in France, the history of the French Revolution was being written before the story of it was completed...Attempts at judgment and interpretation were made before the Revolution had shown the course it was to take."⁸²

Ben-Israel's observation rings true, as it seemed the case that many in Britain, and especially those interested in British political reform, were swept up in a political euphoria of the possible. Those kinds of sentiments were felt more deeply at the working and middle-class levels, essentially the politically disenfranchised, than at the upper and elite class levels who were already vested in the British political system. From 1789 to 1792, the men who would form the London Corresponding Society and other such groups became fully engaged in their political educations and those of their brethren, while those in the existing political establishment paid less attention to the events in France and in their own country until 1792 and the radicalization of the Revolution. This is important in as much as it was in this period that ordinary men as nascent political reformers came to believe, that with the right sort of political education and approach they could effect real and material change in Britain through the use of the political discussions in public sphere, or put more simply, public opinion. Despite what would happen in the Revolution and through the rest of the eighteenth century, this was a notion and concept that would stick, and that would evolve in approach and political importance, and that would become the prevailing model for political discourse in most of the western world to the present day.

This is the period when large scale, and increasingly national, political debates moved from closed political chambers and into the public sphere where they would, after some

⁸² Hedva Ben-Israel, *English Historians on the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1968), p. 3.

fits and starts, remain in perpetuity. Politics and political discourse became democratized in as much as if one had the ability to read and think critically about what they read, one could participate on the national political dialogue at some level or another, be it local pub or private men's club. The French Revolution helped to bring British political reformists and political dialogue more generally out into the light of day, where they and it would remain, for better or worse, as the eighteenth century came to a close.

The new French Republic underscored the development of this new and lasting political public sphere by announcing that it would now be in the business of exporting its political principles, and that it expected like-minded political citizens of any nationality to assist them in the effort, encouraging "other nations to establish their own *republiques soeurs*, dedicated to the same principles as *le grande nation* and in alliance with it. Within all such nations, the local *patriotes* will strive to establish such *republiques soeurs* under the general guidance of *le grande nation*."⁸³ This was like an accelerant to the British public sphere, and to the political reformist movement, who now saw the opportunity to come out of the tavern and coffee-house as it were, and into the main streets of political dialogue in Britain. Such notable British political reformists as Major John Cartwright and Richard Price famously made public pronouncements supporting the Revolution and arguing for its application to the 'corrupt' British political system.

Many British political reformers were drawn to this message from the French, but in a more nuanced way than some historians have previously suggested. The popularized historiography of this period is that British working class reformers *en masse* flew to the

⁸³ Conor Cruise O'Brien, Nationalism and the French Revolution, in *The Permanent Revolution: The French Revolution and its Legacy, 1789 – 1989*, ed. Geoffrey Best (London, 1988), pp. 36-7.

light of the French candle of liberty. This is not entirely the case. What many British reformists such as Thomas Hardy and some of the other LCS founding members recognized, was that the French had created an opportunity in Britain to bring their reform ideas to the British populace more or less directly through the growing political public sphere. In the case of LCS, as we shall see, its political objectives were somewhat more modest than the establishment of a French modeled republic in Britain. Rather, the LCS and other political reformist groups sought to use the French Revolution as a way to reexamine some of Britain's own traditional political principles and to compare those principles to the current state of British politics, a state that many reformists felt had strayed considerably from their nation's shared political beliefs and principles. Other than the most extreme and radical of British political reformists, the political reformist movement that the LCS came to represent was more about a restoration than a revolution. The LCS and other like-minded groups did not want to tear Britain down and start over, they wanted to build upon the existing political structure in order to make it more inclusive and participatory. This is no small difference in the goals and objectives of the British reformists from those of the French revolutionaries. And it was precisely this emergence and flourishing of a wider British political public sphere that would become the battleground for this debate between reformists and the more conservative factions and entities of British politics. The side that could control the public's perceptions and opinions best in this political public sphere would be the side, reformists or conservatives, who would control the political direction of Britain for at least the rest of the eighteenth century.

Prior to the outbreak of the French Revolution, those British reformist groups who developed a fraternity with their French counterparts were barely given a thought by the British government and its supporters. In the wake of the Revolution, however, and particularly after the LCS and other groups began communicating directly with some of the French revolutionaries, the British conservative reaction was suddenly alarmist and full of trepidation over the spread of French political values. But the battle for British political public opinion began in earnest when war was declared between Britain and France on February 1, 1793, just three months after the establishment of the LCS. The war carried enormous military stakes for Britain but it also had enormous political stakes, and the British government and its supporters used the war to attack their political opponents, and most particularly the reformists. Political reformist groups like the LCS stopped being perceived as a minor nuisance, moderate in their goal and tactics, and started being perceived as radical reformists who, in the eyes of conservatives and Loyalists, sought nothing less than to bring down the nation.

In many cases, including Hardy's, these working class men were smart and articulate - a new development that British society struggled with for a generation or two - and they knew better than to become so tightly aligned with the French cause that they and their groups would be seen as one and the same. However their sharp and evolving political instincts could only carry them so far, and in the end their modest backgrounds and means left many of them ill-prepared for dealing with the full weight and measure of the government of William Pitt at a time when their nation was at war. In this highly charged political environment one man's radical views were another man's traditional political principle. As has been noted by several historians of this era, the powerful tides of an

emerging Nationalism and a healthy dose of Franco-phobia combined to make a powerful play for the hearts and minds of the British public in this decade.⁸⁴

The LCS was caught up in all of this, and their story is, at its core, one of political and financial survival and adaptation in trying times. Their story is instructive in showing how working class and grass roots political groups coped with internal and external political pressures, and how they coped with both personal and public attacks and counter-attacks, both in their own private spheres and families, and in the larger political public sphere. In a larger context the French Revolution had another permanent impact on British politics, and the LCS was certainly caught up in that, and that was the polarization of politics in the public sphere.⁸⁵ The history of political factionalism in England and Britain is a continuous one dating from the medieval era, but in the 1790s it was accelerated and cemented as future foundation of all British political discourse. As George Rude has suggested: “One early result of the French Revolution was to divide European society into two distinctly and mutually hostile groups – its supporters or ‘patriots’ on the one hand, and its opponents or ‘counter-revolutionaries’ on the other.”⁸⁶ This political and philosophical cleavage was experienced in a particularly acute way in Britain, as a political citizen was quickly categorized as a conservative/loyalist, or as a radical/revolutionary, based upon the pamphlet one carried around in his pocket. As it happened, the 1790s in Europe featured two of the most literate and influential political philosophers of any time – Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine. The writings of these two men greatly influenced the political culture and debates of the latter part of the eighteenth century, and for the 1790s in Britain, did for all practical purposes define the boundaries

⁸⁴ Davis, I: xxviii

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ George Rude, *Revolutionary Europe 1783 – 1815* (London, 1964), p. 180.

from which the political factions in and around London would build their barricades. Burke and Paine, and their followers, would exchange rhetorical volleys throughout the 1790s, and as one contemporary suggested it must have felt very much like a “war of pamphlets.”⁸⁷

Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine on The French Revolution

Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution on France*, first published in November of 1790 in which he denounced the trajectory of the French Revolution and its implications for France and Europe, quickly became a conservative manifesto that was roundly embraced by those vested in the political status quo in Britain and throughout the rest of Europe. It was not long after the publication of *Reflections* that several more reform-minded thinkers and writers responded with alternative views. Such writers as Joseph Priestly, who would become one of the guiding forces behind the LCS, Joseph Towers, and Mary Wollstonecraft all produced and published pamphlets of their own. The most famous response to Burke was Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* published and widely distributed in two parts in March 1791 and February 1792. Whereas Burke’s audience was political conservatives who had more than likely already secured an enfranchised station in British society, Paine’s audience was clearly those men who desired that enfranchised station. Where Burke preached restraint and order, Paine preached political liberty and revolutions, as he observed in his first volume: “...nothing of reform in the political world ought to be held improbable. It is an age of revolutions, in which everything may be looked for.”⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Philip Francis to Edmund Burke, February 19, 1790, from *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, VI: 86.

⁸⁸ Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (New York, 2007), p. 39.

Indeed, men like Thomas Hardy, Robert Boyd, and George Walne, the founders of the LCS, gathered together to discuss Paine's writings over libations at The Bell tavern on Exeter Street in London, and drew inspiration and courage from Paine's pamphlets. Paine's political thoughts appeared at an optimal time in the maturation process of working-class men as political citizens. Many of these men had been reading contemporary and classical treatises of political thought for some years, and Paine's pamphlets appeared as a flash of political light that spurred many of them to take that all important and consequential next step of putting their new political beliefs into practice. For many of them, including the LCS founders, Paine's political pamphlets served as a de facto political instruction manual, complete with the historical and political precedents that justified working and emerging middle-class participation in the political public sphere. While certainly not solely responsible for the enthusiasm of all things political that swept over the British lower orders in the 1790s, it would be a mistake to underestimate the impact that Paine's pamphlets had, entering the public sphere just as the French Revolution was picking up political momentum and a real sense of political reform was in the air. And the pamphlets were seemingly everywhere, published and distributed in much greater numbers than anything of a political nature ever was in Britain. Some political and cultural historians have put the number of sold copies of Paine's *Rights of Man* parts 1 and 2 as high as one and a half million.⁸⁹ The pamphlets were made widely available, and for those visiting Britain from other parts of the world it must have seemed a strange phenomenon indeed, as Venezuelan Francisco del Miranda

⁸⁹ Horst Ihde, *The Heirs of Paine's Democratic Tradition*, p. 93: '...during the author's lifetime there were printed and sold more than one and a half million copies of parts one and two of *Rights of Man*.'

learned in 1792: "...while on a visit to the House of Commons he saw placed on sale there with sandwiches the second part of Tom Paine's *Rights of Man*."⁹⁰

Working and middle-class men devoured Paine's pamphlets at just the same time that they were discovering their own political consciousness and voice. As historically trite as it may sound, it really seemed an era of political enthusiasts who converted a newly discovered political voice to action, and the results were the nothing less than the birth of an altogether new political nation, one that still exists in Britain in much the same way to the present day. E. P. Thompson considered Paine's pamphlets as "one of the two foundation texts of the English working-class movement" and its ubiquitous availability nearly guaranteed that anybody who wanted a copy of them could more than likely do so.⁹¹ In late 1791 one of the first of many working-class and grass-roots political reform organizations was established as the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information. The Society was comprised of Sheffield cutlers and metal workers who felt that they were not being treated justly politically or economically. In 1792 several other reform societies were established in burgeoning industrial cities such as Birmingham, Manchester, Norwich, Nottingham, and Leeds in England, as well as in Perth, Glasgow, and Edinburgh in Scotland.⁹²

Taken together, however, the London Corresponding Society gave the most influential political voice to the reformist aspirations of the working class in Britain in the 1790s. Further, in the context of an increasingly violent and exported French Revolution, the LCS and many of their reformist brethren would ultimately be viewed as a treasonous

⁹⁰ William Spence Robertson, *Life of Miranda* (Chapel Hill, 1929), I: 119.

⁹¹ E. P. Thompson, *The making of the English working class* (New York, 1963), p. 34.

⁹² Davis, P. xxix.

and revolutionary threat to the Pitt government and would as a result bear the brunt of the full force of the government's efforts to eradicate them. As much as anything, the story of the LCS is a story of the persistence and survival of working-class politics, at least for a time, in the face of overwhelming forces. And it is also the story of how fundamental changes occurred in this short decade in areas of political culture and participation, and in the ways that working and increasingly middle-class men viewed themselves and their place in the political fabric of a rapidly industrializing nation.

Further, the LCS and many other political reformist groups essentially created a much broader and inclusive (in the context of the eighteenth century) public sphere, one in which ordinary men began to have an expectation that they had a political voice that deserved to be heard and understood. Finally, it is important to note that as much as the LCS was labeled a radical reform group, they in fact never advocated or discussed violent activities, and never came remotely close to inciting the kind of civil unrest that was overtaking revolutionary France during this period. Rather, the LCS believed, and in fact fervently believed, that they could reform the political system in Britain by working from within its existing framework, and nearly all of its public correspondence and actions were framed in the approach and context. And while it is true to say that the LCS and other such groups were energetically inspired by the events in France in the early part of the decade, they decided, amongst themselves and within their memberships, to never take their the pursuit of their political goals and objectives to a truly revolutionary posture. That, in and of itself, commends the LCS to our attention and the lessons that might be learned in a better understanding of the differences in political culture and participation between Britain and France in this tumultuous decade, and the implications

those lessons have for understanding their respective roles in the larger view of nation building and national culture construction.

Conclusion

The late eighteenth century in Europe was characterized with political, economic and social upheaval. Early industrialization was disrupting a traditional agrarian existence for most Europeans and with it the kind of economic and social stability that had defined the family unit for many generations. In its place men, sometimes with their families in tow and sometimes without, began moving to burgeoning industrial cities to find the kinds of labor and occupations that would redefine what it meant to be working at all.

The American Revolution further disrupted the existing political, economic, and social fabric of the late eighteenth century and contributed to the idea that the world was awash in political change. In Britain, political clubs, associations, and corresponding groups viewed the American Revolution as a referendum on their view of traditional political rights. The efforts and writings of men such as John Wilkes and Dr. Josiah Tucker were absorbed by many of these nascent political reform groups as part of establishing their own political beliefs and principles. The American victory inspired many of these groups to redouble their membership and organizational efforts so that they might be in a better position to take advantage of the next opportunity for political reform that might present itself in Britain.

Political discourse widened throughout Europe and the Americas between the American and French Revolutions as working class men began to develop a political consciousness regarding their political rights as part of a larger British society. The proliferation of political literature in Britain, France, America, and many other parts of

Europe contributed to the political education of many of these working class men, including those who founded the LCS. As access to political tracts improved, men such as Thomas Hardy educated themselves and began to informally meet with other politically interested men to discuss the political states of their lives and of Britain's.

The outbreak of the French revolution in 1789 provided an opportunity for many of these political associations to compare what was occurring in France to what they viewed as the deteriorating state of British political rights. They did not like what they saw. For many of them, Thomas Hardy included, the early stages of the French revolution appeared as just the sort of political reawakening needed in Britain. Many of these groups, including the LCS, viewed that French Revolution as their opportunity to enter into the British public sphere and start a conversation about the current and future state of British political principles and rights. Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine became the bell weathers for the politically conservative and radical views of the future of British politics throughout the final decade of the eighteenth century. Burke aside, during the first two years of the French Revolution there was widespread support in Britain for the French revolutionaries, and this support emboldened working class political groups in Britain, including Thomas Hardy and the LCS.

CHAPTER TWO – The French Connection

*A Crusade of Universal Freedom*⁹³

- Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, December 31, 1790

Dr. Richard Price's Sermon Ignites a Political Debate

One of the political inspirations for the LCS and many of the other political reform societies of the 1790s was the French Revolution. Many British political reformists, radical, moderate, or otherwise, believed that the revolution in France created an opportunity for reform in Britain. The London Revolution Society, a precursor to the LCS along with the Society for Constitutional Information, was founded in 1788 on the occasion of the centennial of the 1688 Glorious Revolution. At its next celebratory dinner in November of 1789 the Society invited Dr. Richard Price to deliver the sermon, and he did so in what would become his famous (for Paine and radical reformists), and infamous (for Burke and conservatives) *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*.⁹⁴ Price and the Society drew Burke's scorn by suggesting that patriotism for one's country meant more than a parochial love and loyalty to the motherland, but that it should also encompass the larger civic responsibilities of truth, virtue, and liberty.⁹⁵ Price extended these notions to include the need for political education for the masses so that they might be taught "just ideas of civil government."⁹⁶

Price used the more modern and radically political definitions of these civic responsibilities, relating truth, liberty, and virtue to the truth of political education for all

⁹³ Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, from Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution*, 2 Volumes (London, 1962-4), I: 217.

⁹⁴ Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country* (London, 1790), pp. 2-5. In 1792 Thomas Hardy would cite his repeated reading of Price's *Discourse* as one of his inspirations for founding the LCS.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

citizens, the virtue to reform existing economic, social, and political structures, and liberty in the form of freedom from political and religious tyranny: “First; the right to liberty of conscience in religious matters, secondly, the right to resist power when abused; And, thirdly, the right to chuse our governors; to cashier them for misconduct; and to frame a government for ourselves.”⁹⁷ And if that were not enough to secure Burke’s and the conservative government’s scorn and wrath, Price and the London Revolution Society certainly assured that would be the case when Price concluded his sermon with his view of the probable effects of the French Revolution on British reform movements, which of course predicted that a giant wave of liberty would wash over all of Europe.

In substance and essence Price’s sermon to the London Revolution Society was an attempt to reframe the achievements of 1688, taking them out of the context of a celebration of British constitutionalism, and placing them in the context of the events in France, and by comparison making the achievements of 1688 seem wanting relative to what was occurring in France.⁹⁸ Whether Price intended it or not, his sermon was an example of using a known historical past and reframing that past to fit the political needs of an historical present. This of course had been done before, as in the case of John Fox’s *Book of Martyrs* that turned Catholic heroes into Protestant heroes, but Price’s sermon was part of what was becoming a more systematic and systemic approach to political advocacy. The French called Price “The Apostle of Liberty” for the way he challenged the supremacy of the British Constitution as the de facto democratic document of Europe. Price questioned the efficacy of the British political system in light of electoral and

⁹⁷ *Abstract of the History and Proceedings of the Revolution Society in London* (1789), p. 14.

⁹⁸ Goodwin, p. 110.

parliamentary corruption, the outdated notion of monarchial hereditary descent, and the seemingly non-democratic nature of the Test and Corporation Acts.⁹⁹ Price's sermon was cloaked in the modernity of the European Enlightenment and of such political and moral philosophers as Voltaire, Milton, and Rousseau. For radical reformist groups Price's sermon served as a wake up call for the political actions necessary to wake the country from its constitutional lethargy, a lethargy that seemed more concerned with protecting the historical image of a constitutional system, rather than the contemporary reality of a political system that was applied in name only. Price's sermon also resonated with those reformist groups and radical political thinkers that believed that it was now France, rather than Britain, that was leading the European way forward for political reform.

The meeting of the London Revolution Society concluded that evening with many of its members congratulating the new members of the French National Assembly on their foresight and strength of virtue for the republic they had just established. Price used these comments and added his own to create and deliver his now famous *Address of Congratulation to the French National Assembly*. It proved to be a prescient and important statement of British sentiments and favorable public opinion toward the French Jacobins in the earliest stages of their revolution. It also created a political template for the LCS and many of the other British reform and corresponding societies and their own letters of congratulations and pledges of support to the French.¹⁰⁰ In effect Price's address set the tone for the early relationship between British and French reformists and radicals, and more generally for the British public:

The society for commemorating the Revolution in Great Britain...disdaining national partialities, and rejoicing in every triumph of liberty and justice over

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 111.

arbitrary power, offer to the National Assembly of France their congratulations on the Revolution in that country, and on the prospect it gives to the first two kingdoms in the world, of a common participation in the blessings of civil and religious liberty.

They cannot help adding their ardent wishes of a happy settlement of so important a Revolution, and at the same time expressing the particular satisfaction, with which they reflect on the tendency of the glorious example given in France to encourage other nations to assert the unalienable rights of mankind, and thereby to introduce a general reformation in the governments of Europe, and to make the world happy and free.¹⁰¹

Both Price's sermon and the London Revolution's Society correspondence with France were published and distributed in London and beyond before the end of the year in 1789.

Price framed what would become a long and protracted political and socio-cultural debate over the meaning of the French Revolution in Britain, and just exactly how what was happening in France could or should change the British perception of themselves and their place in the world. The sermon was charged with the kind of political rhetoric that would appeal to reformist and working class sensibilities:

I have lived to see a diffusion of knowledge, which has undermined superstition and error - I have lived to see the rights of men better understood than ever; and nations panting for liberty, which seemed to have lost the idea of it...After sharing in the benefits of one Revolution, I have been spared to be a witness to two other Revolutions, both glorious...And now, methinks, I see the ardour for liberty catching and spreading; a general amendment in human affairs; the dominion of kings changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience. Tremble all ye oppressors of the world! Take warning all ye supporters of slavish governments, and slavish hierarchies! Call no more (absurdly and wickedly) REFORMATION, innovation...Restore to mankind their rights; and consent to the correction of abuses, before they and you are destroyed together.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Price, *Discourse*, p. xx.

¹⁰² Richard Price, *Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (London, 1789), pp. 50-1, from: Philp, p. 2.

Price's sermon was an early salvo in the debate over the political reaction to the events in France, and provides a generally accepted summation of the early view held by many British reformists of the French Revolution. That view set the early political agenda for the LCS, as well as for a number of other British reformist groups, and can be characterized as: 1) a general enthusiasm for the events in France across a wide social spectrum, as many viewed the French Revolution as a reflection of the Glorious Revolution; 2) a necessary linkage by British political dissenters between the events in France and Britain and thus an opportunity for serious reform in Britain; 3) and a tendency to elevate the events in France and the perceived political principles they illustrated as universally important – as relevant in Britain as in France.¹⁰³ This early British view of the events in France would lead to a political cleavage over the next several years around two loosely associated socio-political groups whose followers would coalesce as a result of the events in France – Reformists and Loyalists. Further, both would claim the intellectual high ground through the last decade of the eighteenth century through their respective and titular philosophical champions – Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine.

Edmund Burke Responds – *Reflections on the Revolution in France*

Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, written in 1791 as a response to Price's sermon, is a manifesto of British conservative thought, and became a rallying point and an intellectual framework for those in British socio-political circles opposed to the perceived political radicalism of the Reformists. Paine's *Rights of Man*, written in 1792, was seen by many Reformists as an affirmation of the French Revolution, and was used by Paine and his followers to question the state of natural rights and popular

¹⁰³ Philp, pp. 3-4.

sovereignty in the British system. For many Reformists, Paine's book was read as a frontal attack on British constitutionalism – an attack that continued the process of grappling with the unanswered political questions that led to the loss of the North American colonies. Further, both Burke and Paine did much to not only frame the political debate for some decades to come, but to change the language of political debate.¹⁰⁴ The use of rhetoric for specific political advantage, a maturing political practice in the 1790s, was something the LCS would walk the fine line with during their short existence.

In the context of the Loyalist and Reformist movements, then, Burke's *Reflections* can be seen as the first outspoken statement of English Loyalist in the debate, and the first to make specific comparisons between the British and French socio-political systems.¹⁰⁵ In so doing, however, Burke's essay helped to spur, or perhaps re-ignite, a political crisis in Britain as the comparison of the British and French systems forced Brits to cast a critical eye on their own brand of constitutionalism:

You will observe, from Magna Charta to the Declaration of Rights, it has been the uniform policy of our constitution to claim and assert our liberties, as an *entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity; as an estate specially belonging to the people of this kingdom without any reference whatever to any other more general or prior right.¹⁰⁶

The ensuing, or continuing debate, says much about the peculiar ambiguity of the British citizenry's own perception of their individual constitutional rights and liberties, an ambiguity that was not lost on Hardy and the other LCS founders as they viewed with

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁰⁵ Robert E. Dozier, *For King, Constitution, and Country – The English Loyalists and the French Revolution* (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), p. 2.

¹⁰⁶ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 33.

intense interest the events in France. Some Loyalists, however, saw the lines of the debate and what they represented in a much clearer and more threatening light as early as 1791. Lord Grenville synopsized this attitude in a letter to his brother, the Marquis of Buckingham in 1794:

...it is perfect blindness not to see that in the establishment of the French Republic is included the overthrow of all the other Governments of Europe;...I do verily believe that we must prepare to meet the storm here...It seems too probably that it is decreed by Providence that a stop shall be put (for reasons probably inscrutable to us) to the progress of arts and civilization among us...Do not think me dispirited by what has happened.. I see the extent of our danger, and think that danger much greater than is commonly apprehended.¹⁰⁷

The French Revolution polarized the new, politically powerful phenomenon of public opinion in Britain as nothing had since the American Revolution. The Revolution had a coalescing and cleaving effect on British political culture and popular politics. More British citizens were reading about, and discussing the events in France, than any other news of the day. And they were discussing the Revolution in what seemed every possible manner and in every possible forum – in newspapers, pamphlets, books, dispatches, while in pubs, coffee houses, lodges, assembly halls, and private homes. British citizens across social and cultural class structures yearned for news from France, and at least early in the Revolution tended to interpret those events in a British context.

Burke and Paine Set the Debate Between Conservatives and Reformists

It is a well-documented historical fact that the give and take between Burke and Paine in the early 1790s essentially created the political philosophies that supported conservatism and reformist radicalism for the rest of the decade. It was Burke's

¹⁰⁷ Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, *Memoirs of the Court and Cabinets of George the Third* (London, 1853), vol. II, pp. 303, 305, and 306-7; from: Philp, p.64.

Reflections that spurred Paine to comment on the state of British constitutional governance in both parts of his *Rights of Man*, or as it was described in the Manchester Herald in April of 1792 “an address to the people of England on the subject of government.”¹⁰⁸ There was in fact an onrush of, and even some competition for, political opinion essay amongst the many newspapers cropping up in the new urban centers created by industrialism.

Besides London of course, cities such as Manchester, Sheffield, Liverpool, and many more all saw a marked increase in the political content in both established and new newspapers and journals in the first part of the 1790s. The many political associations and reform societies that sprang up during this period found a ready venue waiting for their political discussions and meeting proceedings in these newspapers and journals. The combination of the two created a cyclical phenomenon that fed the political beast – newspapers were anxious to print most things political to increase their circulation amongst a public sphere hungry for political news, and that in turn encouraged political associations to create more and more content, and may have even encouraged more political associations to emerge knowing that they had a good chance of getting their views published and circulated to a wide audience. This proliferation of political views and discussion, together with the continued urbanization of Britain, created an important shift in the political reformist movement. What was once a loose coupling of widely dispersed political interest groups throughout the British countryside, was now a much more concentrated and politically focused network of political groups that together

¹⁰⁸ *Manchester Herald* (April 28, 1792). The *Herald* was sympathetic to the cause of the radical reformers, often printing the letters, correspondence, and meeting minutes of various reform societies, including those of the Manchester chapter of the LCS, for gratis: ‘He [Burke] was the *flint* to Mr. Paine’s steel; by the collision of one against the other, the *divine fire* of the Rights of Man was struck out for the benefit of all mankind, except for Ministers and Placemen.’

represented an altogether new form of British political culture – a decidedly urban radicalism.

The duel of words between Burke and Paine contributed in no small way to both the coalescing and the polarization of reformists and conservatives, a development that would have implications for the LCS.. Burke’s *Reflections*, while ostensibly a critique of the French Revolution to date, was also a not so thinly veiled criticism of those in Britain who sympathized with the French radicals, and a warning about what could happen in Britain if these radical political sentiments were left unchecked.¹⁰⁹ Burke went so far as to call the London Revolution Society “that Mother of Mischief,” and labeled any Paineite sympathizers as proponents of English “Jacobinsm.”¹¹⁰

Burke took particular issue with the tone and intent of support in the correspondence, suggesting that they represented “the manifest design of connecting the affairs of France with those of England, by drawing us into an imitation of the conduct of the National Assembly.”¹¹¹ Burke also took exception with the way in which the London Revolution Society and the Society for Constitutional Information, one of the first political reform societies created after the American Revolution, began to collaborate more closely with other and coordinate efforts. That would be a pattern and practice that the London Corresponding Society would emulate to some limited degrees of success in the ensuing years of the decade. Burke surmised that any combined activities of British political reform groups - authoring pamphlets and communications, their combined affections for

¹⁰⁹ Goodwin, p. 99.

¹¹⁰ Edmund Burke, *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (London, 1826), vol. 6, pp. 248-250.

¹¹¹ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 91.

the French Jacobins, and their connections with other European radical groups - might constitute a credible threat to the British political status quo.¹¹²

A meeting of the reform societies at the London Tavern on December 16, 1789 marking the centenary celebration of the Bill of Rights included at least four prominent members, and MPs all, of the Society for Constitutional Information. James Martin, John Sawbridge, Sir Watkin Lewes, and Joshua Grigby, along with Dr. Price and John Horne Tooke all contributed to an atmosphere of enthusiasm and some public and political credibility, calling on all of their like-minded brethren in England to make “the most strenuous efforts for procuring a Parliamentary Reform.”¹¹³ The tone of the evening was upbeat and optimistic, and a total of twenty-six toasts were proposed and consumed. The final resolution of the evening anticipated the reforms the groups members anticipated, and particularly the reversal of the Test and Corporation Acts and “...the prospect of a complete emancipation of human society from political and intellectual servitude...and the concurrent disposition which, having been displayed in America, is now pervading Europe, or resisting all restraints on the Freedom of Enquiry, or exclusion from the exercise of any civil rights on account of religious opinion.”¹¹⁴

Interestingly and importantly, Burke’s continued public condemnations of the revolution occurring in France tended to have a politically moderating effect on both of these early reform societies. The Society for Constitutional Information in particular began to exhibit a more tempered and flexible approach to its political reform approach. Much of that change may be attributable to the influence and efforts of Horne Tooke, whose tendency to work within the existing political power structure would also pay

¹¹² Goodwin, p. 113.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 115.

¹¹⁴ Public Records Office, Treasury Solicitor’s Papers, 11/961/3507/, fo. 204, from: Goodwin, p. 116.

dividends for the LCS in the early 1790s.¹¹⁵ It may have also been the case that Horne Tooke and the other more moderate members of the Society for Constitutional Information were attempting to respond to Burke's very public and popular (at least among conservatives) condemnations of French radicalism and the grave dangers it posed for the Britain. In light of a mounting concern over the direction of the French Revolution and its potential impact throughout Europe, a prudent political calculation might have been to distinguish one's self from too close a resemblance to French political principles, and instead to frame the political reformist movement in more British terms.

On July 14, 1790 an elaborate dinner was held to commemorate the fall of the Bastille at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in the Strand. The dinner was organized by members of the Whig Club and chaired by Lord Stanhope, and was attended by 652 "friends of liberty" from the two most prominent reform societies and by anybody else whose political persuasions tended toward reform.¹¹⁶ It was also undoubtedly attended by some number of government informers and spies, whose job it was to observe and report on the proceedings. This was the beginning of what would become a more focused and determined government effort to infiltrate and in some cases even influence the activities of reformist political groups throughout the 1790s, and most particularly the LCS. Horne Tooke attended the dinner, and became concerned when he noticed that all of the diners were wearing the new French national cockades in their hats, and the centerpiece of the dinner was a stone fragment from the Bastille itself. When he tactfully suggested that besides a declaration of support for the French Revolution it would be politically prudent to approve a like declaration in support of the British Constitution, the proposed motion

¹¹⁵ Goodwin, p. 116.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 122.

met with energetic hissing and disapproval.¹¹⁷ Tooke, ever astute politically, simply waited until later in the evening to reintroduce his motion, and after many a toast had been consumed, wherein it passed overwhelmingly.¹¹⁸

From 1790 through 1792, and especially during the formative stages of the London Corresponding Society, there was a robust exchange of correspondence between French and British radicals and reformist societies. Through Lord Stanhope both the London Revolution Society and the SCI exchanged messages with Jean Baptiste Treilhard, the president of the new French National Assembly. The exchanges from Stanhope and many of the British reformist groups struck what would become a familiar tone in much of the correspondence exchange: “Soon,” Stanhope wrote, “we hope that men will cease to regard themselves under the odious aspect of tyrants and slaves, and that, following your example, they will look on each other as equals and learn to love one another as free men, friends, and brothers.”¹¹⁹ Besides the formal exchange of correspondence, there was a flurry of exchanges of salutations and congratulations from a wide array of provincial French Jacobin clubs and English reform societies. The London Revolution Society received letters from, among others, Jacobin clubs in Calais, Montpellier, Paris, Chalon-sur-Saone, and Nantes.¹²⁰

In a letter dated April 5, 1791 the London Revolution Society responded to a letter it had received from the Jacobin club in Tours on the matter of Burke’s public crusade against the French revolutionaries, that despite the conservative reaction in England, Burke’s “viciously reflecting on *your* actions, and indecently abusing some of the most

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 123.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Lord Stanhope, Archives Nationales, Paris, C 42, from: Goodwin, p. 124.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 125.

virtuous of our fellow Citizens, has produced a great number of well written refutations from persons of different ranks and connections, which have contributed very considerably to spread among the Inhabitants of this island a more accurate knowledge of the principles of *your* Revolution.”¹²¹ More alarmingly to Burke, the British government, and other conservatives, the Revolution Society had amended its political thinking from 1790 to 1791 – from favorable comparisons of the Glorious Revolution to the French Revolution, to a disapproving comparison of the inadequacies of the British political settlement of 1688 to the principles of the French – and became publicly vocal about it. In its letter of response to the Tours Jacobin club the Society observed that “Royal prerogatives, injurious to the public interest, a servile Peerage, a rapacious and intolerant clergy, and corrupt Representation are grievances under which we suffer. But as *you*, perhaps, have profited from the example of our Ancestors, so shall we from *your* late glorious and splendid actions.”¹²² The letter further noted that the French had “...now given us such convincing practical instructions on the true formation of governments, that we are persuaded all our fellows will soon be inspired with as ardent a desire of improving their own, as they formerly have been of *preserving* it.”¹²³

As Burke was writing his *Reflections* in the summer of 1790 he became increasingly concerned over the connections and correspondence between British reformists and French revolutionaries. Perhaps as much as anything Burke was concerned over the possibility that the British reformists might turn into British revolutionaries in the style and manner of their French counterparts, or as Burke suggested he feared the reformists

¹²¹ *The Correspondence of the Revolution Society in London with the National Assembly and with various Societies of the Friends of Liberty in France and England*, 1792, p. 226.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

and radicals were attempting to draw Britain into “an imitation of the conduct of the National Assembly.”¹²⁴ In particular Burke was desirous of critiquing what he viewed as the reform societies favorable comparison of the conservative English revolution of 1688 to the early stages of the French Revolution.¹²⁵

In fact one of the core purposes of his *Reflections* pamphlet was to put a political damper on the building enthusiasm much of the English public had for the French Revolution in 1790. To that end Burke directly attacked the London Revolution Society and Dr. Price in *Reflections*, referring to the Society as a “club of dissenters...of undetermined denomination” that had prematurely endorsed the revolution in France.¹²⁶ Burke did much the same in attempting to dampen the public popularity of Dr. Price, by far the most renowned of the many Dissenting ministers in the early 1790s, by labeling him as “a man much connected with literary caballers and intriguing philosophers,” and rather sarcastically playing on the French description of him as the Apostle of Liberty by referring to him as “this archpontiff of the *rights of men*.”¹²⁷ Burke, one of the greatest prose writers of his or any other time, was a master at turning the positions of those he opposed and wrote about into a nonsensical and illogical course as he did with those who he believed wanted to emulate the revolution in France:

Is our monarchy to be annihilated, with all the laws, all the tribunals, and all the ancient corporations of the kingdom? Is every landmark of the country to be done away in favour of a geometrical and arithmetical constitution? Is the house of lords to be voted useless? Is episcopacy to be abolished? Are the church lands to sold to Jews and jobbers; or given to bribe new-invented municipal republics into a participation in sacrilege? Are all the taxes to be voted grievances, and the revenue reduced to a patriotic contribution, or patriotic presents? Are silver shoe-buckles to be substituted in the place of the

¹²⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 91.

¹²⁵ Goodwin, p. 130.

¹²⁶ Burke, pp. 88-90.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-6.

land-tax and the malt tax, for the support of the naval strength of this kingdom? Are all orders, ranks and distinctions to be confounded, that out of universal anarchy, joined to national bankruptcy, three or four thousand democracies should be formed into eighty three, and that they may all, by some sort of unknown attractive power, be organized into one? For this great end, is the army to be seduced from its discipline and its fidelity, first, by every kind of debauchery, and then by the terrible precedent of a donative in the increase of pay? Are the curates to be seduced from their bishops, by holding out to them the delusive hope of a dole out of the spoils of their own order? Are the citizens of London to be drawn from their allegiance, by feeding them at the expense of their fellow subjects? Is a compulsory paper currency to be substituted in the place of a legal coin of this kingdom?¹²⁸

Burke specialized in this kind of politically emotional exaggeration that served his purposes in *Reflections*, and purposefully extrapolated the positions of Price and the London Revolution Society in an effort to discredit them socially and politically.

For many of Burke's long-time supporters and political associates, *Reflections* was a bit of a paradox. Burke had written and spoken passionately and favorably on the Glorious Revolution during its centennial celebration period. Burke was also a staunch supporter of the American Revolution, and in many of his speeches before Parliament favorably compared the political principles at stake in the American Revolution to those of the Glorious Revolution. A more casual reader of Burke might have assumed that he would feel much the same way toward the French Revolution, recognizing many of the political principles in the National Assembly's *Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* as resembling those pillared principles of British constitutionalism. Moreover, *Reflections* uncharacteristically contained some factual errors about the nature and purpose of some of the revolutionary activities in France and Burke was taken to task mercilessly by his detractors for such errors. Burke included confusing and erroneous facts about the new tax system and the systems of local governments, and wrote

¹²⁸ Ibid., pp. 144-5

melodramatically about the attack on the Palace of Versailles on October 5 – 6, 1789.¹²⁹ Perhaps such was the case because Burke was less concerned about historical accuracy, and more concerned about the potential threat that he believed the French Revolution posed for Britain. Others have suggested that *Reflections* was less altruistic in intent, and that Burke's less than Whiggish views of the French Revolution were the result of his acceptance of a pension from King George III, a great admirer of the book.¹³⁰

Many found it curious that Burke would write at all about France, a country he may have been to once early in his life, though Burke himself claimed to know France "pretty tolerably for a stranger."¹³¹ In fact there was a considerable amount of confusion and consternation across the political spectrum regarding *Reflections* and its author. Thomas Paine believed Burke to be "very unacquainted with French affairs," and Thomas Jefferson famously suggested that "The Revolution in France does not astonish me as much as the revolution in Mr. Burke."¹³² In France Burke and his *Reflections* were viewed with curiosity and derision toward the "*bizarreries de l'auteur.*" The French also speculated that Burke was a closet Catholic due to the inordinate amount of space he dedicated in the book to a defense of the French Church and clergy.¹³³ Still others believed that Burke had succumbed to madness and the combination of the ramblings in this book and some questionable public acts were the evidence. And in perhaps the ultimate irony for an author of Burke's abilities and reputation, the term 'Burkism' was coined in the early 1790s to describe exaggerated claims.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ Leslie G. Mitchell, *Reflections*, from Introduction to the Oxford World Classics edition (Oxford, 1993), p. ix.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. viii.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., p. ix.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

More than anything however, and however inaccurate some of *Reflections* may have seemed to others, Burke was most concerned with political instruction and comparison. He firmly believed that the French Revolution was different and more immediately threatening to the political elite in London than the American Revolution, and that the French Revolution should not be nostalgically compared to the Glorious Revolution. The French Revolution was, in Burke's view, a revolution intended for export, and his *Reflections* was an attempt to get the political elite in Britain, Whigs and Tories, to recognize it as such.¹³⁵ For Burke, the Glorious and American Revolutions certainly represented fundamental shifts in where the power to govern resided, but the larger model of governance and political structures remained more or less intact. The French Revolution, by comparison, sought to completely obliterate centuries of political, social, and economic culture at single stroke.

The new National Assembly had also made clear its belief that France was the new model of a republic for the ages, and that the rest of Europe should follow suit. Burke saw this clearly and immediately as a material threat to Britain, and could not understand why others did not share his sense of urgency over the matter. Some Burke apologists might suggest that Burke rushed through his writing of *Reflections*, complete with some of the weaknesses that opened it and him up to scrutiny and ridicule, precisely because of his sense of urgency regarding the threat. Much of this sense of urgency came from Burke's belief that the political and social conditions that helped to launch the French Revolution existed in Britain, as he presciently informed a colleague in 1789: "I

¹³⁵ Ibid.

published on the idea, that the principles of a new, republican, frenchified Whiggism was [sic] gaining ground in this Country.”¹³⁶

Burke was convinced and concerned that his Whig party in particular was not taking the threat seriously. Burke was also concerned that the more liberally inclined MPs in the Whig party – Lord Stanhope, Charles James Fox, and R. B. Sheridan to name a few – were moving too close to the new reforming societies in England and might eventually be successful in creating a more liberal Whig party that was sympathetic to the British reformists and the French revolutionaries.¹³⁷ In a letter to one of his Whig patrons in 1790, Earl Fitzwilliam, Burke suggested that *Reflections* was intended as a wake up call for the Whigs, and confided his fear that Whig political independence would end as the party moved closer to both the religious dissenters and the political reformists.¹³⁸ Burke based this notion on his view, expressed in a letter to Fitzwilliam, that the French Revolution sought nothing less than to destroy traditional political and social structure: “Its great Object is not...the destruction of all absolute Monarchies, but totally to root out that thing called *Aristocrate* or Nobleman and Gentleman.”¹³⁹

Both the Society for Constitutional Information and the London Revolution Society were emblematic of Burke’s fears of a potentially new and much more liberal or egalitarian political world. When Price and Priestly spoke at the dinner of the Revolution Society, a dinner that sparked Burke’s concerns and thus *Reflections*, they seemed to Burke to be the British equivalents of Rabaut de St Etienne and the Abbe Sieyes in

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Goodwin, p. 135.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Burke to Fitzwilliam, November 21, 1791. Cobban and Smith vol. 6, p. 451.

France.¹⁴⁰ Burke saw British political reforming societies as “the avowed enemies of the constitution” and believed that dissenting clerics like Price were concerned with expanding their own influence than in any novel notions about the true nature of, and natural rights of man.

Burke also unfavorably compared the early leaders of these reform societies - Horne Tooke, Sir Brooke Boothby, and others - to French *philosophes* such as Condorcet and Rousseau, all of whom Burke held in the utmost contempt. In all cases Burke believed these new men of letters to be of the most dangerous and threatening nature, and made no distinction between British and French political philosophers. According to Burke what united all of them was a misguided “scheme of politics not adapted to the state of the world in which they live,” that collectively their philosophies were based upon the abstract and optimistic, rather than on the empirical, and that they were “so taken up with their theories about the rights of man, that they have totally forgot his nature.”¹⁴¹ The reformist and corresponding societies represented as much of a threat in Britain in 1790 as did their French counterparts in the 1780s. There was an active exchange of correspondence and congratulatory letters with offers of support between the radical brethren in both nations, which Burke believed to be subversive and corrosive to both nations.

Burke was further concerned that the parliamentary reformists such as the LCS were opening a debate that struck at the very foundation of the British social, political, and economic system, and that was the potential conflict between the “noble ancient landed

¹⁴⁰ L. G. Mitchell, p. xi.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. xii.

estate” and the “new monied interests.”¹⁴² The traditional system that recognized the sanctity of property as a basis for law and political rights had served England admirably well for centuries.¹⁴³ The connection to the value of one’s property provided a vested interest to the property owner to participate in the affairs of the state in order to protect his investments, and by extrapolation to be concerned with the well being of society more generally. The French Revolution had set that model aside in its entirety, handing the affairs of state over to, in Burke’s view, new monied interests who were only motivated with short term expediencies that served their private interests. Burke believed that such forces were at work in Britain, and that “new men” such as Lord Landsdowne, Jeremy Bentham, and Joseph Priestly, represented this alarming new “revolt of the enterprising talents of a country against its country.”¹⁴⁴

Burke and the Political Reformist Movement

To understand Burke and his animus toward both the British political reformist societies and the French Revolution requires an understanding of Burke’s view of the political nature of men. As opposed to most Enlightenment thinkers who espoused an *a priori* view of the rights and nature of man, Burke firmly believed in an *a posteriori* view of the same. Burke thought it illogical and foolish for Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau, the new French revolutionaries, and the British political reformists to declare without empirical proof that men were of one nature or another, and that they deserved one right or another according to any natural laws.¹⁴⁵ Burke believed in the experiential and practical, rather than the abstract and idealist, and prided himself as being

¹⁴² Ibid., p. xiii.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. xiv.

“...influenced by the inborn feelings of nature, and not being illuminated by a single ray of this new-sprung modern light.”¹⁴⁶ Burke regarded the French *philosophes* view of mankind as being fundamentally noble and rational once relieved of the artificially constructed social structures, as overly simplistic and one dimensional, and ultimately dangerous. What Burke feared most in the ascent of British reformist societies like the LCS was that they would adopt this same overly optimistic view human nature. To be sure, Burke did believe that men could aspire to the new French precepts of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and might even attain them over time.. But Burke also knew from his years in the British political arena that men could be irrational, petty, ambitious, jealous, and the like, and it was only by including these characteristics also that the true nature of man emerged. These experiential views of the political nature of men fortified Burke’s great admiration for those social, economic, and political structures that had withstood the test of time. Burke was less a traditionalist than a realist, perhaps, but that nevertheless armed him with a conservative view of social and political change.

Thus Burke believed in the strength and validity of institutions that had endured, surmising that they survived as a result of being tested and proven over a long period of time. Those institutions that did endure and in some fashion keep the more irrational character of men in check deserved better than to be suddenly condemned and overturned by French or British radicals.¹⁴⁷ As Burke stated in *Reflections*; “...it is with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society, or on building it up

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

again, without having models and patterns of approved utility before his eyes.”¹⁴⁸ Burke favored history over philosophy, institutions over ideals, and political adults over adolescents. It was clear to Burke that the French were more interested in what the world might become than in what had worked well enough for centuries, and that the British political reformists were in danger of falling for the same thing. Such was never truly the case, however, for the vast majority of reform and correspondence societies about which Burke worried so much. As opposed to the French revolutionaries who showed nothing but contempt for the *ancien regime*, the British reformists were committed to the historical political traditions of their nation.¹⁴⁹ Even the most radical societies believed that their parliamentary reform efforts were based on ancient and traditional franchise rights, and not on any Enlightenment revelations about the natural rights of man.¹⁵⁰ This was certainly true of the LCS. The LCS was not trying to change British calendars or the boundaries of their cities and provinces, but instead saw their principal cause as the restoration of rights that they used to enjoy – rights that had been usurped by political and economic corruption perpetrated by those with too little respect for the origins and virtues of British constitutionalism.

For Burke and all but the most radical of British reformists the principle upon which they cleaved most from the French was on the sanctity of property ownership. Burke believed property ownership and the corresponding rights of property owners to be the rock upon which British constitutionalism was based. While the French were busy nationalizing the property of the Church and the aristocracy in the name of the new republic, the British, including the reformists, continued to honor a prescriptive belief

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. xv.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. xvi.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

that property ownership sacrosanct. Burke firmly believed that property ownership was the basis for societal organization, the foundation of law, and the reason man had evolved from barbarism and anarchy.¹⁵¹ So too, it seems, did many of the British reformist societies. Both the London Revolution Society and the Society for Constitutional Information took their names in honor of their Anglo Saxon pasts, and both groups believed that they were grounded in historical precedents and that they would soon enough have those historical rights they had somehow lost along the road to modernity. Burke and the early reformist societies shared the political view that Glorious Revolution was more restorative than transformative.¹⁵² Where they differed is to the degree in which that Revolution actually did succeed in restoring ancient constitutional rights.

The reformists believed that their struggle for parliamentary reform and the expansion of the voting franchise was a continuation of the Glorious Revolution that did not go far enough. Burke had a more conservative view, believing that the Glorious Revolution had been necessary only as a minor course correction to preserve the model of constitutional monarchy.¹⁵³ It was primarily upon these differences in perspective that Burke and the British reform societies clashed, and it was Burke's ardent fear that reformists would become much too enamored with the brashness and boldness of the French revolutionary model. Burke further feared that there would be a direct correlation between the pace of the events in France, and the evolving attitudes in Britain towards the French Revolution, and as importantly towards their own cherished political system. Was not the French Revolution, after all, merely the French peasant and bourgeois classes finally catching on to the ideals that the British had codified in their constitution a century before? Was it

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. xviii.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. xix.

not just like the French to figure out what the British already knew, only a little too late, and to start a Revolution absent a clear notion of how to end it? It was in this context that Burke feared the British radicals viewed the events in France – as a Revolution that was importing British ideals, rather than as a Revolution that would, as Burke believed, soon be in the business of exporting its own, dangerous deals to the rest of Europe.

Several centuries of competition and conflict between Britain and France had led each nation to have a politically disdainful view of the other. For many in Britain - and in many of the reformist societies in particular - the French Revolution in its early phases was nothing more than the French finally figuring out what the British already knew – that an absolute monarchical system no longer worked. Rather, modern government worked best under a system of checks and balances, in which the interests of citizens (men, with property and a stake in the system) were fairly represented. It was not until the second phase of the Revolution, as the Terror ensued, that some in Britain came to see Burke's observations as politically prescient and as a fair assessment of the danger that confronted them.

Many in Britain, then, whether they were in reform societies or not, had a somewhat conceited view of the French Revolution, and that conceit manifested itself in a variety of ways during the early 1790s, not the least of which was the constant translation of the events in France to British political sensibilities. These socio-cultural translations divided British society at several levels in the early stages of the French Revolution. The cleavage that occurred might be seen as a politically and socially conservative reaction of propertied elites to what they viewed as an alarming growth of a popular (read artisan and

working classes) radicalism emanating from London and other urban centers.¹⁵⁴ This social and political cleavage would become exacerbated as the 1790s progressed. In that context then, Burke's *Reflections* served as a clanging alarm for British conservatives:

In France you are now in the crisis of a revolution, and in the transit of one form of government to another – you cannot see that character of men exactly in the same situation in which we see it in this country. With us it is militant; with you it is triumphant; and you know how it can act when its power is commensurate to its will.¹⁵⁵

Burke's conservative audience read *Reflections* as a warning that if radicals and reformers at home and abroad were not recognized and resisted the consequences might well be nothing short of the destruction of the established order of things, including the Church, property ownership, and their cherished model of governance. Many conservatives feared that the growing popularity of British radicals would lead to the undermining and usurpation of social order and harmony, the elimination of justice, and an open invitation to the masses to plunder the propertied.¹⁵⁶ Perhaps this conservative fear of political and constitutional reform was characterized best by William Pitt (the Younger) in 1792:

It is this union of liberty with law, which, by raising a barrier equally firm against the encroachments of power, and the violence of popular connotations, affords property its just security, produces the exertion of genius and labour, the extent and solidity of credit, the circulation and increase of capital; which forms and upholds the national character, and sets in motion all the springs which actuate the great mass of the community through all its various descriptions.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ H. T. Dickinson, *Britain and the French Revolution 1789-1815* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1989), p. 103.

¹⁵⁵ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 64.

¹⁵⁶ Dickinson, p. 104.

¹⁵⁷ Frank O'Gorman, *Pitt and the 'Tory' Reaction to the French Revolution 1789 – 1815*; from: Dickinson (ed.), *Britain and the French Revolution 1789-1815*, p. 28.

As much as Pitt epitomized the conservative position, the Reformists were equally as aligned and convinced of their cause, at least initially. This political polarization did not occur at the outbreak of the French Revolution however, but rather, throughout 1790, 1791, and 1792, leaving one to wonder how such a generally and favorable initial response to the French Revolution in Britain could so quickly lead to such political divisiveness, and set the stage for a new form of political participation in Britain. Burke believed that the conditions that allowed for a French Revolution to occur in France were also present in Britain. He compared such British radicals as Horne Tooke, Price, and Priestly, to the emerging French radicals Brissot, Robespierre, and Marat. He believed that the political, social, and economic conditions in Britain were conducive to a radical ascension that would challenge the very nature of the British state.¹⁵⁸ The political lines were beginning to be drawn between conservatives and reformists/radicals in Britain within just a few months after the French Revolution began. For Burke, the state was not a man-made construction that could be dismantled and reassembled as a matter of convenience, but something more historical and prescriptive, an experiential and gradual aggregation of those systems and structures that allowed men to live in a society governed by law and order:

...the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco, or some other such low concern, to be taken up for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties. It is to be looked on with other reverence; because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary or perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between

¹⁵⁸ Mitchell, p. xix.

those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.¹⁵⁹

Thomas Paine and the LCS

Further exacerbating the Reformist's position with the British government in their formative stages were the books of Thomas Paine. It would be difficult to overstate the reverence in which Paine was held by members of the many working class reform societies and political associations, and the contempt in which he was held by the British government. Paine's esteem and popularity grew measurably between the American and French Revolutions in the eyes and hearts of reform minded British citizens, and by the time the LCS and many other associations formed, Paine had become something of a patron saint for them. Paine's *Rights of Man*, published in two parts in 1791-2, served as a radical primer for the LCS, and the ideas contained therein fueled the Society's agenda throughout the 1790s.

Paine never became a formal member of the LCS, or any of the other political associations and reform societies, but he did offer to draft the first address of the LCS "if he had a little more time."¹⁶⁰ By most accounts Paine had every good intention of authoring the address, however his indictment by the British government over his seditious and libelous writings in part two of the *Rights of Man* induced him to flee to France and join the republican movement there. As a result the LCS never got the inspirational inaugural tract they had hoped for, even as they did record a subscription to the Society's newsletter in Paine's name and honor.¹⁶¹ Paine's books and the initial successes of the republicans in France on the one hand, and Edmund Burke's scathing

¹⁵⁹ Burke, *Reflections*, p.

¹⁶⁰ *Selections*, p 9.

¹⁶¹ *Selections*, p. 36.

rebuke of the French revolutionaries in his *Reflections of the Revolution in France* on the other hand, combined to reawaken and reenergize the British radical movement.¹⁶² In many ways the political philosophies of Paine and of the French revolutionaries served to fortify the reform platform of the LCS, and unlike some of the more sporadic and less sustainable British reform movements between the American and French revolutions the LCS presented a relatively cohesive set of political goals to the British public.

In fact the French Revolution fortified the LCS's goals of universal male suffrage and annual parliaments through its own positions of natural rights against the rights of property, its efforts and experiments with the rotation of annually elected representatives, and in their efforts to provide political education to the new citizenry.¹⁶³ The public debate over Burke's *Reflections* helped the LCS and other reform societies provide political education to the public, and served as an effective counterweight to the conservative argument that universal suffrage would only lead to further electoral abuses and corruption.¹⁶⁴ Once he was safely in France, Paine was quick to point out that the new and modern republican political ethos of the French Revolution stood in stark contrast to the feudalistic vestiges of Britain, including the game laws, the tithe system, and the continued prevalence of the primogeniture system.¹⁶⁵ In the battle for public opinion British radicals calculated that the momentum of the events in France combined with a growing dissatisfaction with the political, economic, and social inequities in Britain would bring people around to their point of view and the need for change. It must also be said that the LCS and other British reform societies learned much from the

¹⁶² Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty – The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Ma., 1979), p. 22.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

American example of political representation. Both before and after the American Revolution it was common practice for municipalities to rotate members of their local government.¹⁶⁶ After the American Revolution it was the non-urban country freeholders who seemed most interested in parliamentary reform in Britain, in the same way that it was the American gentlemen farmers who provided much of the drive for their revolution.¹⁶⁷ By 1790, with the continuing developments associated with industrialization and urbanization in Britain, a new and more organized urban working and middle class group of radical reformers had emerged.

The widely circulated editions of the second part Paine's *The Rights of Man* provided a digestible schema for political and economic change, even if the 1780s and the early 1790s saw little in the way of radical reform agendas for solving the economic and social problems associated with urban poverty and the economic inequality occurring as a result of industrialization.¹⁶⁸ Part of the reason for the lack of radical and reform agendas during the 1780s might have been that the condition of poverty had not yet been firmly linked to the economic implications of industrialization, and was instead still understood to be a condition of the national debt and taxation.¹⁶⁹ Further, few radicals really believed that parliamentary reform was possible, such was the strength of the conservatives in power and their stranglehold on the political and economic resources required to acquire and maintain political power. In some respects that is precisely why parliamentary reform and universal male suffrage became such a rallying cry for the reform societies and political associations of the 1790s. Those groups believed it to be

¹⁶⁶ Colin Bonwick, *English Radicals and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1977), chs. 6-8.

¹⁶⁷ Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty*, p. 24.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

the ultimate goal that, if ever achieved, would most assuredly and inevitably lead to the rise of popular political and economic power.

Unlike their American counterparts, however, the LCS and other reform societies did not seek to completely overturn the political status quo, focusing instead on eliminating electoral corruption in the House of Commons, and an implementation of Paine's "representative democracy" as their political charter. LCS leaders were particularly sensitive to being compared to the more radical Jacobins in France, and despite their best efforts to walk a tightrope of political and public perception, the events in France acted as a revolutionary black hole, emanating a gravitational pull that inexorably pulled all other radical reformists in Europe into the same revolutionary sphere. The political context of the French Revolution made all the difference to the opponents of the LCS, and they quickly went from relative indifference toward political associations in the 1780s, to characterizing them as "anarchists, Levellers, atheists, and in general, the ignorant dupes of French republican propaganda."¹⁷⁰

Despite the very public protestations of Hardy, Thelwall, Place, and other prominent reformers that their movement was as much about political education for the common man as parliamentary reform, their opponents effectively fixed their platform to the violent and radical changes in France, and bombarded the press and other public forums with accusations that British radical reformers sought nothing less than the complete overthrow of the church and state.¹⁷¹ Burke in particular carried this view forward both privately and publicly, and his 1791 *Appeal From the New to the Old Whigs* specifically targeted the London Revolution Society and the Society for Constitutional Information

¹⁷⁰ Goodwin, p. 25.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

for such plans, even as both of those reform societies were comprised primarily of socially respectable middle and upper class members.¹⁷²

In fact Britain was nowhere close to having its own revolution in 1792, despite its proximity to the events in France, and the sympathies of a very few, ultra-radical societies. Perception was everything, however, in the socially and politically charged environment of late eighteenth century Europe. Because the LCS had publicly declared its sympathies and support for the French revolutionaries, including their open congratulatory letter to the new citizens of France, their offer of financial support, and their encouragement to all reformers in all places, they were quickly condemned by British conservatives as a subversive threat to the nation. It did not help when in September 1792 the LCS published and distributed gratis Paine's *Letter to the People of France*, written on the occasion of the establishment of the new republic of France. In the letter Paine sounded very much like the dangerous radical that British conservatives feared, and by implication so too did the LCS: "The mind, highly agitated by hope, suspicion, and apprehension, continues without rest till the change be accomplished. But let us now look calmly and confidentially forward, and success is certain. It is no longer the paltry cause of Kings, or of this, or of that individual, that calls France and her armies into action. It is the great cause of ALL. It is the establishment of a new era, that shall blot Despotism from the earth, and fix, on the lasting principles of Peace and Citizenship, the Great Republic of Man."¹⁷³

As if that did not provide the conservative British government with all of the evidence, circumstantial or otherwise, it needed to hold the LCS in the same league as the French

¹⁷² Edmund Burke, *Select Works*, ed. E. J. Payne, vol. 3 (1878), p. 7.

¹⁷³ Thomas Paine, *Letter of Thomas Paine, to the People of France*, 1792, from Davis, *Selections*, p. 42-43.

Jacobins, Paine's comparisons of the events in France to the events in America a decade earlier certainly drove the point home for British conservatives:

It has been my fate to have borne a share in the commencement and complete establishment of one Revolution (I mean the Revolution of America). The success and events of that Revolution are encouraging to us. The prosperity and happiness that have since flowed to that country, have amply rewarded her for all the hardships she endured, and for all the dangers she encountered. The principals on which that Revolution began, have extended themselves to Europe; and an over-ruling Providence is regenerating the Old World by the principles of the New. The distance of America from all other parts of the globe, did not admit of her carrying those principles beyond her own situation. It is to the peculiar honour of France, that she now raises the standard of Liberty for all nations; and in fighting her own battles, contends for the rights of all mankind.¹⁷⁴

Still developing their own firm political footing, Paine's writings provided much of early agendas for the LCS and other reform societies. It also helped to create the agenda for a conservative rebuttal.

Conclusion

The outset of the French Revolution in 1789 reignited a debate in Britain over the traditional beliefs concerning the nature of government as compared to its current state. Emerging political reform societies in Britain viewed the French Revolution, at least in its early stages, as an encouraging sign that Europe was moving toward more republican and democratic principles. Many in Britain thought the Revolution would propel the French nation into a more modern political world that resembled British representative government.

In 1789, Dr. Richard Price contributed to the political debate with a sermon given at a centenary celebration of the Glorious Revolution sponsored by the London Revolution Society. Entitled *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, the sermon proved inspirational to the founders of the LCS and many other political reform societies. In the

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

sermon Dr. Price compared what he perceived the goals of the French Revolution to be to the current political landscape in Britain, and found it wanting. Price's sermon was a thinly veiled criticism of the corruption in British politics, and of the lack of representation for working class men.

Edmund Burke responded to Price's sermon with his essay – *Reflections on the Revolution in France* – that criticized and condemned the Revolution and the folly in suddenly overturning centuries worth of political, economic, and social conventions, all in the name of individual rights. While aimed at French revolutionaries, Burke's essay became the framework of the British conservatives who viewed the growing political reform in Britain as something akin to, and as dangerous, as the events in France. Burke's essay served to create the boundaries – conservative and reformists – for a political debate that would last throughout the 1790s.

Thomas Paine rebutted Burke's essay in the second part of his *Rights of Man*, a book that inspired the founders of the LCS to public proclaim their political goals and begin to organize themselves in anticipation of the Society's founding. However, Thomas Hardy and the other LCS founders did not subscribe to Paine's view that the current British political system was beyond repair and needed to be dealt with in the French manner. Rather, Hardy believed that the British political system was constructed from fundamentally sound principals and traditions, but had strayed from many of those since the Glorious Revolution of 1688. It would be the goal of the LCS, and many other reform societies in the 1790s, to create a public debate about this, while concurrently providing political education and experience to working class men.

Thus the table was set for the founding of the LCS in 1792, and for the British government's reaction to that founding.

CHAPTER THREE – The LCS Introduces Itself

“That the number of our members be unlimited.”

- “The Corresponding Society of the unrepresented part of the people of Great Britain,” draft rules of the LCS, 1792.

E.P. Thompson and the LCS

On January 25, 1792, at The Bell tavern in Exeter Street, Strand, London, Thomas Hardy and eight other men met and formed the London Corresponding Society (LCS).¹⁷⁵ When Hardy established the LCS in early 1792 he originally envisioned a political association that would be comprised of just the disenfranchised, those unrepresented in the British parliaments of the 1790s.¹⁷⁶ Upon reflection Hardy deemed such an organizational structure as too narrow in political and social scope and appealed instead to “all classes and descriptions of men (criminals, insane, and infants excepted”).¹⁷⁷ From the start Hardy and many of the other initial LCS board members understood that a political association too narrowly defined and focused risked being marginalized rather quickly. Hardy had learned from the experiences of some of those reform associations that preceded the LCS and had defined themselves too narrowly or abstractly, and consequently failed to generate any sort of widespread public or political support. As a result Hardy and the LCS are credited with implementing two important innovations of political organization that were key elements in expanding participation, at least initially.

¹⁷⁵ Davis, I: xxix.

¹⁷⁶ Goodwin, p. 191.

¹⁷⁷ Thomas Hardy, Draft Letters: “The Corresponding Society of the unrepresented part of the people of Great Britain,” draft rules of the LCS, BL, Add. MSS. 27818, 1792.

The first of those innovations was the very low subscription rate of a single penny per week, and the second was, famously, “That the number of our Members be unlimited.”¹⁷⁸

E.P. Thompson began his landmark study of the British working class in the era of early industrialization, *The making of the English working class*, with this very quote and uses the founding of the LCS and their role in the political sphere as one of the foundational tenets of his book. First published in 1963, Thompson’s book was one of the first comprehensive examinations of this emerging social class in this formative period, and Thompson placed great historical weight on the role that the LCS played in raising the political consciousness of the working and newly-formed middle classes. While some historians since have taken issue with Thompson’s views regarding the primacy of the LCS in this era, his placement of the LCS at the hub of an expanding wheel of political participation and organizations seems appropriate and correct. Thompson in fact uses a quote from Thomas Hardy’s memoir to express one of the theses of his book:

After having had their bread and cheese and porter for supper, as usual, and their pipes afterwards, with some conversation on the hardness of the times and the dearness of all the necessaries of life...the business for which they had met was brought forward – *Parliamentary Reform* – an important subject to be deliberated upon and dealt with by such a class of men.¹⁷⁹

Thompson continues his description of the LCS as *the* model political association of the time by suggesting that its original nine members were on the whole average men of

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. While Hardy and the LCS is widely credited with this innovation in political organization, it is likely that it evolved from the Society of Constitutional Information’s founding bylaws of April, 1780 – ‘Resolved. That this Society be unlimited in its number.’ However many historians of this era believe that the context of the SCI bylaw was meant to refer to higher ranks of the aristocracy as a way to prevent the lower aristocratic ranks from gaining membership. It might be more likely construed as Hardy’s attempt to expand the boundaries of political organizations as a response to the limited nature of many political associations of the period.

¹⁷⁹ British Library, *Memoir of Thomas Hardy*, 65153A, p. 16.

average means and occupation, but something had stirred in them and after much discussion and debate over many months-time they all answered affirmatively to this question: “Are you thoroughly persuaded that the welfare of these kingdoms require that every adult person, in possession of his reason, and not incapacitated by crimes, should have a vote for a member of Parliament?”¹⁸⁰ Thompson builds most of the rest of his book around this question of why, and with what reasonable hopes of success, did such men believe that they had the right to equal political participation when such rights, whether constitutionally implied or not, had never been practically applied to them.

Thompson further suggests that one of the key differentiating aspects of the LCS relative to the many other political organizations that would come to exist in this period, was that the LCS should not be viewed as the first working-class political society as much as it should be viewed as the first ‘popular Radical’ society.¹⁸¹ The difference is a critical and controversial one, and perhaps a bit overstated. It is the case that prior to the LCS and some of the other reformist groups that there was no such idea or concept in England that something that was considered radical in idea or scope could also have some popular support amongst a relatively broad section of British society. If some entity, event, or idea was deemed radical by the government or the existing social and economic power structures, or even by the larger society, it was by definition not popular and deemed to be counter to the greater good. Likewise, those who embraced or were associated with such radical things were unpopular by definition, in as much as their interests were perceived to be outside of the mainstream notions of what was popular and beneficial to society. The LCS emerged at a time in British society when the lines

¹⁸⁰ E. P. Thompson, *The making of the English working class* (New York, 1966), p. 17.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

between what was radical and what was not were becoming increasingly blurred. In the revolutionary world of the late eighteenth century what was considered radical and what was not was increasingly becoming a matter of perspective. Thompson describes, and Hardy lived in, a period when the lines between socio-economic classes were increasingly blurred relative to their stratification prior to urbanization.

Several criticisms have been leveled at Thompson's theoretical views of working class consciousness since the publication of *The making of the English working class* in 1963. Many critics have suggested that Thompson's views of class readiness – the idea that neatly segmented classes were already formed and were just waiting to be released when and if changes in the existing political and economic power structures occurred – as not jiving well with the political realities many of these people or classes of people may have faced. In his writings on the LCS however, Thompson seems right to suggest that there was a combination of economic and political events that provided the kind of environment from which groups like the LCS might emerge.

Hardy was an artisan, apprenticed to a shoemaker in Stirlingshire, but he had also been exposed to the emerging industrialism as a bricklayer at the Carron Iron Works.¹⁸² He came to London during the American Revolutionary War and married the daughter of a carpenter. Hardy met Francis Place, the first chairman of the LCS, when Place was a journeyman on his way to becoming a master-tailor. The early 1790s was an era in which the remnants of long practiced feudal structures were breaking down irrevocably, and the lines between apprentices, journeymen, masters, tradesmen, and independent artisans was fuzzy at best. There were more opportunities for men to become self-

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 20.

employed and their own masters, and Hardy and his generation were increasingly motivated by such prospects.

Thompson places historical importance on the way in which Hardy, Place, and the LCS were able to pull this increasingly disparate and confused socio-economic environment into a movement that was, at least temporarily, both broad and cohesive. As Thompson suggests, the LCS's message reached "coffee houses, taverns, and the Dissenting Churches off Piccadilly, Fleet Street and the Strand," as well as to the east and south of the river, where it recruited from working-class communities "the waterside workers of Wapping, [and] the silk-weavers of Spitalfields."¹⁸³ Thompson believed that the LCS was a "junction-point" for working class political organizations, and that the way in which the LCS organized itself contributes to that belief:

But there are features, in even the brief description of its first meetings, which indicate that a new kind of organisation had come into being – features which help us to define (in the context of 1790-1850) the nature of a "working-class organisation." There is the working man as Secretary. There is the low weekly subscription. There is the intermingling of economic and political themes – "the hardness of the times" and Parliamentary Reform. There is the function of the meeting, both as a social occasion and as a centre for political activity. There is the realistic attention to procedural formalities. Above all, there is the determination to propagate opinions and to organise the converted, embodied in the leading rule: "That the number of our Members is unlimited."¹⁸⁴

Thompson also recognized the LCS in this period as initiating an era of political inclusiveness, one that had been evolving since the Levellers and Putney Debates, the Glorious Revolution, and the American Revolution. It was a trend that many feared, including the semi-official political organization called the Association for Protecting Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers, an organization that worked

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

against the interests of political reformists. Nevertheless, even moderate reformers were beginning to believe that the French model for political change might be necessary in Britain.

Thompson viewed the aspirations of the LCS and other such reformist associations as the continuation of a constitutional debate that had been smoldering, and occasionally flaring up, since the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution of the seventeenth century. While there may have been some new and more politically aware players, the arguments and debates over who should be allowed to govern and with what rights to do so were still relevant. In 1792 it was not at all clear to which direction the nation would turn to effect political change – continued incremental changes that were part of a more conservative pattern of reform, or something much more like the French experiment. Reverend Wyvill echoed those fears in 1792: “If Mr. Paine should be able to rouse up the lower classes, their interference will probably be marked by wild work, and all we now possess, whether in private property or public liberty, will be at the mercy of a lawless and furious rabble.”¹⁸⁵ Thompson highlights the role of the LCS as one of the cornerstones of this renewed and more energized debate at the end of the eighteenth century.

Thomas Hardy and the LCS

From the start Thomas Hardy and John Thelwall wanted to make the LCS a new and different kind of political organization, and one that drew upon the historical lessons of such groups. It is not a coincidence that the name Hardy chose for the group - the London Corresponding Society - was a reflection of the American committees of

¹⁸⁵ Christopher Wyvill, from G. Rude, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (1959).

correspondence that were so prevalent during that Revolution.¹⁸⁶ Hardy was quite familiar with those committees having read much of their published correspondence while he was an apprentice shoemaker. Likewise the French Revolution provided a contemporary model of political reform, a model that the Hardy and the LCS embraced in the first two years of the Society's existence (1792-3). Of its initial nine members, Thelwall was probably the most well known as a popular lecturer and poet, and a friend of both of the Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge. All of the other founding members, Hardy included, were men of little social or political consequence. Hardy envisioned a political organization of nondescript Citizens (after the French model of a leveled society of Citizens) that would be more inclusive and thus larger than any past political organization. The LCS was thus formulated as a political reform organization consisting of artisans, shopkeepers, small business owners, mechanics, and the like that believed that most of the ills of the realm could be corrected with Parliamentary reform and universal male suffrage for all men above the age of twenty one, except for criminals and lunatics.¹⁸⁷ Unlike some past political organizations that believed the route to political reform was through direct influence of seated politicians and the politically powerful, Hardy believed that the key to accomplishing their goals rested on Society's ability to educate the masses of their political rights. This was different in approach from the American correspondence committees who imposed restrictions on membership and political education, and the French revolutionary model that sought to dismantle the existing political and societal structures through massive upheaval and violence. The idea was to form as many chapters as possible, thus the

¹⁸⁶ Thale, *Selections*, p. xv.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xvi

“unlimited in numbers” approach, and engender in each of those chapters broad and lively discussions of political pamphlets that would lead to the distribution of their own pamphlets. Hardy and the other founding members further believed that while membership should not be free (something must have a value to people for them to care and participate, and the Society needed some income to afford its existence), it should be widely affordable, and thus the established dues of a penny a week.

The issue of parliamentary reform was not a new one, and in the 1780s there were articulate and landed men who spoke out in favor of it. Whether it was in the name of their own interests, or in their belief in the traditional rights of Englishmen is not altogether clear, but it is clear that reform was an issue in the public sphere at the time the LCS was formed. Several of these men were involved in the Society for Constitutional Information (1780-94), a forerunner to the LCS, whose goal was to work for reform by educating people of their rights based on the Glorious Revolution constitution of 1688.¹⁸⁸ The SCI was an exclusive, invitation only political club that limited its members to those who owned land or a business of some note. In 1788 some of the members of the SCI splintered from that group to form the London Revolution Society as a way to celebrate the centenary of the Glorious Revolution.¹⁸⁹ Both reformist groups held regular meetings to educate others on their political rights, and to discuss how to achieve parliamentary reform. While never a member of either, Hardy was familiar with both groups and some of its members, and in many respects the SCI acted as the rich uncle of the LCS in its early days. Both the SCI and the London Revolution Society attempted to work within the existing political system to achieve their reforms. Their members were well

¹⁸⁸ Thale, p. vxi.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

connected politically and socially and it was through these connections that its members lobbied their acquaintances in the House of Commons for reform. In 1785 William Pitt introduced a motion for a debate on parliamentary reform on the floor of the House of Commons, but it was summarily dismissed.¹⁹⁰ The result of all of this was that by the end of the 1780s those who were working for parliamentary reform were, for all practical purposes, no closer to their goals than when they began. Hardy came to believe that a new approach for reform was in order, and this notion of broadly educating the public so that their numbers would eventually create a tipping point coalesced into the notion of establishing the LCS.

So it was that mass political education that led to mass public participation became the central driver behind the establishment of the LCS. By comparison, that seems a much more modest goal than the goals of the revolutionaries in France, or even from Hardy's American cousins, reluctant though they may have been to break away from the mother country. Hardy, Thelwall, Tooke, and the other founding members of the LCS chose to organize their Society in such a way as to optimize their chances of achieving their stated goals. In the early 1790s many other newly formed political clubs followed the model of the LCS, and Hardy and the LCS quickly became a first among equals of political reformists in this period. This leadership position allowed the LCS to influence the organization and activities of many of the other political associations, and is likely one of the reasons that LCS was targeted above all others by the government, and why they appear the most historically relevant.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Thale, p. xvi.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

Several historians have suggested that the LCS and other grass-roots political organizations of this period saw themselves in an altogether new way, and that new way was important in terms of how they organized and governed themselves. First, the LCS and other reform societies considered themselves a modern phenomenon and actively promoted themselves as such to potential members and the general public. They considered themselves modern in as much as they were more politically educated than their predecessors. The reason they believed this to be the case is that, for men of their generations and stations, they were more and increasingly literate, and had more access to the historical and political literature that was previously the domain of men of the upper classes. Second, the men of these late eighteenth century political associations saw themselves as a different kind of political entity, in the American or French notion of the 'people,' disconnected completely from the aristocracy and able to create and build political organizations of their own accord.¹⁹² They clearly saw themselves as the next wave of political reformers in Britain, the more organized and powerful follow on to the reformist efforts of the 1780s, the cousins of the American and French reformists, and the flag bearers for the restoration of the ancient Saxon rights of the Magna Carta and the constitution of the Glorious Revolution.¹⁹³ It was a rather remarkable change in bourgeois and working-class attitude in Britain from one generation to the next - from the men of the SCI who were primarily of the high bourgeois and low aristocracy and attempted with little success to work within the existing political structure for reform - to the men of the LCS and other such reform societies who believed that they had the *right* to expect and create political reform, and on their own terms. As historian Mary Thale

¹⁹² Thale, p. xvi.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

has suggested in her edited review of the correspondence of the LCS, this was something different: “There was no precedent – not even among the seventeenth-century levellers – for shoemakers, tailors, and plumbers organizing under the assumption that they – men without property – had a right to decide who should vote or how parliamentary seats should be allotted.”¹⁹⁴ It was indeed a new phenomenon in political attitude and organization, and one that was little understood by members of the existing political structures. The attitude toward their efforts to promote universal suffrage was summarized by a London judge as ‘a most ridiculous and absurd doctrine...nothing can be so absurd.’¹⁹⁵

Indeed, and to the good judge’s point, what made these men believe that they had the right to organize and pursue their political goals? What was different about how Hardy and his peers saw the world and their place in it? It was as if a large number of working to middle class men in a number of cities – London, Manchester, Sheffield, Birmingham, and others – all woke up in 1791 and 1792 with the collective notion that they should be able to vote. As with most things, the answer seems to lie in not one single thing, but a confluence of events and attitude shifts in eighteenth century Europe. Among the many events that informed these men and their political expectations were such things as the American example, the pamphlets of such predecessor societies as the Society for Constitutional Information, the early enthusiasm for and success of the French Revolution, the centenary celebrations of the Glorious Revolution, Paine’s *Rights of Man*, and their participation in the growing number of debating societies available to men of their station. Among other influences, Hardy attributed his inspiration to form the LCS to

¹⁹⁴ Thale, p. xvi.

¹⁹⁵ Letter, P.W. Frost of the Stockport Society of the Friends of Universal Peace and the Rights of Man to Hardy, September 27, 1792, Treasury Solicitor’s Papers 11/965/3510A, from: Thale, p. xvi.

his rereading of political pamphlets he had initially encountered during the American Revolution.¹⁹⁶ The eighteenth century was awash with printing and publishing, and Hardy, Thelwall, Hooke, and many others had no shortage of political literature from which to draw inspiration and direction. One of the tracts that Hardy referred to in the first LCS meeting was an essay on the nature of public spirit in 1740, in which Sir William Keith included comments on the liberty of British subjects as opposed to those of other nations “...it is not in the Power of any Man, not even the greatest in the Kingdom, to oppress one single individual by wrongly affecting either Life, Liberty, or Estate.”¹⁹⁷ In his memoirs Hardy also gave inspirational credit to a 1783 letter from the Duke of Richmond, a letter that the SCI reprinted for its membership later that decade, and that the LCS reprinted for its members in the early 1790s. In the letter the Duke sets the foundations for the goals of the LCS:

I am more convinced that the restoring the right of voting universally to every man, not incapacitated by nature of want or reason, or by law for the commitment of crimes, together with annual elections, is the only reform that can be effectual and permanent. I am further convinced that it is the only form that is practicable.¹⁹⁸

Richmond’s letter and political beliefs became a clarion call for Hardy and the LCS. Hardy would refer to the Duke’s letter at many LCS meetings and larger public gatherings, particularly on the topic of voting and representation:

But in the more liberal and great plan of universal representation, a clear and distinct principle at once appears that cannot lead us wrong. Not conveniency but right: if it is not a maxim of our constitution, that a British subject is to be governed only by the laws to which he has consented by himself or his representative, we should instantly abandon

¹⁹⁶ Thale, p. xvi.

¹⁹⁷ Sir William Keith (1680-1749), *A Collection of Papers and Other Tracts Written Occasionally on Various Subjects, To Which is Prefixed, by Way of a Preface, an Essay on the Nature of Publick Spirit* (London, J. Mechell), 1740.

¹⁹⁸ *A Letter From His Grace the Duke of Richmond to Lieutenant Colonel Sharman*, London, 1783.

the error; but if it is the essential of freedom, founded on the eternal principles of justice and wisdom, and our unalienable birth-right, we should not hesitate in asserting it.¹⁹⁹

Richmond's letter struck the proper chords for Hardy and the LCS, and along with the nascent examples of meritocracies in America and increasingly France, seemed to frame the goals and objectives of the LCS in an unambiguous and rational way:

The equal right of men to security from oppression, and to the enjoyments of life and liberty, strikes me as perfectly compatible with their unequal shares of industry, labour, and genius, which are the origin of inequality of fortunes. The equality and inequality of men are both founded in nature; and whilst we do not confound the two, and only support her establishments, we cannot err.²⁰⁰

All of these influences contributed to Hardy's desire to start a political reform group, and in late October of 1791 Hardy exchanged letters with Francis Place about the notion, and inquired as to whether or not Place might be interested in participating or even leading such a group.²⁰¹ In his letter to Place, Hardy began to articulate what he envisioned in terms of political reform, and the working-class rationale for why such a thing was important:

It has been a long and very just complaint that the people of this country are not equally represented in Parliament....Many large and populous towns have not a single vote for a representation such as Birmingham containing above 31000 of inhabitants, Manchester above 28000, Leeds near 20000...according to Dr. Price. (underlined by Hardy.)

Rules and regulations of this society –

1. That a society be instituted and called by the name of The Corresponding Society of the Unrepresented Part of the people of Great Britain.
2. That this society be unlimited in its numbers while there is one in Great Britain unrepresented and that no one shall be esteemed [membership] who has not paid at least one penny towards its expense and continued weekly.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Collection of Francis Place, London Corresponding Society, Vol 1, British Library, MS # 27811, *Original Letter Book of the (London) Corresponding Society*, 1791.

3. That as soon as twenty members are associated a General Meeting shall be called when all the several laws or regulations already agreed to shall be read over and confirmed after or annually and at this meeting there shall be elected a President, Treasurer, and Secretary.
4. That a committee be chosen to correspond with societies formed in different parts of Great Britain with the view of [furthering] the views of this Society.
5. That no person shall be proposed to be a member of this society unless he is recommended by one member and the proposed seconded by another.
6. That each members name and place of abode be entered regularly on a book kept for that purpose.
7. That all proceedings of the society and its committee be fairly transcribed into proper books for that purpose by the secretary from the rough minutes against the [formal] meeting of the Society and Committee.
8. That no one be admitted a member under the age of twenty years (Hardy wrote twenty one but crossed the one out) nor any who has not resided in this country for one year.

A Parliamentary reform is that which of all things in our opinion deserves the attention of the publick – We are more and more convinced from every days experience that the restoring the right of Voting universally to every man not incapacitated by nature for want of reason, or by law for the commission of crimes, together with annual elections, is the only reform that can be effective and permanent.²⁰²

LCS Founding Precepts

Hardy's letter to Place was important as it was around these precepts that the LCS was formed and operated. Each of the eight precepts that Hardy articulated were and are important to our understanding of the LCS specifically, and to the larger reform movement of the 1790s more generally. In his first point, it was critical to Hardy that this political reform society be formed for the express purpose of representing the 'Unrepresented Part' of the people of the country. Such a name explicitly announces the intent and purpose of the society, and stakes a claim as a political entity that will attempt to represent those that have been heretofore unrepresented. That says something important about the impact the LCS hoped to have by providing first political education

²⁰² Ibid.

and then participation to the disenfranchised, for Hardy and the LCS believed that education must proceed participation.

Hardy's second point is just as fundamental, and as E. P. Thompson has suggested, was one of the things that was different about the LCS. As envisioned the LCS was not an exclusive club, like so many political and otherwise groups of the day, but rather was meant to be by definition an inclusive club, thereby flipping the whole notion of what clubs and other such groups ought to be. By having an unlimited membership the LCS essentially put no restraints on its potential growth, and created an expectation that working-class political participation might and could grow exponentially in the nation. It was that same potential for growth that would become a source of great concern for the British government, who feared that unlimited growth of such radical organizations could lead to the sort of revolution that was occurring in France.

Hardy's third precept addressed the potential for growth and the potential for an unlimited number of chapters, and that in effect a new chapter might be formed any time twenty or more members formed, either from within an existing chapter or in the form of an altogether new one. Setting such a low bar for chapter creation and affiliation had several advantages, allowing LCS chapters to form and spread throughout the nation. It also addressed a much more practical issue, and that was given the working-class nature of most LCS members the chapters had to be kept small enough to be able to meet in public spaces, as none of the members had houses big enough for a chapter meeting, and could ill afford to rent larger halls. This precept also provided for a consistent, and conventional, organizational structure and was meant to insure that all chapters would be working under the same set of rules and orders.

The fourth precept spoke to the importance of connecting with other political reform societies around the country as a way to pool resources and build momentum for political education, action, and reform. This was a sophisticated political notion for its time and was a lesson that Hardy drew from the American colonials' committees of correspondence. The idea was to build a political network of like-minded groups whose cumulative numbers and influence might be able to sway opinion in the public sphere and effect political change.

The fifth precept was not meant to promote exclusivity, but rather was meant to build accountability in the membership. In as much as Hardy and the leadership of the LCS were interested in building a political network, asking members to recommend new members meant that there was some assumed knowledge of any newly recommended member, and by implication that a member recommending a new member would take that new member under his wing in the chapter.

The sixth and seventh precepts spoke to the need for procedure and process, and that was vitally important to Hardy and others in the LCS as it was intended to provide transparency to the public sphere so that there would be no accusations of political conspiracy and treachery, and as a way to be viewed as a credible and 'proper' organization. And finally, the eighth of Hardy's precepts spoke to the requirement that members be of serious age and attitude, having some stake and vested interest in the current and future political structure.

There were nine men present at the initial meeting of the LCS on January 25th of 1792 – no Chairman was appointed but Hardy was appointed both Treasurer and Secretary.²⁰³ At the next meeting of the society two weeks later twenty-four men attended. By May of

²⁰³ Thale, p. 6.

1792 the Society had grown to the point where it became necessary to organize into nine geographically determined divisions, with each division sending a delegate to a general committee meeting held each Thursday.²⁰⁴ In his *Memoir*, Hardy at first envisioned a smaller society, but upon considering the breadth of underrepresentation in the nation became convinced “that it was impossible to establish a society to have any *effect*, upon so narrow a scale, for it is clear as a mathematical axiom that the whole mass of the people are unrepresented, or misrepresented.”²⁰⁵ Hardy and some of the other founding members believed that the widest possible reach for the Society would create the best potential for real reform. At the initial meeting it was decided that a larger society “which included all classes and descriptions of men (criminals, insane, and infants excepted) agreeable to the plan of the Duke of Richmond, Major Cartwright, Dr. Jebb & c...” would allow for the participation of a number of men without precedent in British political history.²⁰⁶ As with most reform societies of this period, the founding of the LCS was no more noteworthy initially as the founding of a lottery club might be today. In Hardy’s own words:

The plan of a society I read to an intimate acquaintance who approved of it, and a few days afterwards two more friends and him met me at supper where I took the opportunity of reading it to them. They were all pleased with it as a groundwork. And it being a new thing we were anxious about putting it in practice. I proposed that we should have a meeting next Monday night at a public house the sign of the Bell in Exeter St. strand. It was agreed to, and each of us was to invite as many of our acquaintance as we thought would agree to the measure.²⁰⁷

And so the LCS was established modestly and earnestly with an expectation that working class citizens, properly organized, educated, and motivated could effect political

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p. xvii.

²⁰⁵ Hardy, *Memoir*, p. 35.

²⁰⁶ Hardy, *Memoir*, p. 36.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

change in a peaceable way where none had been able to in the prior history of England. As its newly appointed Secretary, Hardy began to record the proceedings of the LCS and its meetings. From 1792 – 1794 Hardy kept a detailed notebook of proceedings that was never subsequently published as such, but was later included as part of Hardy's autobiographical *Memoir*. His reflections deserve extensive inclusion herein, as it provides invaluable historical insight into the thought processes of late eighteenth century working class and tradesmen, and their rising political consciousness:

Although we were at first but few in number and humble in situation and circumstances, yet we wished to take into our consideration how to remedy the many defects and abuses that had crept into the administration of government. And in our enquiries we soon discovered that gross ignorance and prejudice of the bulk of the nation was the greatest obstacle to obtaining redress. Therefore our aim was to have a well regulated and orderly society formed for the purpose of dispelling that ignorance and prejudice as far as possible, and instill into their minds by means of the press a sense of their rights as freemen, and of their duty to themselves, and their posterity, as good citizens, and hereditary guardians of the liberties transmitted to them by their forefathers. On the Monday following, which was the *first of Feb*: there were eight more added to our number, and increased the funds of the society to *two schillings*. The Third meeting nine more were added, which made the number of the society amount to twenty five and the sum in the *treasury, four schillings and one penny* – a mighty sum!

On the *second* night of the meeting there was a Chairman appointed for the *third meeting* – when the following questions were proposed for discussion viz.

- First Is there any necessity for a reformation of the present State of the Representation in the British House of Commons?
- Second Would there be any utility in a parliamentary reform? – or in other words – Are there any just grounds to believe that a reformation in parliament will be of any essential service to the Nation?
- Third Have *we* who are Tradesmen – Shopkeepers and mechanicks any right to seek to obtain a parliamentary reform?

The above questions were debated in the society for five nights successively – in all points of view that we are capable of handling the

subject – and after due deliberation, and discussion, they were all decided in the affirmative.²⁰⁸

Hardy's passage is extraordinary on many levels. It is at first a reasoned and logical progression of Socratic questions by a class of men who by the end of the eighteenth century were becoming increasingly learned in literature and the classics of antiquity of their own volition, and who had come to their own understandings of what such things could and should mean to them. Second, it is representative and emblematic of a new class and age of political citizen in British politics. Hardy and much of his generation were the recipients of a century's progression of printing, publishing, improved transportation and distribution methods, coffee and other public houses, debating clubs, the proliferation of affordable newspapers and broadsheets, etc., that occurred in the eighteenth century. And thirdly, and by their own admission, Hardy and his fellow LCS members were part of a socio-political class that was something just a bit new. In the first instance, they were certainly neither aristocratic nor noble, they owned no land and had no hereditary titles or ancestry that could help define their social station. In the second instance, they were not peasants or poor by contemporary living standards, and many of them owned modest homes and business interests. And in the third instance, they were not exactly apprentices or journeymen either, at least not all of them, as many had left those modest careers behind to pursue a more public and political career. As suggested earlier they knew that collectively they were part of a newer phenomenon, one that saw working yet learned men aspire for a proper seat at the franchise table.

This issue of self-definition would plague the LCS, and many of its brethren reform societies, throughout their short existences. Many of its members were initially fearful of

²⁰⁸ Hardy, *Memoir*, p. 37.

identifying themselves with reform societies for fear of loss of their ability to make a living and provide for their families, and for fear of political persecution. Much like teenagers who are less sure of themselves in the presence of their elders, the LCS members struggled to identify themselves as something different from the prevailing political groups of the day, and to stake out their political territory. At one of the early LCS meetings a document was created that would serve to introduce the LCS to the public sphere. Called *An Address to the Nation* the early committee members worked collaboratively on it, each culling and contributing their political views and positions to create an introductory letter. However when it came time for some number of members to sign the letter as a contributor, or as Hardy put it – “Who should put the Bell about the cat’s neck?” - none would do so for fear of economic and political retribution.²⁰⁹

In their first public address however, Hardy and the LCS certainly did attempt to stake out their political ground, and in the end Hardy was the lone signatory, and nearly by default: “- As it was necessary to have a name to the Address that it might appear genuine – it was next proposed to me to sign it – the only objection that I could possibly have was - that being an obscure individual – my name could add no consequence to it – but I being the most independent in the Society at the time having nothing to hope nor fear from any *party* or *class* of Men whatever – I readily agreed - ...my name appeared *singly* to the first address and resolutions on the 2d. of April 1792.”²¹⁰

First Address of the LCS, April 2, 1792

Man as an Individual is entitled to Liberty – it is his Birth-right.

As a Member of Society, the Preservation of the Liberty becomes his indispensable Duty.

²⁰⁹ Hardy, *Memoir*, p. 7.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

When he associated, he gave up certain Rights, in order to secure the Possession of the remainder;

But, he voluntarily yielded up only as much as was necessary of the common Good:

He still preserved a Right of sharing in the Government of his Country; - without it, no Man can with Truth call himself FREE.

Fraud or Force, sanction by Custom, withholds that Right from (by far) the greater Number of Inhabitants of this Country.

The few with whom the Right of Election and Representation remains, abuse it, and the strong Temptations held out to Electors, sufficiently prove that the Representatives of this Country seldom procure a Seat in Parliament, from the *unbought* Suffrages of a Free People.

The Nation at length perceives it, and testifies an ardent Desire of remedying the Evil.

The only Difficulty, therefore, at present is, the ascertaining the true Method of proceeding.

To this end, different and numerous Societies have been formed in various Parts of the Nation.

Several likewise have arisen in the Metropolis, and among them (though as yet in its Infant State) the *Corresponding Society*, with Modesty intrudes Itself and Opinions, on the Attention of the Public, in the following Resolutions:

Resolved, - That every individual has a Right to Share in the Government of that Society of which he is a Member – unless incapacitated:

Resolved, - That nothing but Non-age, Privation of Reason, or an Offence against the General Rules of Society, can incapacitate him.

Resolved, - That it is no less the *Right* than the *Duty* of every Citizen, to keep a watchful eye on the Government of his Country; that the Laws, by being multiplied, do not degenerate into *Oppression*; and that those who are entrusted with the Government, do not substitute *Private Interest* for *Public Advantage*.

Resolved, - That the People of Great Britain are not *effectually* represented in Parliament.

Resolved, - That in Consequence of a *partial, unequal*, and therefore *inadequate Representation*, together with the *corrupt* Method in which Representatives are elected; *oppressive Taxes, unjust Laws, restrictions of Liberty*, and *wasting of the Public Money*, have ensued.

Resolved, - That the only Remedy to those Evils is a fair, equal, and impartial Representation of the People in Parliament.

Resolved, - That a fair, equal, and impartial Representation can never take Place, until all *partial Privileges* are abolished.

Resolved, - That this Society do express their *Abhorrence* of Tumult and Violence, and that, as they aim at Reform, not Anarchy, Reason, Firmness, and Unanimity are the only Arms they themselves will employ, or persuade their Fellow-Citizens to exert, against *Abuse of Power*.

Ordered, - That the Secretary of this Society do transmit a Copy of the above to the Societies for Constitutional Information, established in *London, Sheffield, and Manchester*.

By Order of the Committee,
T. HARDY, Secretary.

The first public address of the Society laid the groundwork for the style of political organization that would be the hallmark of the LCS in the late eighteenth century. Lacking the necessary funds to print and distribute their first address Hardy and other LCS members appealed to like-minded and sympathetic citizens for donations of a single penny apiece per week for their membership in an LCS chapter. Soon enough money was raised to distribute the address gratis to members and potential members alike – several thousand copies were printed. The LCS also sent copies to the London Constitutional Society, the Constitutional Societies of Manchester and Sheffield, and to the Society for Constitutional Information.²¹¹ The London Constitutional Society subsequently submitted copies to many of London's daily and weekly papers and with that the London Corresponding Society was introduced in the public and political sphere. This pattern of the reciprocal exchange of addresses and letters between reform societies would prove an efficient and effective means of distribution for most all of the societies that participated. Further, Hardy seemed to have a keen sense of where potential members might be found, and the LCS and other reform societies became adept political recruiting machines by knowing who to look for, and where to find them:

As our plan was *Universal Suffrage* and *annual parliaments*, The Society admitted journeymen tradesmen of all denominations to it – A class of Men who deserve better treatment than they generally meet with from those who are fed, and cloathed, and enriched by their labour, industry, and ingenuity. Many of that description of Men are unmarried, and whose practice is to go to a public house from their workshops after the labour of the day, to have their supper, and then regale themselves with a pint or pot

²¹¹ Thale, p.8

of Beer, and smook their pipes, and convers about the news of the day – and the hardness of the times – the dearness of provisions, and of every necessity and comfort of life & c. which directs their conversation a little farther by inquiring into the *cause* of all those calamities of which they complain -...By admitting all upon the principle of universal suffrage, the society increased rapidly - ...²¹²

As Hardy suggests such targeted recruiting served the LCS well and was a brilliant example and precursor of the political axiom of, paraphrased here, knowing ones audience. As the first Secretary of the LCS, Hardy was also responsible for soliciting relationships with other political reform societies. Given the fact that Hardy knew many of the members of the SCI, and that the SCI had provided Hardy and the LCS with some organizational guidance, it was only natural that Hardy's first official letter of solicitation from the newly formed LCS was sent to the Society for Constitutional Information on April 7, 1792:

Sir,

I am ordered by the London Corresponding Society to send a copy of their resolutions to the Society for Constitutional Information established at Manchester. Likewise I have to inform you of their wish to confer into correspondence and be in close connection with you as we are all engaged in one common cause, our sentiments ought to be known to each other and act with one heart in a matter of such vast importance. We began this society about ten weeks ago [and] it is composed of [?], mechanics, and shopkeepers. The enclosed will inform you of the principles we set out upon when we at first appreciated and flattered ourselves that no other societies in the nation were formed from the same principles, but in two or three meetings afterwards we were most agreeably informed of our brethren at Sheffield haveing taken the lead in so glorious a course – we immediately wrote to them and was answered without delay enjoying a wish to unite with us for promoting the ends we have in view and our [?] of success by persevering prudently and with unanimity. I have the honour to be sir your most obedient servant.

T. Hardy. April 7/1792.²¹³

²¹² Hardy. *Memoir*

²¹³ Letter from T. Hardy to the Society for Constitutional Information, Collection of Francis Place, BL, MS # 27811, April 7, 1792.

The LCS grew steadily through the remainder of 1792, and it was not long before more than just working-class men were interested in joining. This development, while having the potential to broaden the Society's base of appeal and political status, concerned Hardy and many of the other founding members greatly. Hardy had envisioned a truly grass-roots organization comprised of the multitudes of working-class men banded together to control their own collective destinies. He was particularly concerned about the inner machinations of a Society that too closely represented and emulated the existing class structures that many of its members found so distasteful. It seemed pointless to simply create a class structure for the LCS within the context of the existing class structures in society at large, as it "...might prevent the people exerting themselves in their own cause and depend implicitly (as formerly) upon the mere ipse dixit of some NobleMan or great Man without the least trouble of examining [an issue] for themselves..."²¹⁴ That said, the LCS was founded on the tenet of unlimited and unrestricted membership, so something had to be reconciled to allow for the expansion of the LCS across social boundaries. The founding members conceived an approach that did in fact allow anybody to join so long as they paid the exact same amount of dues as all other members, answered affirmatively to the exact same three questions posed to all other members, and had their names and residence addresses – but not their titles – recorded into the Society's membership role.²¹⁵ This approach seemed to satisfy the egalitarian model that the LCS was founded upon:

²¹⁴ Hardy, *Memoir*, p. 55.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

We were so scrupulous about the admission of any of those of higher ranks that when any of them offered to pay more than we usually demanded on the admission of a new member We would not receive it but told them that we had money sufficient for all necessary purposes Viz for printing, postage of Letters, and stationary - ... - Every three Months new Officers were elected by ballot or the old ones rechosen if they found it convenient – There was a uniform rule by which all Members were admitted high and low rich and poor – After the three following questions were proposed to them and answered in the Affirmative their names and residences were entered into a book kept for that purpose (*but not their titles*) each member had a ticket given to him with a copy of the rules and orders and the Address of the Society.

Question first. Are you convinced that the parliamentary Representation of this country is at present inadequate and imperfect?

Questions 2d. Are you thoroughly persuaded that the welfare of these kingdoms requires that every person of *Adult* years in possession of his reason and not incapacitated by crimes should have a vote for a Member of parliament?

Question 3d. Will you endeavour by all justifiable means to promote such reformation in parliament.²¹⁶

The Society also hit upon the idea of printing tickets for their members that indicated the chapter they belonged to, their numerical order of entry as a member, and the motto of the LCS, something that Hardy, Margarot, and others equivocated over:

By this time [late 1792] we were under the necessity of having printed tickets – for the member multiplied so fast that the business of the society was retarded by writing the tickets – printed tickets were talked of for several weeks before they were ordered to be printed – what is every bodys business is no bodys business (and old proverb) – At last I gave the form of a ticket into the committee for their approbation with this Motto “*Unite, persevere, and be free*” I remember Margarot objecting to that Motto at first as liable to be construed to our injury – however the next day when he called upon me (which was his practice every day) he said that it would de very well it was very proper -²¹⁷

Almost as soon as the first Address of the LCS was printed and distributed the Society was split into nine divisions in the London area in order to accommodate those who continued to join. By the end of April 1792 each of the nine divisions were meeting

²¹⁶ Hardy, *Memoir*, 56.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

regularly and weekly, and each division elected a representative to attend an LCS general committee meeting on Thursday nights. The LCS founders were forward thinking in how they organized the Society to allow for geographical and membership growth. Each division was to be composed of thirty members in its final form, but each division was allowed to grow to forty-six members before it was required to reconstitute itself. The excess sixteen members were used to seed the next new division, having the effect of providing both substance and experience to the newest divisions.²¹⁸ This system worked well enough in practice, although some divisions grew larger than the bylaws of the LCS allowed. Hardy's own London division, in fact, Division 2, was well over 100 members for several years according to the membership roster. By bylaw each division meeting began promptly at 8:00 p.m., allowing for the completion of supper, the loading of pipes, and the distribution of after-supper libations, and each meeting began with the consideration and admission of new members.

The LCS leadership organized the Society around the premise that the best judges of prospective members were current members. To that end each prospective member had to be recommended by at least two current members who vouched for the "Civism and Morals" of the potential member.²¹⁹ This process was not always adhered to however, and as a consequence government spies had little trouble becoming members, a fact that would have serious implications for the LCS in the years ahead.²²⁰ As part of the admission process each prospect was required to answer three questions (correctly) about the need for parliamentary form and about his willingness and commitment to work for its accomplishment. Each admitted member was required to pay either a one or three

²¹⁸ Thale, *Selections*, p. xxiv.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

month advance on their dues, depending on a particular division's adopted constitution, which had the dual purpose of supporting the financial needs of the LCS, and allowing the new member to attend any division's meeting, though he could only vote in his own.²²¹ In this manner, then, the LCS was able to quickly recruit and admit new members, putatively vetted, who could just as quickly begin to educate his circle of family, friends, and acquaintances on their political rights, and on the goals and objectives of the LCS.

Following the approval of new members the designated delegate reported on the activities and outcomes of the most recent LCS general committee meeting. If necessary, the division then voted on matters that had been referred by the general committee to the entire LCS membership.²²² A typical sampling of the matters that might come before the divisions were such things as the electing affiliate members from other reform societies, the practicality of holding general meetings, whether or not divisions should allow memberships to apprentices, and the duration that general committee delegates should serve.²²³ The general committee delegates, along with an alternate if the elected delegate could not attend a general committee meeting, were elected by secret ballot quarterly as a way to rotate and expose as many members as possible to the workings and discussions of the general committee. Try as they might though, general committee delegates were often re-elected. Francis Place is a good example of this, as he was elected as a delegate in June of 1794 was re-elected successively up until his resignation in March of 1794.²²⁴

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid.

Each LCS division also elected a new secretary each quarter, who was tasked with keeping the membership roster up to date, writing vouchers certifying the election of general committee delegates and alternate delegates, drawing up motions to be presented at general committee meetings, and collecting and recording the payment of member dues.²²⁵ Toward the middle of 1794, each of the divisions elected tithing members – their duties included notifying members about changes in meeting venues, calling on members whose dues were delinquent, and to notify members of any changes in the plans for, or agenda of, the general committee meetings.²²⁶ One of the main objectives of LCS was always to educate all men on their political rights, and much meeting time was often devoted to such education. Division members had political and economic news from recently released pamphlets or newspapers read to them by other members. And the readings were often diverse – in 1792 and 1793 they included such things as an account of the trial of Thomas Walker from Manchester as reported in the *Courier*, the parliamentary of speeches of Stanhope and others, and various newspaper accounts of the French Revolution.²²⁷ Special efforts were often made so that there was time for such readings, as the meetings were scheduled to end at 10 p.m. and the division business could take considerable time.

Hardy also hit upon the politically astute idea of soliciting potential members of the LCS by sending letters to those men that Hardy believed might have some sympathy for the goals of the Society, but perhaps needed a bit of a nudge to get involved. In perhaps a precursor to the modern practice of political solicitation letters, Hardy would briefly outline the goals of the Society to the targeted individual and ask that they consider

²²⁵ Thale, *Selections*, p. xxiv.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xxv.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

attending an upcoming meeting, as he did in his letter to Mr. D. Guidoc on April 28, 1792:

Sir,

Knowing you to be a friend of freedom I have taken the liberty of sending you a copy of the resolutions of the London Corresponding Society of which I have the honor of being a principle on establishing. We are friend of freedom on the broad basis of the Rights of Man – our aim is to have these lost rights reestablished by having an equal representation of the people in parliament. We meet every Monday evening at 8 O Clock and should be happy if you would favor us with your company and give us your assistance in promoting the grand project we have in view.

I have the honor to be Sire Your Most Obedient Servant, Thomas Hardy, April 28/1792.²²⁸

By June 14, 1792, less than six months after their founding, the LCS had outgrown their meeting space at the Bell tavern in Exeter. It was time to find a bigger place to meet.

The newly formed LCS, along with many other nascent political associations, viewed the events of the early stages of the French Revolution with great excitement and anticipation. The members of the LCS were excited for the potential of a European rebirth of participatory and democratic governing systems, and saw an opportunity to advance those goals in Britain through the efforts of a grass roots movement of political interest and advocacy. The LCS contributed to this dispersion of all things political with their *Address from the London Corresponding Society to the inhabitants of Great Britain, on the Subject of Parliamentary Reform*, first published in July 1792.²²⁹ The address is jointly signed by Maurice Margarot, the first chairman of the LCS, and Thomas Hardy, the first Secretary of the LCS. The address was important for two reasons. First, it

²²⁸ Thomas Hardy Letter to Mr. D. Guidioc, Collection of Francis Place, BL, MS # 27811, April 8, 1792.

²²⁹ Michael T. Davis (ed), *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799, Volume 1*(London, 2002), p 3.

publicly articulated for the first time the political goals and positions of the LCS for all to see, and second, two thousand copies were printed and distributed gratis to members of the LCS and other political associations in London, Sheffield, Manchester, and Edinburgh.²³⁰ In the address, Margarot and the LCS invoked British reformists' sympathies toward the perceived goals of the French Revolution to stake out their goals for Britain: "This great end however we believe attainable, solely, by the whole nation deeply impressed with a sense of its wrongs uniting, and as it were with one voice demanding of those to whom for a while it has entrusted its Sovereignty, a Restoration of ANNUALLY ELECTED PARLIAMENTS, UNBIASED AND UNBOUGHT ELECTIONS, AND AN EQUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE WHOLE BODY OF THE PEOPLE."²³¹

While it might be a stretch to characterize the members of the LCS as political opportunists, primarily due to the lack of political experience for many of them, some members of the Society were savvy enough to recognize and capitalize on not only the widespread British interest in the early French Revolution, but also on the widely popular second installment of the Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* in their address:

As men can never barter away the rights of their Posterity – as encroachments on Liberty or Property cease not to be Grievances from their being customary and of long standing – and as a Grievance is not the less felt for being denied by those who cause it – feelings Grievances enormous, - Seeing our Liberties encroached upon and endeavored to be entirely purloined from us – as also that our complaints are derided by Government and ourselves unlawfully menaced by those in Power, We, call upon you all Britons to remember your privileges as such and to assert your Rights as Men – to pay all proper regard to your native freedom and to consider that, being the property of no one man nor of any set of men it is highly disgraceful for you to suffer yourselves any longer to be thus

²³⁰ Ibid., p 1.

²³¹ Ibid., p. 4.

enslaved and disposed of as Cattle in a fair, as irrational Beasts in a market, to the highest Bidder.²³²

Further, and in the spirit of the French revolutionaries rallying cry – *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* – the LCS invoked the same egalitarian spirit: “...and we take Pride in acknowledging ourselves a part of that useful class of citizens which placemen (pensioned with the extorted produce of our daily labour) and Proud nobility wallowing in Riches, (acquired somehow) affect to treat with a contempt too degrading for human nature to bear, unless reconciled to it by the reflection that though their inferiors in rank and fortune we equal them in Talents and excel them in Honesty.”²³³

The LCS was one of many political associations – the Society for Constitutional Information and the Friends of Liberty among them – that used the rhetorical images of the Glorious, American, and French Revolutions to communicate directly to the widening public sphere of politically minded citizens. The late eighteenth century was a decade full of public appeals and pronouncements by nearly all of the political associations - radical, conservative, Whigs, Tories, etc., - in which each group battled to win the war of public opinion. The LCS would often appeal directly and publicly to brethren political associations as a way to coalesce and consolidate political positions and goals. In November 1792 the LCS printed and distributed 500 copies of their *Address of the London Corresponding Society to the other Societies of Great Britain, United for Obtaining a Reform in Parliament*, as a response to the newly formed and conservative Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property Against Republicans and Levellers.

²³² Ibid., p 4-5.

²³³ Ibid.

The address was probably written by John Reeves (1752 – 1829), a barrister and the nephew of long time reformer and LCS supporter John Horne Tooke (1736 – 1812), and its purpose was to rally other reform minded political associations behind the call for parliamentary reform, but in a socially responsible way: “We admit and declare, that we are Friends to CIVIL LIBERTY, and therefore to NATURAL EQUALITY, both of which we consider as the RIGHTS of MANKIND.---Could we believe them to be *in direct opposition to the Laws of this Land*, we should blush to find ourselves among the Number of Inhabitants; but we are persuaded that the Abuses of the Constitution will never pass current for its true Principles, since we are told in its first Charter that all are EQUAL in the *Sight of the Law*, which “*shall neither be sold nor refused, nor delayed, to any Free Man whatsoever.*” Should it ever happen that “Right and Justice” are opposed by Expencc, by Refusal, or by Delay, THEN IS THIS PRINCIPLE OF EQUALITY VIOLATED, AND WE ARE NO LONGER FREEMEN.”²³⁴

In addition to appealing directly to other political associations through the publication and delivery of their pamphlets, the LCS was also appealing to the wider audience of public opinion through its use of recognizable and traditional British political rhetoric. In the previous passage, the term “Right and Justice” might have been recognized by some of the more politically educated citizens as an allusion to the famous wording in paragraph 29 of the Magna Carta.

Much as the American revolutionaries did during their struggle for independence from the British crown, the LCS made direct and concerted efforts to contact and collaborate with French revolutionaries in the early stages of their efforts to establish a new political order of republicanism. British political associations of the last decade of the eighteenth

²³⁴ Ibid., p 18-19.

century sought to build revolutionary and political credibility by attempting to align themselves with the popular revolutionaries from the American Revolution, and with the new and in 1792 still well regarded revolutionaries in France. Doing so was important to the LCS and other nascent political associations in several respects. First, in the emerging public sphere of politically active and increasingly engaged citizens, it was important to be viewed as having credible friends who might be used to provide support and guidance. Second, an increasingly important part of engaging this expanding public sphere was by expanding one's own membership. An expanding membership meant, among other things, increased credibility and relevance, the perception of momentum, and last but certainly not least the ability to build the association's financial base, allowing for further political activity. Finally, in the case of the LCS, making connections with the French revolutionaries allowed them to exchange information regarding organizational techniques and to show good revolutionary form by supporting the efforts of their French brethren.

In September of 1792 the LCS did just that by authoring and publishing an open address to the French revolutionaries. LCS founders Thomas Hardy and Maurice Margarot understood the political and legal dangers in doing so. To publicly support the French revolutionaries was a calculated political risk; such a move would appeal to the general good will much of the British public held for the events in France during the early stages of their revolution. However, doing so too vehemently risked inviting the further scrutiny of the conservative British government – a government that was already alarmed by the rise of what they viewed as radical political groups. Realistically the LCS was in no position to offer any sort of financial or military support in any event, but even the

suggestion of any such support would bring repercussions from the government of William Pitt. So it was with some political calculation that Margarot and Hardy decided upon a course of action that manifested itself in the form of words – an open address to the French National Convention.²³⁵

Margarot took the further step of writing a letter to John Horne Tooke asking for his support in suggesting that political reform societies in Britain be contacted to ratify the issuance of “an Animated (but safe) Declaration, assuring the French that we entertain the most friendly dispositions &c. &c. towards them and that we will, to the utmost of our power, discountance {sic} all Hostile attempts on the part of Ministry.”²³⁶ For LCS founder Hardy, it was a matter of appealing to the weight and breadth of public opinion as he indicated in his own letter to Horne Tooke: “Ten or Twenty thousand signatures would have more weight than as many thousand pounds for ten men might subscribe that sum.”²³⁷

Both Margarot and Hardy were interested in the broadest possible audience for the address, and the support of as many as the other reform societies and political associations as possible. To that end Margarot and Hardy wrote to many of their fellow reformers in London, including the Society for Constitutional Information, the Constitutional Whigs, the Borough Friends of the People, the Independent Friends of the People, along with many of the societies in Derby, Manchester, Edinburgh, Norwich, Sheffield, and Stockport.²³⁸ By most accounts Margarot was the author of the address, but it is likely that Hardy, and possibly even Horne Tooke contributed. Once drafted,

²³⁵ Ibid., p 27.

²³⁶ Thale, *Selections*, p 21.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Davis, *Selections*, p 27.

Margarot, Hardy, and fellow LCS members John Martin and George Walne met with the French ambassador in London, Bernard-Francois Chauvelin and received final approval to deliver the address to the French National Convention where it was read in November of 1792.²³⁹ After it was read the Convention ordered it published in local newspapers in both English and French. Because of the Address's importance to understanding the political position of the LCS, and the fact that it would be used against the LCS by the British government in 1794, it is included in its entirety:

ADDRESS to the FRENCH NATIONAL CONVENTION, from the following Societies of Britons, united in one common cause; namely, the obtaining a fair, equal, and impartial Representation in Parliament.

Manchester Constitutional Society	THO. WALKER, Pres. SAM JACKSON, Sec.
Manchester Reformation Society	JOHN STACEY, Sec.
Norwich Revolution Society	THO. GOFF, Pres. JOHN COZENS, Sec.
London Constitutional Whigs	GEO. PULLER, Chair
Independent and Friends of the People	JAMES BLY, Sec.

Authorized by our United Brethren above named,

We the London Corresponding Society, for them as well as ourselves, thus address you:

FRENCHMEN,

While foreign robbers are ravaging your Territories under the specious pretext of justice, cruelty and devastation lead on their van, while perfidy with treachery bring up their rear, yet mercy and friendship are imprudently held forth to the world as the sole motives of their incursions; the oppressed part of mankind, forgetting for awhile their own sufferings, feel only for yours, and with an anxious eye watch the ultimate event, fervently supplicating the Supreme Ruler of the Universe to be favourable to your cause, so intimately blended with their own.

Frowned upon by an oppressive system of control, whose gradual but continued encroachments have deprived the Nation of nearly all its boasted liberty, and brought us almost to that abject state of slavery from

²³⁹ Ibid.

which you have so gloriously emerged, a few thousand of British Citizens indignant, manfully step forth to rescue their country from the opprobrium brought upon it by the Osupine conduct of those in power; they conceive it to be the duty of Britons to countenance and to assist to the utmost of their power; the champions of human happiness, and to swear to a Nation proceeding on the plan which you have adopted, an inviolable Friendship. – Sacred from this day to be that Friendship between us! and may vengeance to the uttermost overtake the man who shall hereafter attempt to cause a rupture!

Though we appear comparatively so few at present, be assured Frenchmen, that our number encreases daily – it is true that the stern uplifted arm of authority at present keeps back the timid, that busily circulated impostures hourly mislead the credulous, and the Court-intimacy with avowed French Traitors has some effect on the unwary and on the ambitious. But with certainty we can inform you, Friends and Freemen, that information makes a rapid progress among us: Curiosity has taken possession of the public mind; the conjoint reign of ignorance and despotism passes away. Men now ask each other, what is Freedom? what are our Rights? – Frenchmen, you are already free, and Britons are preparing to become so.

Casting far from us the criminal prejudices artfully inculcated by evil-minded men and wily Courtiers, we, instead of natural enemies, at length discover in Frenchmen our Fellow Citizens of the World, and our Brethren by the sane Heavenly Father, who created for us for the purpose of loving, and mutually assisting each other; but not to hate, and to be ever ready to cut each other's throats at the command of weak or ambitious Kings, and corrupt Ministers.

Seeking our real enemies, we find them in our bosoms. We feel ourselves inwardly torn by, and ever the victims of a restless, all-consuming Aristocracy, hitherto the bane of every nation under the Sun; – Wisely you have acted in expelling it from France.

Warm are our wishes for success, eager as we are to behold Freedom triumphant, and Man every where restored to the enjoyment of his just rights, a sense of our duty as orderly Citizens forbids our flying in arms to your assistance; Our Government has pledged the National Faith to remain neutral. In a struggle of Liberty against Despotism, Britons remain neutral. O shame! But, we have entrusted our King with discretionary powers, we therefore must obey. Our hands are bound, but our hearts are free, and they are with you.

Let German Despots act as they please, we shall rejoice at their fall; compassionating, however, their enslaved subjects, we hope this tyranny of their Masters will prove the means of reinstating, in full possession of their Rights and Liberties, millions of our Fellow Creatures. With unconcern, therefore, we might view the Elector of Hanover join his troops to Traitors and Robbers: But the King of Great Britain will do well

to remember that this Country is not Hanover – should he forget this distinction, we will not.

While you enjoy the envied glory of being the unaided Defenders of Freedom, we fondly anticipate in idea the numerous blessings, which mankind will enjoy, if you succeed, as we ardently wish. The Triple Alliance, not of Crowns, but of the people of America, France, and Britain, will give Freedom to Europe, and Peace to the World! Dear Friends, you combat for the advantage of the Human Race! how well purchased will be, though at the experience of much blood, the glorious, the unprecedented privilege of saying. “Mankind is free! Tyrants and Tyranny are no more! Peace reigns on the Earth! And this is the work of Frenchmen.”

The desire of having the concurrence of different Country Societies to this Address, has occasioned a month’s delay in presenting it. Success unparalleled has now attended your arms. We congratulate you thereon – that success has removed our anxiety, but it has no otherways influenced our sentiments in your behalf. Remember, Frenchmen, that although this testimony of friendship only now reaches your Assembly, it bears date the 27th of September, 1792.

(Signed by order)

MAURICE MARGAROT, President

THOMAS HARDY, Secretary

The address to the French National Convention was not widely distributed in Britain by the participating reform societies partly due to the expense required to so, and to avoid unnecessarily inflaming the British government and its conservative supporters. However, the English version of the *Joint Address* was reprinted and widely distributed by many of the opponents of the reform societies as a means of demonstrating to the court of public opinion that the LCS was in league with the radical French, and was therefore dangerous. The widest distribution of the *Joint Address* appeared in *A collection of addresses transmitted by certain English clubs and societies to the National Convention of France* published by the Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers.²⁴⁰ That version of the *Joint Address* would be used as evidence of the seditious intentions of the LCS in a series of treason trial

²⁴⁰ Davis, *Selections*, p 31.

against the members of many of the reform societies beginning in 1794. Indeed, Hardy testified to its damage during his own trial when he stated that he believed the *Collection of Addresses* “calumniated the society he belonged to, and its proceedings.”²⁴¹

Conclusion

The LCS was formed on January 25th, 1792, in a tavern by the shoemaker Thomas Hardy and several other working class men who decided to attend the meeting on a Monday evening. At the meeting Hardy proposed the basic political goals and objectives of the Society, along with its organizational structure. The LCS was used by E.P. Thompson to start his 1963 book, *The making of the English working class*, as an example of the kind of working class political organization that exemplifies a rising working class political consciousness in this period. Thompson viewed Hardy and the LCS as a shining example of the potential political power of emerging classes of peoples in a shifting economic and social landscape. Thompson viewed the aspirations of the LCS and other such reformist associations as the continuation of a constitutional debate that had been smoldering, and occasionally flaring up, since the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution of the seventeenth century. While there may have been some new and more politically aware players, the arguments and debates over who should be allowed to govern and with what rights to do so were still relevant. Thompson’s views of the theoretical nature of class consciousness in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been oft criticized, but in the case of the LCS Thompson appropriately recognized the political potential – whether fully realized or not - of the LCS in the last decade of the eighteenth century in Britain.

²⁴¹ Hardy, *Memoir*.

After founding the LCS, Hardy and his colleagues created the political and organizational precepts by which the LCS would operate. The LCS introduced themselves to Britain with several addresses to the nation, attempting to fix their political aspirations in the continuum of British politics. Above all else, the LCS sought to accomplish its goals through constitutional and lawful means, and as a result focused its early efforts and meetings on educating working class men of their political rights. Hardy believed that before men with little or no experience in the political realm sought to engage in it, they had to have a solid understanding of the rights they had, or should have, in that political system. The LCS grew impressively throughout 1792 – from just nine members to hundreds of members spread over several chapters – and as Hardy and the other LCS leaders looked ahead to 1793 and beyond, their prospects seemed to be growing.

CHAPTER FOUR – Membership & Decorum

*Unblest by virtue, Government a league
Becomes, a circling junto of the great,
To rob by law; Religion mild, a yoke
To tame the stooping soul, a trick of state
To mask their rapine and share the prey
What are without it Senates, but a Face
Of consultation deep & reason free,
While the determined voice & heart are sold?
What boasted freedom, but a sounding name?
And what election but a market vile,
Of slaves self-bartered?*

- Thomson's Liberty, 1792

LCS Membership Grows

From 1792 through the spring of 1793 the LCS and many other political reform organizations grew steadily, and Hardy, Margarot, Place, and others in the LCS leadership went about the task of organizing chapters and divisions, and making sure that the political education of new members was moving apace. By October of 1792 the LCS had ten divisions, and a decision was made to form a General Committee in order to manage and coordinate all LCS business. A realistic and quantifiable number that reflects the true nature of LCS membership has been historically difficult to ascertain. While many thousands of men might have been sympathetic and even privately supportive of the political goals of the LCS, it seems that in many cases that did not translate into a formal LCS membership. There may have been many reasons for this, not the least of which was a fear of government or employer reprisals for being a member of such a group. In the meeting minutes from an October of 1792 meeting, the membership was reflected as follows, by division:

Division & Members

- No. 1 –
- No. 2 – Thomas Hardy - 61
- No. 3 – Robert Lyttlejohn – 30
- No. 4 – George Walne – 21
- No. 5 – Robert Thomson – 42
- No. 6 – John Jackson – 34
- No. 7 – Maurice Margarot – 44
- No. 8 – John Martin – 41
- No. 9 – William Wilson (no entry)
- No. 10 – John Tindall – 54

Thomas Hardy, Delegate of Division No. 2 prayed for leave to divide – granted
The Committee thus formed proceeded to choose their Officers for the ensuing quarter, when no complaint arising against any of the former they were continued in their office:

Maurice Margarot, Chairman
Thomas Hardy, Treasurer & Secretary
Robert Lyttlejohn, Assistant Secretary²⁴²

If these numbers are close to being accurate then the LCS would have had a membership of at least 300 men across ten divisions in the fall of 1792. While some contemporaries claimed that LCS membership was in the tens of thousands, the best evidence suggests that from 1792 to 1797 paid membership roughly averaged about 1000 members, with a peak in the late part of 1795 at nearly 3000.²⁴³ In any event, this sort of membership represented a society of modest substance and sustainability, and one that was building momentum from 1792 to 1793. It was important to its leadership that in the public sphere the LCS be perceived as a growing and increasingly active society. This in turn helped with recruiting and funding, but it also contributed directly to the core LCS mission of fostering political education and participation amongst the working class. For

²⁴² LCS Minutes from Business Meeting, Collection of Francis Place, London Corresponding Society, Vol. 1, BL, MS # 27811, *Original Letter Book of the (London) Corresponding Society*, October 1792.

²⁴³ Davis, *Selections*, p. xxxi.

the LCS leadership it was important to widen the net of members and supporters, but as the French Revolution radicalized they found that they had to strike a balance between members who lobbied for a politically moderate approach to achieving their goals, and those who thought that more politically radical or revolutionary approaches were required.

Like many other reformist groups of the day, the LCS struggled with maintaining consistent numbers of members. These fluctuations were likely a result of the differences of opinion that occurred between new members and the established LCS leadership over direction, tactics, and even conduct and meeting decorum. With incomplete records at best, historian Mary Thale, who provided one of the first studies of the complete correspondence of the LCS in 1983, estimated the following paid membership history of the LCS:

1792: 650
 1793: 650
 1794
 Jan – June: 800
 July – Dec: 250
 1795
 Jan – June: 300
 July – Dec: 3000
 1796
 Jan – June: 1500-2000
 July – Dec: 1000
 1797: 600
 1798: 400²⁴⁴

On the whole these remain modest numbers compared to some well-established private and aristocratic political and business clubs over the period, but it is important to note that the LCS and many of their brethren societies were carving new political ground with respect to working-class political organizations and participation. While the LCS

²⁴⁴ Thale, *Selections*, p. xxiv.

and other groups could follow the organizational practices of more conservative and established groups with which they would share little if any political and economic views, they could not follow their membership recruitment practices. In fact, recruitment was an entirely different process for the LCS and other political reformist groups in so much as they were decidedly not exclusive or private clubs, and encouraged divisions to cast near and far for potential members. Unlike the aristocratic men's clubs of the day, the LCS presented a membership model that promoted inclusiveness over exclusiveness, and a very low barrier to entry, and if nothing else that was something different from the long established practices of clubs and societies in Britain. While there is no way to quantify such things, one wonders if the fact that the membership model was so different might have caused working class men to question the benefits of being a member of the LCS – benefits in the context of the traditional private club or society to which many working class men may have aspired.

It also might have been the case that since membership in the LCS was easy to attain, potential members were less motivated to join as quickly as possible, instead taking a wait-and-see approach toward the durability and efficacy of the LCS. Perhaps more important than anything else, however, was the perceived risk involved in joining the kind of organization that wanted to effect political reform in a time when political reformist efforts were widely under suspicion. These were, after all, working class men who had never participated in, or even paid much attention to the political process. Now, in the early part of the 1790s, there seemed to be an opportunity to do so, and to have one's voice heard as a part of a collective with common political and economic interests. Such activities were not without risk however, particularly when a combination

of several bad crop years, a revolution across the English Channel, and a government fearful of the spread of revolutionary fervor were all in play. The risks to LCS members and those of other political reform societies were real, as it was well known that the government had made attempts, some quite successful, to imbed spies into the LCS and other such groups.

LCS Organization and Meetings

In fact, one of the best records of what occurred in LCS meetings was compiled by government spies who infiltrated many of the LCS divisions throughout 1793 and 1794, and they reported in detail on the various activities that occurred at many meetings. One reported activity was the trading and selling of political broadsheets and pamphlets that were considered seditious by the government. These included such publications as *The Guillotine* and *The Rights of Man*. Spies also reported that many of the division meetings included the singing of political reform songs that contained, according to the spies, seditious content.²⁴⁵ Several former members who ended up working for the government reported that deistical books were sold at division meetings as well.²⁴⁶

The general committee meetings served much the same functions, but tended to last longer due to the inclusion of so many delegates from so many different divisions. The general committee acted as the umbrella group for all divisions, aggregating and disseminating the work of the divisions into a politically cohesive LCS whole. In the early part of the Society's existence this organizational approach provided great dividends, allowing the LCS to be perceived as presenting a unified front with a single

²⁴⁵ LCS Minutes from Business Meeting(s), Collection of Francis Place, London Corresponding Society, Vol. 1, BL, MS # 27811, *Original Letter Book of the (London) Corresponding Society*, October 1792 – December, 1793.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

voice and thereby increasing its potential for political influence and further recruitment. The general committee met every Thursday at public houses, and the meetings often lasted until 3:00 or 3:30 a.m., even though they were supposed to end no later than midnight as specified in the LCS constitution.²⁴⁷ The agenda of the general committee was organized similarly to that of the division meetings as the LCS leaders stressed consistency and efficiency in all of their activities.

At the beginning of each general committee meeting the division delegates were asked to report on the number of current and new members in their respective divisions, and those totals were recorded into the minutes of the meeting. If there were division delegates or alternates that were recorded as absent from the meetings, general committee deputies were assigned to visit that particular division in the coming week.²⁴⁸ It was in the general committee meetings that larger divisions applied to subdivide and create a new division, and when approved (which they nearly always were) experienced Society members were assigned to help establish the new divisions procedurally. Following that business item, any letters and/or articles to or about the Society were read aloud for membership consumption and discussion.

If the letter or article required a response, a member was designated to draft it and present it at an upcoming meeting. At this point in their growth, the LCS was beginning to establish divisions outside of London in other industrializing cities, although London was still by far their biggest membership base. The next order of business was to tally the votes from each division regarding questions or issues that had been put before the entire membership. Each delegate reported the vote totals from their division and any

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

relevant discussions or concerns. That was followed by the reading and recording of any motions that had been put forth by a division, and the general committee members discussed and decided whether such motions should be put to the entire membership. Finally, the general committee treasurer and secretary reported on new members and total membership, and on the fiscal standing of the Society.²⁴⁹

Part of the general committee meeting process was adjusted in 1794 as a way to prevent the identities of the members who wrote politically controversial articles for the Society from being disclosed by government spies.²⁵⁰ An executive committee was formed and as envisioned would conduct its business in secrecy, although many LCS members challenged the need for secrecy as being counter to the Society's principles and goals. The requirement to protect identities within the LCS won the day, however, and the executive committee was constituted and established with six members.

The primary function of the executive committee was to draft the correspondence of the Society, including responses to letters or other inquiries, and any notices, addresses, or petitions issued by the LCS.²⁵¹ Composed of only the most experienced and visionary LCS members, there was some concern that it could dominate the direction and voice of the Society, in much the same way that the Committee for Public Safety was doing in revolutionary France. To prevent this the general committee delegates agreed that the executive committee members, and its successor the corresponding committee, would not be allowed to speak at general committee meetings.²⁵² This was a delicate balance to be sure, as the loss of those experienced and visionary voices might negatively impact the

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid.

political direction of the Society. In the end, however, this seemed a calculated risk worth taking in the name of inclusiveness, and the executive committee was established and began its work. According to the records of the LCS, and to Mary Thale who has analyzed these records, the executive committee members gave quite generously of their time. All said, the executive committee usually met three times a week, and as many of the executive committee members were also delegates for their respective divisions, they also attended the Thursday night general committee meetings, not to mention their own division meetings.²⁵³ That means that most of the executive committee members were spending five days a week on Society business, an impressive commitment of what little spare time they might have had given that all of the leaders, delegates, and members of the LCS were participating only after having worked at their various occupations and labors during most days.

The LCS also conducted occasional Sunday evening meetings that were reserved expressly for either reading and discussing, or debating.²⁵⁴ These meetings were informal, as no roll was taken and no minutes were recorded, but they were of great importance as they went to the core of the Society's mission to educate its membership on its political rights. Francis Place considered these meetings as valuable or more so to the membership than any official Society meetings: "The discussions in divisions, in the Sunday evening readings, and in the small debating meetings, opened to them views which they had never before taken. They were compelled by these discussions to find reasons for their opinions and to tolerate others."²⁵⁵

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ British Library (BL): Place Collection, *Autobiography*, vols. 36-8, p. 198.

The Sunday evening meetings were generally held in the home of a member who could accommodate the number of attendees, usually 10-30 members. Place, who attended many of the meetings, recalled that they followed a similar pattern. A chairman was chosen at each meeting to read aloud the chapter of a particular book, pamphlet, or treatise. The text was then circulated amongst the attendees during the ensuing week so that they could continue to familiarize themselves with the arguments and positions of the author. On the next Sunday the chairman - a different one was chosen for each meeting - read the text aloud once again, pausing three times during the reading for comments. No member was allowed to speak more than once during the reading and the pauses, and anybody who had not spoken up during the first two pauses in the reading was expected to wait until the end of the reading to voice their comments. At the end of the reading there was a general discussion session but no member could speak a second time until all those who had not spoken had an opportunity to do so. According to Place “These were very important meetings and the best results to the parties followed.”²⁵⁶

LCS Meeting Decorum

One of the more striking aspects of the LCS was their insistence on following the same rules of decorum for every meeting, and on requiring that all members, new and veteran alike, hold each other accountable for doing so. This demonstrates the ways in which the Society sought to educate its members not only on their political rights, but also on how to behave and speak appropriately (in the context of eighteenth century Britain) so that they might be taken seriously by the established socio-political elites. Many of the founders of the LCS, and Hardy in particular, believed that they should endeavor to integrate a new political class of citizens into the public domain. They

²⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 131.

believed that while the French example, and the rather radical writings of Paine and others, provided fertile ground upon which to recruit and rally, the real work of integrating new voices into the political culture of Britain would require working from *within* the system to effect the desired change.

It was, in fact, a well-reasoned and even cagey approach to the problem of being depicted as French-style radicals, far afield from the norms of political discourse, and thus easily marginalized and condemned as a material threat to the state. Hardy understood that to be successful the Society needed not only to agitate for changes that would be resisted by the status quo, but do so in such a way that would garner broad public and political support. And a major part of that approach was to make sure that all Society meetings were conducted in a socially acceptable manner. Doing anything less than that would open the doors to the political enemies of the Society who might easily undermine them in the public sphere. The general committee and division heads of the Society knew that the government had embedded spies in its membership, and in some cases even knew who the individuals were, so it was increasingly important that proper meeting protocol be adhered to at all times. While well reasoned, this approach was difficult in practice, in as much as the Society cast such a wide net of membership of gentlemen and laborers alike. Nevertheless, rules of decorum were established and were followed to mostly good effect over the short life of the Society.

And while some of the rules might seem simplistic, in the context of eighteenth century life, labor, and socially acceptable behavior, they were quite effective both during and after the lifespan of the Society. First and foremost, nobody “in liquor” was admitted to any meeting, and any pattern of drunkenness at Society events was grounds for

immediate dismissal from the Society.²⁵⁷ Every member was required to remove his hat when he entered the meeting location. When a member spoke he was required to stand and to address his comments to the chair of the meeting. Just as with the Sunday discussion meetings, no member was permitted to speak a second time at a general membership meeting until every other member who wanted to comment on a particular topic had an opportunity to do so, and no member could speak more than twice to any particular topic. The chairman was essentially the sergeant at arms for decorum, and it was his job to make sure that members were not idly milling about the meeting room while other members spoke, that no member was interrupted by another, and that no member used “intemperate aspersions or seditious language.”²⁵⁸

This decorum was established and implemented over the course of several meetings in the early stages of the Society, and several of Hardy’s letters to other reform society leaders indicated that the necessity for establishing such things was both experiential and aspirational. In February 1794 the Society adopted a constitution that further addressed the need for appropriate behavior as a means to be viewed as a legitimate political constituency. The LCS constitution stated that “...it is the duty of every member to study concord, and for that purpose to moderate his own passions, particularly his personal attachments and aversions.”²⁵⁹ When voting, “The practice of shewing both hands, or of calling all! all! or other such exclamations are [sic] tumultuous, indecent, and utterly unwarrantable.”²⁶⁰ The constitution was firm in that even approbation of a member by the chair should be done silently by simply holding up a hand. Members were also

²⁵⁷ Thale, *Selections*, p. xxvi.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

educated on the appropriate method for disapproving of something: "...to attribute the conduct or opinion of any member to factious combination, or other improper motive, is disorderly, as are also all invectives and declamatory remarks. A noisy disposition is seldom a sign of courage, and extreme zeal, is often a sign of treachery."

The Society had an aversion to verbosity as well, mandating by constitution that no one member should speak more than ten minutes: "[o]ver the seat of the President in each meeting of the Society, shall be suspended a label with these words, BEWARE OF ORATORS."²⁶¹ Reflecting upon it some years later, Francis Place recognized the necessity of these decorum efforts as part of a larger effort to improve the lives of working class men through political education and the habits of self-improvement: "The moral effects of the Society were considerable. It induced men to read books, instead of wasting their time in public houses, it taught them to respect themselves...It gave new stimulus to an immense number of men who had been but in too many instances incapable of any but the grossest pursuits."²⁶²

Government Spies and the LCS

The discipline and order with which the Society functioned had much to do with its ability to stay constituted for over six years under the withering pressure and persecution of the British government. This is likely true and a credit to the Society's leaders over that period of time. From the first Hardy understood the need for such an approach. The first constitution that included the rules of decorum for any division was written by Hardy when the Society had only about twenty members.²⁶³ Hardy created a rough draft that included a preamble on the unequal representation in Parliament, and included eight rules

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Place, *Autobiography*, pp. 198-9.

²⁶³ Thale, *Selections*, p. xxvi.

and resolutions of decorum that were taken from those established by socially elite members of the SCI.²⁶⁴ Hardy's rules established that "[A]s soon as twenty members are associated a General Meeting shall be called when all the several laws or regulations already agreed to shall be read over and confirmed altered or annulled and at the meeting there shall be elected a president, Treasurer, and Secretary."²⁶⁵

While similar in some respects, the LCS rules that Hardy drafted are very different from other SCI rules in important ways, particularly as respects membership. SCI members were by and large men that were already represented politically and economically based upon their socio-economic stations. LCS members, were, with few exceptions, expressly not represented politically or economically in the established political power structures – that was the reason the LCS existed after all. That is why it was so important for Hardy that membership was unlimited and affordable, that the minimum age was only twenty, and that the residency requirement was only a year. These differing characteristics established the LCS as something altogether different – a new political class made up of, and representing, men drawn from “the lower orders.”²⁶⁶ Of course, that was also why it was relatively easy for fringe believers, political radicals and government spies to become members of the LCS, and there is little doubt that the ease of gaining membership had both a positive and a negative impact on the LCS.

By July of 1793 Hardy and other LCS leaders were well aware that several LCS divisions had been infiltrated by government spies – some posing as working class men but many who were actually working class men who either supported the government and/or were receptive to the kind of compensation the government was offering for doing

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

such work. From their own recordkeeping, we know that such men as George Lynam, who began reporting LCS activities to the government as early as October 1792, along with John Taylor in January 1794, John Groves in February 1794, William Metcalfe in April 1794, and Edward Gosling in May 1794 all were government spies who kept tabs on the LCS.²⁶⁷ The LCS attempted to prevent such spying from taking place by proposing ways to deal with it in one of the many versions of their constitution. The proposed amendment to the constitution provided for a seventeen step process for dealing with any member accused by another member of being some sort of infiltrator or spy, or for a member who joined the LCS with some sort of ulterior motives that did not align with the core goals of the LCS. The amendment did not win approval and in fact caused a great deal of consternation and heated debate to and amongst the membership.²⁶⁸ Ironically it was the government spy John Groves who provided the reasons why this amendment produced such a ruckus in one of his reports to his government handlers:

The Report of that Commee & the Form of Government recommended gave rise to great Jealousies & Animosities, as founded on principles incompatible with that Liberty which the Society was seeking for in the National System of Governmt. and as investing Powers & creating Offices & Officers among themselves which would infallibly render the Division a Cypher, and the whole management and Controul be placed in the hands of a few, & thereby their Government be Monarchical or something worse.²⁶⁹

As historian Michael Davis has suggested, government spies and other detractors of the LCS often tried to characterize the membership as ill tempered and under educated revolutionaries whose only goal was to topple the government.²⁷⁰ In fact the truth was

²⁶⁷ British Library: Place Collection, *Autobiography*, vols. 36-8.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁹ Public Record Office (PRO), Treasurer Solicitor's Papers (TS), 11/955/3500.

²⁷⁰ Davis, *LCS Papers*, p. xxxii.

much more complicated; while there were examples of LCS members who fit that stereotypical description, the vast majority of members and supporters were politically conscious, relatively articulate, and moderate in their goals and beliefs. They were also not ignorant to the efforts and experiences of the political reform groups that came before them, and they drew from those experiences as a way to improve the chances that they might ultimately be successful in their efforts. That said, what drew working class men to the LCS had much to do with what the LCS said it stood for, and to a lesser but still important degree, how it organized itself and its chapters, as previously mentioned.

A Colonial Model for the LCS

The leaders of the LCS continually emphasized to its members that their mission was to educate themselves about the state of parliamentary representation in the nation for the purpose of “...obtaining a peaceful but adequate Remedy to this intolerable Grievance.”²⁷¹ One of the models for this that the LCS and other British radical groups of the 1790s looked back to was the colonial example of the Boston Committee of Correspondence (BCC) of the early 1770s. The BCC was founded in 1772 in Boston as a way to educate and inform citizenry of their political rights, so that from city to city, town to town, and farm to farm, people were well acquainted with their rights under the British Constitution.²⁷² The BCC sought to accomplish this, as the LCS and other groups would do two decades later, by combining the distribution of printed materials with a series of public orations.²⁷³ In the colonial BCC model, public orations that emphasized the Lockean transition from a state of nature to the voluntary compact of a civil society

²⁷¹ Ibid., 12.

²⁷² Richard D. Brown, *Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts – The Boston Committee of Correspondence and the Towns, 1772-1774* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1970), 43.

²⁷³ Ibid.

guaranteeing basic individual and civic rights, were recorded and subsequently published and distributed to a wide audience.²⁷⁴

Moreover, through the texts they read the LCS leaders were familiar with the anxiety that colonials felt in pushing for reform in the early 1770s without provoking a military response from the British government. The LCS used the BCC model by attempting to establish committees in contiguous towns and cities, in an effort to amplify and spread the principles and publications of these committees to the widest possible audience. As in the colonial experience, the LCS hoped to democratize and level the entire communications process by cutting across political, economic, and social boundaries. In practice the model worked better for the BCC than it did for the LCS.

While there is some evidence that suggests transatlantic similarities between the colonial committees of correspondence of the 1770s and British committees of the 1790s, there were also differences. In the colonial BCC model, the persons selected for committee membership were often from the economic and political elite, as was the case with the British SCI; they certainly were propertied, and often owned their own businesses.²⁷⁵ For the BCC and other such American committees, membership was often a matter of prestige and stature. Additionally, the colonial committees were often more interested in political persuasion as opposed to political education.

The Early LCS – Pragmatism and Perceptions

The notion of some common political goals between the colonials and this new era of British reform groups had some shared lineage, dating back to at least the Glorious Revolution of the seventeenth century, and for many all the way back to the Magna

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 44.

²⁷⁵ Brown, 59.

Carta. In 1783, Lord William Petty Shelburne, a member of Parliament and a supporter of parliamentary reform, expressed one of the goals that the LCS would take up: “That it is necessary our Constitution be brought back and nearly at least to its first Principles, will be evident, I presume, to every man who will [stop] to reflect, that if such a Reform as we stand in need of had taken place ten years since, we had not been in that calamitous situation in which we find ourselves at this day.”²⁷⁶ Shelburne was a long time Whig politician, and as it happens, an acquaintance of both colonial reformists of the 1770s and British reformists of the 1780s and 1790s. He lived through both eras, and as a result drew experiential lessons from the American experience that he passed along to British reformists, including the concept of agitating for change within a set of political boundaries: “Gentlemen! We mean to petition Parliament for a parliamentary tax reform, but we presume not to dictate to Parliament that reform; nor the mode of reform.”²⁷⁷ While this might appear too deferential as an agenda for political change, it in fact was a realistic recognition of what was practical and politically palatable in 1790s Britain in the wake of the humbling military defeat in America.

Despite the politically pragmatic strategies of the LCS and other British radical groups, the radicalization of the French Revolution, combined with the growing conservative reaction to it from the British Government, greatly increased the scrutiny on such groups. The British government, concerned about sedition and radical collusion with the new French government of Robespierre, began a concerted effort to infiltrate the LCS and other groups in order to gather intelligence.²⁷⁸ Part of that effort was to

²⁷⁶ Lord William Petty Shelburne, *A Meeting on Parliamentary Reform*, May, 1783, *Shelburne Papers*, Vol. 165, William Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Mi.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Davis, *LCS Papers*, I:xxxii.

discredit the political principles and the motives of the LCS by marginalizing its working class membership. British conservatives and loyalists inside and outside of the government already had a disdainful view of the LCS and its brethren groups, much as their predecessors had for the American colonials of the 1770s.

In 1794, the government spy John Groves characterized the disdainful view of the LCS and its membership in his report: “There are some of decent tradesmen-like appearance, who posses strong, but unimproved faculties...There are others of a apparent lower Order – no doubt Journeymen, who thought they seem to possess no abilities & say nothing, yet they appear resolute and determined...The last description among them, & which is the most numerous, consists of the very lowest order of society – few are even decent in appearance, some of them filthy & ragged, and others such wretched looking blackguards that it requires some mastery over that innate pride, which every well-educated man must naturally possess, even to sit down in their company...These appear very violent & seem ready to adopt every thing tending Confusion & Anarchy.”²⁷⁹ Reports like this certainly served the government’s purpose, but cloud the historical reality of LCS membership.

In point of fact, the LCS was neither the dastardly and seditious group that conservatives and loyalists attempted to portray it as, nor was it a completely egalitarian group where democratic principles ruled. The LCS was, and operated as, something in between those two extremes. As historian Michael Davis has suggested of the LCS, the “most apt vignette is that of a politically conscious and articulate artisan group.”²⁸⁰ More precisely, the LCS was an organization, and environment, that allowed working men to

²⁷⁹ Davis, *LCS Papers*, report from John Groves, LCS General Committee, June 12 1794, I:xxxii.

²⁸⁰ Davis, *LCS Papers*, I:xxxiii.

ascend to positions of leadership in a realm where they would otherwise never have had an opportunity, and in that context it allowed for the maturation of a political ethos that belonged to the working class.²⁸¹ Besides Hardy, men such as John Ashley, John Baxter, Francis Place, and John Thelwall, all rose to leadership positions in the LCS, and in subsequent political organizations, despite being shoemakers, tailors, silversmiths, and shopkeepers, much as in the American revolutionary experience.²⁸² The LCS and other radical and corresponding groups became conduits for political participation amongst and within the working classes, and one might argue that the full extent of LCS participation and membership may never be known due to the lack of accurate record keeping by contemporary statisticians and census recorders of the lower classes.

Further, many LCS meetings were run as discussion groups, consistent with the underlying mission of the LCS to educate people as to their political rights. The educative process was both public and private, as the LCS held dozens of public rallies in the 1790s, and conducted much smaller and more intimate meetings in the homes of its members.²⁸³ Those Sunday nights that were reserved for reading and discussion groups in private homes led to many of the Society's published political positions.

Though financially strapped throughout its existence, the LCS managed to produce some 80 separate and distinct political pamphlets, periodicals, and broadsides between 1792 and 1798 that espoused its democratic principles.²⁸⁴ Two of their periodicals, *The Politician* (1794-5), and *The Moral and Political Magazine of the London Corresponding*

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid., xxxv.

²⁸⁴ Davis, *LCS Papers*, I:xxxv.

Society (1796-7) were distributed in large numbers and were read by contemporary democratic societies in Philadelphia, Moscow, and many other places.²⁸⁵

Quite often, the publications of the LCS were used to defend themselves and their principles in the public sphere, and to reinforce their operating mantra of advocating for reform without inciting or advocating for violent insurrection. In the politically charged cauldron of late eighteenth century British politics, it was often difficult for the public, and at times the government, to distinguish one radical group from the next. Among other things, the LCS and many of its members were accused of being involved in many subversive plots, such as planning an insurrection in London in late 1792; the conspiracy to assassinate King George III in 1794 (known as the Pop-Gun Plot); the alleged attack on the King in 1795 that precipitated the Two Acts; and the naval mutinies of 1797.²⁸⁶ Over and over, the LCS used its publications to distance itself from any such subversions, as in this broadside printed and distributed in 1794, entitled *Reformers No Rioters*: “...We are therefore not surprised, that the unfounded assertion has been made, that this Society has been the agitators of the tumults, which have lately so much disturbed the peace of this city...To take up *other arms*, and revolt against the government of the country each time that every separate grievance might have been most gallingly felt, has neither been the *practice*, nor one of the *principles* which guide this society.”²⁸⁷

The LCS and Radicalism

However in the early 1790s the debate over the political direction of the nation and the contest over the new phenomenon of public opinion *were* still very much in play. Hardy

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., xxxvi.

²⁸⁷ Davis, *LCS Papers*, I:289-93.

and the LCS organized themselves and their efforts around educating a widening public sphere that was increasingly interested in all things political. This was, after all, a generation of British citizens that was raised on two revolutions, the American and the French, and there was a palpable atmosphere if not expectation of and for political change. This seemed a new age of political participation that more and more was occurring, at least conversationally, in the public sphere. As Dr. Priestly suggested, events such as the American and French revolutions:

...teach the doctrine of *liberty, civil* and *religious* freedom, with infinitely greater clearness and force, that a thousand treatises upon the subject...These great events, in many respects unparalleled in all history, make a totally new, a most wonderful, and important era in the history of mankind. It is...a change from darkness to light, from superstition to sound knowledge, and from a most debasing servitude to a state of the most exalted freedom. It is a liberating of all the powers of man from that variety of fetters, by which they have hitherto been held, so that, in comparison with what has been, now only can we expect to see what men really are, and what they can do.²⁸⁸

As indicated previously, some of the same sentiments were expressed in the widely popular writings of Thomas Paine at the outset of the last decade of the eighteenth century. In the first part of his *Rights of Man*, published in March of 1791, Paine took on Burke's view of the French Revolution and the potential danger it held for Britain rather directly. For reformists and radicals, Paine more than effectively refuted Burke's arguments regarding the destructive nature of the French Revolution and French history, arguing that the French National Assembly was engaged in the types of constitutional innovations that had been required for most of Europe for so long.²⁸⁹ Hardy and many other LCS members were great admirers of Paine and his political writings and positions, and in fact emulated many of those positions as they created the charters for their own

²⁸⁸ Joseph Priestly, *Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity*, 1777, p. 141.

²⁸⁹ Goodwin, p. 173.

political clubs and societies. However, Paine was considered a dangerous radical by the British government and many parts of the British populous, so to the degree that the LCS was perceived as espousing the political principles of Paine they ran the risk of being branded radicals.

Some of Paine's positions were deemed as too radical even for the most radical of the reformist groups. The LCS initially adopted Paine's *Rights of Man* as one of their political guides, but realizing the dangers of being viewed as too radical stopped short of embracing Paine's position en masse, completely rejecting Paine's call for an altogether new constitution.²⁹⁰ These differences in perspective raise the question of what the term "radical" or the notion of being a radical meant to many of the British reformists, even those that were accused and in some cases even convicted primarily on the strength of the prosecution's ability to prove one a radical in the eyes of the law. It seems clear that to be a radical in France in this period was somehow different than being a radical in Britain. Radicals in France were breaking completely with their political and traditional pasts in every way imaginable, while radicals in Britain were far less assertive and ambitious in their demands and goals. While the French were convening an altogether new National Assembly the British radicals were petitioning the Parliament to address their grievances. And while the French radicals seemed bent on nothing short of the establishment of a true and virtuous republic, the British radicals fought most vigorously for the more modest goals of Parliamentary reform and universal male suffrage.

Nevertheless, reformist groups such as the SCI and the London Revolution Society were nearly instantly guilty by association as they embraced many (though not all) of Paine's political philosophies as their own. The membership of the London Revolution

²⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 175.

Society had been steadily declining throughout the late 1780s and used the publication of *Rights* to reinvigorate their members. On March 23, 1791 the Society made Paine an honorary and lifetime member, resolving that Paine should be admired for “his most masterly book” which they hoped would create the prospect of “usurping Borough sellers and profligate Borough buyers” ultimately being “deprived of what they impudently dare to call their property – the choice of the representatives of the people.”²⁹¹

Paine’s book provided a political jolt to the existing reformist societies, and helped to spur the creation of many new ones, including the LCS. The London Revolution Society made it their mission to disseminate excerpts from Paine’s book to its members and to the public at large via newspapers and their own publications.²⁹² Likewise the SCI promoted Paine’s book heavily to its membership, and to brethren reforming societies in Manchester, Norwich, and Sheffield. In fact Paine gave permission for the Manchester Constitutional Society to prepare and print an abridged version of *Rights* to its members, and allowed the Sheffield Constitutional Society, founded in part by the Sheffield Newspaper editor Joseph Gales, to print and sell cheaper editions of his book to its members.²⁹³

All of this was part of widening of the public sphere in the arena of political discourse that many of the British political associations and societies both contributed to, and benefited from. Hardy and the other founding members of the London Corresponding Society expressly claimed Paine as one of their own, and had obtained Paine’s agreement to write their public proclamation of their formation in 1792, until Paine’s schedule and the circumstances of his harassment by the British government prevented him from doing

²⁹¹ British Public Record Office (PRO), Treasury Solicitor’s Papers (TS), 11/631/3507, fo. 223.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 177.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

so. Even while embracing Paine however, many of the reform societies attempted to carefully manage their public personas, and were ever so cautious about appearing too radical in their principles and goals lest they run the risk of being politically marginalized or legally persecuted. The SCI embraced Paine but publicly stopped short of publicly embracing Paine's republican principles for fear of being too easily compared to the French National Assembly. In a statement issued to London newspapers in early 1792 the Society stressed:

That we are not unfriendly to the real Constitution of this country, a reference to our publications will clearly demonstrate. We only contend, with the zeal suitable to the importance of the subject, for the revival of forms approved by experience, and derived from principles, the most simple and ancient. Defended by the shield of conscious integrity, we dread not the darts of loquacious calumny. It was never in our contemplation to extend a reform beyond the manifest corruptions of that part of it which the people at large have an undoubted right to create, and reflect with perfect satisfaction, on no other mode of address than what the established forms of constitution may sanction.²⁹⁴

However as the French Revolution continued to radicalize, public opinion began to look distastefully at the events in France and consequently had less tolerance for political experimentation and reformation. In Manchester the participants in the Bastille celebration dinner were threatened via circulated handbills "...the brains of every man who dined there would be much improved by being mingled with brick and mortar."²⁹⁵ It was only through the political and police connections of the dinner's chairman, Thomas Walker, that a potential for violence was averted. In Birmingham there had already been anti-Dissenting riots targeting Dr. Joseph Priestly and many other clerical reformers, and

²⁹⁴ W. Belsham, *Examination of an Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (London, 1792), p. 35, from: Goodwin, p. 178

²⁹⁵ T. Walker, *A Review of some of the political events which have occurred in Manchester during the last five years* (London, 1794), pp. 22-23.

the Bastille dinner there simply added to the unrest and the potential for widespread violence. Fortuitously the local Constitutional Society held a very low-key dinner and no further violence occurred. Birmingham seemed especially prone to political and religious unrest with its combination of an established clergy, an industrializing middle and merchant class, and a large number of displaced artisans, and all the larger context of the revolutionary events across the channel. In his study of these riots, Professor R. B. Rose suggests that “we can hardly disregard the charged atmosphere and disruptive claims injected into English politics by the French Revolution, if we are to attempt a final explanation of the full fury of the Church & King Terror of 1791.”²⁹⁶

Nonetheless, the British governments of the 1790s were nothing if not concerned with internal dissension and unrest fueled by the French Revolution, and the growth of domestic radical groups. The LCS was targeted as a potentially subversive and seditious group, just as colonials had been twenty years previously, and as such the government maintained an active and watchful surveillance program against them. From 1792 to 1800, thirteen different and repressive pieces of legislation were passed that specifically targeted the LCS and its brethren groups, including the suspension of habeas corpus in 1794 and 1798, and the Two Acts of 1795 (the Seditious Meetings Act and the Treasonable Practices Act – both restricted the size of public meetings and required licenses for public gatherings that involved the discussion of political policies).²⁹⁷ These acts gave the British government the legal grounds they required to press their attack against the LCS. They started by charging the LCS with libel, followed by the illegal distribution of political literature, and finally culminating in 1794 with the charges of

²⁹⁶ R. B. Rose, ‘The Priestly Riots of 1791’, *Past and Present*, no. 18 (Nov. 1960), p. 84.

²⁹⁷ Davis., *LCS Papers*, I:xxxvi.

treason against Thomas Hardy, Horn Tooke, and John Thelwall.²⁹⁸ And it would be the treason trials of 1794 that, in the end, represented both the culmination of LCS influence in Britain, and the beginning of their demise.

Conclusion

From 1792 through most of 1794 the LCS grew at a steady pace, recruiting most of their new members from the greater London area. In this same period however, the Society did begin to make membership inroads outside of London, especially in other industrializing cities such as Manchester and Birmingham. The records are inexact, but it appears clear that the LCS had put the kind of organizational processes in place that allowed them to recruit working class men who found their goals and methods of political education appealing. The LCS stressed inclusiveness as opposed to exclusiveness, and as a result their chapters and members found a low barrier of entry into a political club, something that was not true of the more aristocratic political clubs of the period.

As the Society grew, its leaders created an organizational structure of executive, general, and chapter meetings as a way to manage a growing political reform group comprised of men who were unaccustomed to participating in such groups. To address that reality, LCS leaders instituted a structured set of meeting rules and decorum. These rules worked as a meeting guidebook for working class men, providing new chapters a structure by which they might organize and conduct their meetings. A secondary purpose of a strict adherence to the Society's meeting decorum was so that working class men learned how to behave in a manner that might allow their political aspirations to be taken more seriously by the public sphere.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

In the summer of 1793, the LCS leadership became aware that the British government had placed spies in many of their chapters. In some cases the Society knew who the spies were, but in many other cases they did not. As a result the LCS created an executive committee whose members would be unknown to the larger membership. The executive committee was chartered with drafting the correspondence of the Society, and the hope was that if the committee worked in anonymity the government spies could not implicate any of the authors. Secondly, the executive committee was tasked with carrying on the work of the Society, ostensibly by going underground, should the government outlaw or otherwise terminate the LCS.

The LCS borrowed generously from the organizational model of the colonial corresponding group known as the Boston Committee of Correspondence. In the 1770s the BCC became effective at creating and distributing political pamphlets that furthered their cause, in this case independence from Britain. The LCS attempted to emulate the ways in which the BCC recruited members and distributed materials, while stopping short of emulating some of the more politically radical goals of the colonial BCC. As a result of the American and French revolutions, there was an active political debate in Britain on what constituted “radical” activity, and what that meant for groups such as the LCS who were arguing for political reform within the constitutional structure of British law.

Despite their efforts, the LCS could not balance the fine line between lawful reform and radical activism in the eyes of the British government, and by 1794 the missions for imbedded government spies had changed from simply reporting on the Society’s

activities, to actively gathering evidence against the Society for possible government action. These government actions would become a reality for the LCS in 1794 and 1795.

CHAPTER FIVE – The “Order of the Day”

We must ever regard the suppression of the meetings of the people, (by the interference of power, however elevated), of which the guide is order, the object knowledge, and the end peace, as establishing principles, and deducing consequences, that must EXTINGUISH FOR EVER THE LIBERTIES OF OUR COUNTRY.²⁹⁹

- Joseph Gerrald, at the British Convention in Edinburgh, Nov. 19, 1793

The Need For A United Front

1793 and 1794 were difficult years for Europe. The French Revolution had fully radicalized and a newly constituted French army of citizen-soldiers was marauding its way across the continent, and quite successfully so. French victories against traditional European powers Prussia and Austria only served to heighten the political paranoia in Britain over just how far afield the French intended to export their revolution. Britain had allied militarily with a coalition of Austrian and Hanoverian troops but they were unable to stop the French advance. And so it was that Parliament had opened in January of 1794 particularly intolerant of political reform proposals and those who advocated for them.

In December of 1793, reacting to a hastily called convention in Edinburgh for those working for political reform, Parliament ordered the arrest of three LCS member delegates in attendance. Maurice Margarot, Joseph Gerrald, and William Skirving, all part of the group of original founders of the LCS, were arrested and charged with sedition. These arrests were the culmination of at least a full year of vigorous government attempts to dampen the popular enthusiasm for political reform in Britain. From 1792 to 1800 a series of British Parliaments passed no fewer than thirteen separate

²⁹⁹ *Address of the British Convention assembled at Edinburgh, November 19, 1793 to the People of Great Britain*, p. 24.

and repressive acts of legislation in an attempt to cripple, if not kill, the political reform movement, and in particular the LCS, whom the government viewed as the most politically threatening of all the reform groups.³⁰⁰ On May 21, 1792, the British government issued a royal proclamation banning all seditious activities and writings. The 1790s marked a dramatic increase in government interventions and prosecutions for treason and sedition, and some have argued that the decade marks Britain's own political reign of terror to stamp out movements for political reform and radicalization, lawful or otherwise.³⁰¹ While the records are incomplete, it is clear that there were well over one hundred trials and successful prosecutions for libel, treason, and sedition in Britain in the 1790s alone, a number that is roughly three to four times as many as in the entire eighteenth century to that point.³⁰²

The Edinburgh Convention of political reformists evolved from the notion that forging a more united approach for political education and activism might be an effective way to combat the government's recent crackdowns on political activity. In January of 1793 reformists in Sheffield sent a letter to many of the other political reformists groups asking each of them to specify how they were going to present their particular letters and declarations to the new Parliament.³⁰³ The Sheffield reformists correctly calculated that the more the various reformist groups could organize, the better their declarations might be viewed in Parliament and in the larger public sphere.

However, disagreements concerning the nature and aggressiveness of the proposed declarations quickly arose between the Sheffield reformists and the Society for

³⁰⁰ Davis, *LCS Papers*, 1: xxxvi.

³⁰¹ Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty*, pp. 269-74.

³⁰² Davis, *LCS Papers*, 1: xxxvi.

³⁰³ Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty*, p. 276.

Constitutional Information, and the Friends of the People declined to disclose their proposed declarations to Parliament altogether. For their part the LCS and its leadership were willing to collaborate with many of the other reform societies, but in early 1793 they still lacked the political experience to negotiate effectively with many of the other reformist groups.³⁰⁴ This lack of cohesiveness between and amongst the political reformists in the 1790s would prove to be, in the end, a strategic pitfall that would not go unexploited by the British government. Along with a failure to win the war of popular public opinion for their cause in the formative stages of the reform movement, and severe economic difficulties in the movement's latter stages, this lack of coordinated political activism formed the third pillar of the movement's ultimate demise.

When the Sheffield letter failed to produce any clear indications of how the various reformist groups might work as one, the LCS took it upon itself to circulate a questionnaire to all of the other reformist groups inquiring as to how they might proceed to work more effectively together. This inclusive and collaborative attitude illustrates the rather forward thinking approach the LCS endeavored to employ for the betterment of the reform movement overall, rather than just focusing on their own particular and specific political reform agenda. One might even say that the LCS was attempting to leverage the emerging public sphere to create a political focus group within that sphere through which political reform direction might be ascertained. This type of political canvassing is still a practice in use today amongst political parties.

In any event the LCS asked their brethren reform groups for their preferences along three possible tracks of political activity – a joint petition to Parliament, a joint petition directly to the crown, or the convening of a political convention as a means to form a

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

unified political reformist front.³⁰⁵ Once again the answers to the LCS questions demonstrated the general lack of cohesiveness in the reform movement. The responses lacked any clear consensus. There was some support concerning the option of petitioning the crown directly – even though it was a course of action that most of the leaders of the various reformist groups considered futile.

There was more consensus around the next proposed approach, a petition to Parliament, and as one might expect given their mandate of political education the LCS was in favor of this approach. The idea was to encourage each and every reformist society across the political spectrum – radical, moderate, otherwise – to send individual petitions to Parliament that were in broad agreement with respect to the types of political reforms sought. The LCS leadership believed that by linking the metropolitan and rural reform societies into a coordinated petitioning campaign they could build enough momentum nationally to influence opinion in their favor in the public sphere. They believed that the British newspapers – both those for and against reform, in their constant competition for readers - would publish and discuss the deluge of petitions from all corners of the nation supporting substantial political reform.³⁰⁶

From a political education perspective, the collective political goals and aspirations of the overall reform movement would attract new supporters, as they became educated as to the reform issues by reading about them in the newspapers. Further, the LCS leadership believed that they could sway public opinion through a bit of what might be perceived as reverse psychology. The LCS correctly surmised that all, or nearly all, of the petitions submitted to Parliament would be rejected, as they ultimately were.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 277

³⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 278.

However, the published parade of Parliamentary rejections would inevitably be noticed by the public, arousing their collective curiosity regarding just what all the fuss was about.³⁰⁷

The SCI also supported the idea of a petition campaign as “well worth considering as a warning voice to our present legislators and as a signal for imitation to the majority of the people.”³⁰⁸ The SCI leadership hoped for a general awakening of the silent majority in the nation who might support the cause of political reform if only they were made more aware of its goals and aspirations.³⁰⁹ The SCI also hoped to alter the public perception of the political reformists more generally from that of French sympathizers and political novices to something more akin to a focused and cohesive group that were “not a handful of individuals unworthy of attention.”³¹⁰ In general though, both the SCI and the LCS considered any sort of petitioning movement as an exercise in political public relations.³¹¹ Both the leaders of the SCI and the LCS knew that they needed to create a more publicly favorable view of their respective organizations in order to build the sort of mass popular movement required to pressure the government for real political change.

The Petition Campaign

Over the next few months an attempt was made, coordinated initially by the Association of the Friends of the People and later by the LCS, to organize a petitioning campaign. However the difficulties in organizing and controlling such a campaign soon proved to be daunting. In an LCS meeting on February 23, 1793 a motion was made and

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ PRO TS 11/955/3500.

³⁰⁹ Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, p. 278.

³¹⁰ PRO TS 11/955/3500

³¹¹ Goodwin, p. 278.

passed supporting the idea of a petitioning campaign by encouraging the societies in the provinces and outlying regions to create their own petitions and send them to Parliament. The LCS created its own petition, drafted by Joseph Gerrald, and by early April had collected about 1300 signatures from its various divisions.³¹² The LCS took the further step of deciding to place the petition in the newspapers as an open document and encouraging the general public to sign it. The effects of that move, and the petition signatory campaign were not what the LCS and many of the other reform groups had hoped for. This difference between real, personal political commitment and a sort of interested and supportive posture from afar would plague the LCS throughout its existence. “Ignorance, Interest, and Timidity” was the way Hardy viewed much of the general public’s reticence to sign such petitions or to join groups such as the LCS.³¹³ Joseph Gerrald even went so far as to recruit signatures from the King’s Bench prison – not exactly the sort of signatory that was core to the Society’s efforts to recruit self-made men.³¹⁴

The reality for the LCS and the other reformist societies was that the working class men they were trying to reach were often torn between the practicality of needing to maintain their livelihoods, and their still-nascent and evolving political ideals. In a time of war with France many working class men were pressured by their employers to sign Loyalist oaths and petitions stating their support of the government. Many artisans and publicans were simply afraid to sign political reformist petitions or join as members for fear of losing their government-issued licenses to work their respective trades or crafts

³¹² Goodwin, *Friends*, p. 279.

³¹³ Hardy, *Memoirs*.

³¹⁴ Goodwin, p. 279.

and even their jobs.³¹⁵ However, even with all of that working against them, by the end of May 1793 the LCS was able to obtain between 5000 and 6000 signatures for their petition.³¹⁶ Several petitions emanating from various reform societies were in fact presented in the House of Commons in May and June 1793, but most were summarily dismissed as being too derogatory or presumptuous, or as being based solely on the issue of universal suffrage, an issue that the House of Commons was not willing to consider. Moreover, when the LCS petition was presented in the Commons by Philip Francis and not Charles James Fox as the Society's leadership had hoped, it was immediately ordered to "lie on the table."³¹⁷ The LCS had hoped to garner enough signatures and MP support to represent the petition as the will of the general public, but it was instead quickly labeled by conservative MPs as the radical agenda of the LCS and quickly discounted.³¹⁸

There was a great deal of discouragement and hand wringing inside the LCS and amongst many of the other reformist groups over the failed petitioning campaign. The more moderate groups, including the Friends of the People and the SCI, had hoped for a more politically acceptable course toward political reform through the petitioning campaign. Some of the smaller and more provincial groups, such as the Manchester Patriotic and Reformation Societies and the Derby Political Society, were so discouraged at the failure of the petitioning campaign that they simply shut their groups down. For his part Hardy even considered offering a motion to suspend all LCS meetings and activities for three months in order to reexamine their strategy and approach, though he

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ BL, Add. MSS. 27812, fo. 36

³¹⁸ Goodwin, p. 280.

never did.³¹⁹ That non-action by Hardy poses an interesting question – in the face of such discouragement and against fairly daunting obstacles (the British government had, after all, targeted the LCS explicitly for infiltration and elimination), why did some reform societies press on while others simply died a premature political death? Were Hardy's and the London Corresponding Society's collective convictions and goals somehow stronger than those of other reformist groups, or were some of the leaders and membership of the more persistent reform societies simply too stubborn to give up the cause they believed so passionately in? The answer likely lies somewhere in between.

In general, the 1790s were, compared to the previous decades, heady times for working class men. Freed from subsistence farming and family production, many for the first time in their lives, and for the first time in British history, found themselves part of something bigger, something that went beyond the close family and rural village structures that their parents and grandparents before them knew so well. Aggregated together in growing urban centers for the first time, there was an air of discovery and a diversity of experiences that began to coalesce around political and economic issues that their forefathers had given little thought to. While it might be overstating the reality to suggest that this was a new class of men complete with its own consciousness and awareness of itself, it might be reasonable to suggest that a new kind of man was developing, a more political man.³²⁰

The Glorious and American revolutions paved the way for this newer kind of man, but it was the French Revolution that was most transformative, at least in its formative stages, because it demonstrated to British political reformists that an organized and focused

³¹⁹ Ibid., 282.

³²⁰ Thompson, p. 167.

popular political effort could make a real difference. Certainly, British political reformists such as Hardy, and in fact even the most radical amongst them, had no aspirations to eliminate the existing state structure altogether, as things seemed to be developing in France. Their goals were more modest, although in the eyes of the British government and Loyalists, the goals of the LCS were viewed as quite radical.

One of the more important developments during the 1790s in British politics is that working class men were discovering their own political voice, and as importantly, they were learning how, in fitful steps, to organize, focus, and deliver that voice in the forums and spheres where it might have the greatest impact. So one might inquire again, and the short history of the LCS is nothing if not some sort of an answer to this question – why persist? What was so important to Hardy, Margarot, Gerraldard, Fox, and so many others about having their political voice heard, particularly in the face of such strong headwinds? And as importantly, in the end, how far were they prepared to go to have that voice heard? These are questions that the men of the LCS and other reformist groups struggled to answer themselves, so it is with some difficulty that historians endeavor to do the same.

What is a bit clearer to historians, however, is how reformists struggled to have their voices taken seriously in the public sphere, and how that goal for political legitimacy at least drove some of them to continue their efforts against difficult odds and conditions. In the case of the LCS, and largely with much of the political reform movement of the 1790s, each successive approach was somehow calculated and tied to this idea of achieving political legitimacy first and foremost, and once that was established their other political goals for Parliamentary reform and universal suffrage would follow. As we

shall see, that goal of legitimacy was eventually achieved, though it took many years. The leaders of the LCS and many other groups pressed on in the face of great personal and professional peril, even when many of their plans, tactics, and actions never quite worked out as well as many of them had hoped, either because of government infiltration and interference, or through infighting and political power struggles amongst the reformist groups themselves.

A General Convention

In that context then it was altogether appropriate for Hardy and other reform leaders to think long and hard about what to do next after the petitioning campaign had failed. The third option in the survey that the LCS had sent to its membership was the idea of holding a national convention for political reform. Many of the more moderate reformers felt that to be too radical an idea, one that would bring even more unwanted government attention to their activities and efforts. Others in the movement argued that just such an event was necessary to kick start the movement again, and to get more people involved, or at the very least, exposed to the political ideas and goals of the reformist movement.

As that debate ensued amongst the reformist groups and societies, events in Britain provided the opportunity and the necessary political support to hold a convention. First, as a result of the petitioning campaign, the English reformist groups were reconnected with their Scottish counterparts. These political connections had been mostly severed after the American Revolution as a result of John Wilkes's anti-Scottish polemics during the American crisis. Since the war, the English and Scottish political reform movements had been developing and working along their respective political paths, but had not

patched up their differences in order to work together.³²¹ As part of the petitioning campaign, inquiries and inroads were made to the Scottish societies, and when the petitioning campaign foundered, both the English and the Scottish groups were in the position of attempting to figure out what to do next. In a letter sent to William Skirving, the leader of the Edinburgh Friends of the People reform society, dated May 17, 1793, Hardy and Margarot suggested that the time had come for “a renewal of correspondence and a more intimate cooperation” with Skirving’s group.³²² Hardy and Margarot argued that the failure of the petitioning campaign required a more cohesive and unified effort throughout Britain and its empire if real and lasting political reform were ever to be affected. In deference to the relative success that Skirving and his fellow reformers in Scotland had had, Hardy and Margarot framed their letter as both a pledge of cohesiveness and as a request for operational guidance.³²³ As an exemplar of the kind of political inclusion the LCS continuously strived to practice, they indicated to Skirving that they were open to all of the ideas and experiences from Scotland, pledging that they would “adopt the firmest measures provided they are constitutional.”³²⁴

This is important to dwell on for a moment and speaks to the heart of whether or not the LCS and other such groups were political reformists, a term this author employed throughout this dissertation, or political and economic radicals, a label they were given in their own time, and by many historians since. The problem with such labels is that they can be a matter of perspective, and change in meaning over time. One man’s radical is another’s political reformist, as Burke and Paine would assuredly agree. There is no

³²¹ Goodman, p. 282.

³²² Hardy, *Memoirs*.

³²³ Goodman, 285.

³²⁴ Hardy, *Memoirs*

question that the LCS and many other British popular political associations were viewed as politically and socially radical in their time, and as a potential threat by political and social conservatives and a series of British governments. Such a label proved difficult for the LCS to overcome in their time, and they constantly fought to prove that working class men were more than capable of working for political reform within the constructs of the prevailing political structures, so long as those political structures were constitutionally valid themselves. Interestingly, it was the French Revolution that provided both the spark and the snuff for what would be a short but intense decade of political reformist activity in Britain in the 1790s.

As mentioned previously, between the American and French Revolutions, the British political reform movement was somewhat adrift, lacking any real political momentum or focus. The government's attitude toward such groups between the revolutions was an acknowledgement of their existence, but very little weight or concern was given to the threat they might pose to the status quo. They were not viewed as political radicals then, merely working class men with some unorthodox ideas about what they thought applied to them under the banner of British constitutionalism. The government was content to let them have their say and their little meetings, so long as they did not cause any undue trouble. In this context the British government and political conservatives seemed little concerned with whether or not some of these marginal reformist groups were radical or moderate, only that they were not troublesome.

And indeed they were not troublesome until the outbreak of the French Revolution. The early years of the French Revolution changed all of that. It was only when the LCS and other such groups began to recruit working class members in concentrated urban

areas, growing in membership and potential voice, that the political elites took notice. And once they decided to take notice they became convinced that these groups constituted a threat to the state. It was in the context of the radicalization of the French Revolution and the proliferation and growth of these British political societies that their characterization shifted from that of a mild nuisance to something more radical and threatening to the government. The goals of many of these groups – Parliamentary reform and universal male suffrage in the case of the LCS – seemed more extreme in a time of national crisis in Britain.

The fact that the British governments of the mid-1790s found themselves at war with a new and sovereign nation intent on exporting its own versions of liberty, equality, and fraternity, certainly makes their paranoia over the political reformist movement more understandable. In the rapidly changing but still in tact economic and class structures of late eighteenth-century Britain notions like working class men being able to vote seemed to many to be very radical indeed. Less radical was the notion that as a result of the rotten boroughs, pay to play, and widespread under-representation of emerging industrial centers in Parliament something had to be done. That debate was centered on what was to be done, and how it might be implemented. Nevertheless, in the context of the French Revolution and the Terror, they seemed radical indeed; and that evolving characterization of the LCS and other such groups both in the public sphere and in the halls of Parliament would make all the difference in the reformists efforts in the 1790s.

When Skirving replied to Hardy and Margarot in May of 1793 he agreed that among other things, “the ennobling principle of universal benevolence”³²⁵ required that the reformist societies work more effectively together if there was any hope at all of

³²⁵ Hardy, *Memoirs*, p. 92.

furthering their collective causes.³²⁶ What Skirving had in mind then was indeed the third option on the survey that the LCS had administered earlier in 1793 – a convention of Scottish and British political reform societies at Edinburgh whose purpose was the general adoption of the reform platform for universal suffrage and annual parliaments.³²⁷ Given that many of the reformist groups in England and Scotland felt that they needed some sort of new tactical approach in the wake of the collapse of the petitioning campaign, many of them were quick to offer their support for a national British convention of political reformists. It helped the cause of the reformists, and those in support of a convention, that in the middle of 1793 much of Britain was suffering food and employment hardships as a result of the war with France.³²⁸

These hardships caused a spike in membership in the reform societies throughout Britain, as people – primarily the poor and the working class – were economically and politically motivated out of self-interest to get behind the need for parliamentary reform and universal suffrage. The Scottish government also provided additional motivation for membership when Lord Advocate Robert Dundas decided to crack down on the Scottish political reform movement in August and September of 1793. Dundas targeted Thomas Muir, founder of the Friends of the People society in Edinburgh, and the Reverend Thomas Fyshe Palmer, minister of the Unitarian Church in Dundee, for their allegedly seditious activities. Within weeks both men were tried for sedition and sentenced to deportation to Botany Bay for fourteen and seven years respectively, thus creating the kinds of political martyrs that the British reformist leaders could get people to rally

³²⁶ Goodman, p. 285.

³²⁷ Ibid., 286.

³²⁸ A Letter from the Reverend James Lapslie of Campsie to Lord Robert Dundas on the causes and origins of the Edinburgh convention dated December 6 1793. PRO, Home Office, 102/9, 268-73.

around.³²⁹ The presiding judge, The Lord Justice Clerk, Lord Braxfield, pointed out that Muir was a supporter of parliamentary reform, and anybody who supported such a thing was surely engaging in sedition, particularly in such dangerous and unsettled times.³³⁰ In a striking example of the kinds of attitudes and prejudices the reformists were up against throughout Britain, Lord Braxfield included in the written summary of his verdict concerning Muir that:

A government in every country should be just like a corporation; and in this country, it is made up of the landed interest, which alone had the right to be represented. As for the rabble, who have nothing but personal property, what hold has the nation on them? What security for the payment of their taxes? They may pack up all their property on their backs, and leave the country in the twinkling of an eye.³³¹

For his part Muir protested that he advocated for political reform only under constitutional means, but Lord Braxfield would have nothing of it and Muir was summarily transported to Botany Bay.³³² The attitudes of Lords Dundas and Braxfield are a good example of the kinds of social and political prejudices the reformist groups, English, Scottish, Irish, etc., were up against throughout the 1790s. The tumult caused by an industrializing and urbanizing society, the food and employment shortages, and the war with France all combined to create a decidedly intolerant environment toward political reform. In fact one wonders how the LCS and other reformist groups and societies might have fared in a less politically and economically tumultuous era. Perhaps their political goals and objectives might have seemed more reasonable, and their approaches and tactics toward achieving their objectives less radical in a different

³²⁹ Goodwin, p. 287.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

³³¹ T.B. and T.J. Howell (eds), *State Trials*, vol. 23, col. 231.

³³² Goodwin, p. 288.

political landscape, though in the less tumultuous 1780s they could not garner much enthusiasm, coordination, or support.

As it was men like Dundas and Braxfield, who represented the landed elite and the politically vested and entrenched, felt threatened by the sudden changes to their social and political structures and their future place in them. In a larger context one of the 'services' provided by the political reformist movement of the late eighteenth century was the fact that they asked hard questions about the state of the state, and what it meant to be a citizen in a nation that defined itself in its individual rights under the law and representative government roots. Such questions had particular resonance and sharpness in the wake of the loss of the American colonies, the recent celebration of the centennial anniversary of the Glorious Revolution, and the French Revolution. For many of the elite men who had traditional lands, titles, and social and political status it must have seemed that the world they knew for so long was quite simply going to hell, and by gosh something should be done to stop it. All politics is local, and that means that all politics eventually is personal, and many of these men felt personally threatened by the political reformist movement.

The sentencing of Muir and Palmer might be seen as an example of the political reaction to the reformist movement in Britain by those who held the power to do such things. In the context of larger political and military environment in Europe the goals and objectives of the LCS and other such groups seemed a direct and subversive threat to the well-being of the nation. Men like Dundas and Braxfield dealt with such a threat as their collective upbringings and understandings of their places in the hierarchy of British society had taught them. Their way of life was being directly threatened, and their efforts

to protect that would naturally be proportional to the seriousness of the threat. This is not offered as an historical apology or excuse for the repressiveness with which the political reformists were dealt with, but rather as a way to begin to understand perhaps a bit better why such reactions occurred.

Many other men in the political reformist movement were subjected to such reactions as the decade progressed. Yet while the political elite still had control over judicial and legal matters, they had less control over a continuing and widening public sphere in which news of the sentencing of Muir and Palmer traveled fast. Most in the reform movement, and it should be said many in the general public, reacted with indignation in Britain, and as far away as America and France.³³³ The reformist and even radical view was that Muir in particular had worked within the accepted political and legal structures in Scotland, and that his efforts to promote reform were well within his constitutional rights. In many respects the sentencing of Muir and Palmer backfired on the Scottish elites – rather than stamping out the political reform movement there they instead made political martyrs out of both Muir and Palmer.

That had the unintended consequence of at least temporarily reigniting the reform movement across Britain.³³⁴ In a report to the Scottish Procurator Fiscal, William Scott, the government spy known as ‘J. B.’ acknowledged that “the severity of Mr. Muir’s sentence, instead of extinguishing the spirit of the associations, seems to have given new life and vigor to them.”³³⁵ Indeed, groups like the Societies of the Friends of the People of Edinburgh saw a decided uptick in memberships and meeting attendance in the wake

³³³ Goodwin, p. 289.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ PRO, Home Office, 102/9, fo. 52.

of the sentencing of Muir and Palmer.³³⁶ In the September 5, 1793 General Committee meeting of the group there was a resolution passed that was inspired by the stand that Muir took in the name of political reform. In the resolution, the committee emphatically declared that they would never, under any circumstances, “...part with their rights and liberty but with their lives...[that] they may never be driven to that awful point, at which resistance becomes duty, when the voice of reason is no longer heard; when complaining and remonstrating are interdicted and when the will of the ruler is made the Law to an enslaved people.”³³⁷

The reinvigoration of the political reform movement as a result of the trial and sentencing of Muir and Palmer, combined with the unsuccessful petitioning campaign, left the political reform movement with what was their third remaining option for action – a national General Convention of delegates for the purposes of political reform. For their part Hardy and the rest of the LCS leadership had already paid tribute to Scottish political martyrs by placing a public proclamation of support in several London newspapers.³³⁸

So it came as no surprise when in a letter to Hardy on October 5, 1793, Skirving invited the LCS to send a delegation to the General Convention that was being planned for the late fall in Edinburgh. To accomplish the election of delegates for the Convention the LCS decided to call for a general meeting of their membership as quickly as was practical. They decided that the occasion for the election of delegates to the first General Convention presided over by working class men for the purposes of political reform called for something special. Several ideas were hastily discussed, but it was eventually decided that the LCS would hold its first outdoor meeting for its general membership and

³³⁶ Goodwin, p. 290.

³³⁷ PRO, Home Office, 102/9, fo. 52.

³³⁸ BL, Place Collection, various newspaper clippings, vol. 36, fo. 72.

for the public at large on October 24, 1793.³³⁹ The meeting was held in a field on the Hackney Road that was owned by a Mr. Thomas Briellat, a pump-maker and supporter (though not a member) of the LCS.³⁴⁰

The meeting was advertised in the newspapers for several days prior, and drew a number of Society members from the various divisions, but drew even more sideline supporters, curious onlookers, and those who just happened to be passing by. All told the LCS leadership and the police and magistrates present estimated the crowd at about 4000 people, a respectable show of support to be sure.³⁴¹ Many of those who had just happened by the event speculated on its meaning and purpose. Hardy later recounted that the rumors amongst the crowd regarding the meeting ran from speculation that Thomas Paine would be speaking, or that the French Jacobins were behind the meeting, or that its real purpose was to discuss the dire conditions of the working and the poor and to put an action plan in place to provide some relief.³⁴² No matter the purpose the authorities were not taking any chances, as nearly three hundred police were present at the meeting to keep order, and perhaps to arrest those who might be advocating sedition and treason.

At the beginning of the meeting there was some sort of disruption as the Society's leaders and invited guests climbed the wooden stand and called the meeting to order, but the police quickly restored calm in the crowd and allowed the meeting to continue. In his memoirs Hardy surmised that the disruption was caused by fellow political reformists who were in favor of a much more radical approach to change, and acknowledged his surprise and the surprise of other members of the Society's leadership when the police

³³⁹ Goodwin, p. 291.

³⁴⁰ BL, Add. MSS. 27812, fos. 76-8

³⁴¹ BL, Add. MSS. 27814, fos. 56-60, Hardy's own account of the meeting and the estimated number of attendees.

³⁴² Ibid.

actually intervened on their behalf.³⁴³ After that the business of the meeting passed by quietly, and Maurice Margarot and Joseph Gerrald were elected as the Society's delegates to the General Convention.³⁴⁴ About an hour after the meeting however, an ominous message was conveyed when, Mr. Briellat, the owner of the field in which the meeting was held, was arrested on the flimsiest of charges – that he had spoken in seditious tones about the King some months prior to the LCS meeting in his field.³⁴⁵ For this offense Briellat was imprisoned for two years at Newgate and fined over one hundred pounds. Upon his release Briellat immediately emigrated to America.³⁴⁶

A week later the SCI met to choose its delegate to the General Convention. LCS members Hardy, Margarot, Martin, and Richter attended the meeting as all had been elected honorary members of the SCI when the LCS was formed, and by most accounts helped to persuade the more moderate leaning SCI that sending delegates to the Convention was in the best interest of the cause. The drafted instructions to the SCI delegates indicated that they were to advocate for parliamentary reform by means of petitions that would lead to an inquiry into the misrepresented boroughs in the House of Commons.³⁴⁷ Since the petition drive had failed, the delegate instructions were modified to a demand for a “specific remedy for the prevalent abuses.”³⁴⁸ Upon hearing and participating in the SCI discussion over their delegate instructions, the LCS members present pushed the SCI members to align themselves more closely with the demands of the LCS and some of the more action-oriented reformist groups by insisting that the SCI

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ Goodwin, p. 291.

³⁴⁶ BL, Add. MSS. 27809, fo. 269.

³⁴⁷ PRO TS 11/957/3502(i) – deposition of G. Williams, July 5, 1794.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

include in their delegate instructions the need for “general suffrage and annual representation, together with the unalienable right in the people to reform.”³⁴⁹

The LCS Leads

The more moderate members of the SCI acquiesced to the LCS input, and it is fair to say that this is another example of the preeminence of the LCS in the political reform movement. After roughly two years, most of the philosophical and intellectual concepts and ideas for reform increasingly ran through the LCS, and its leaders were increasingly viewed by all parties concerned – working class reformists, the general public, and the government – as the point of the spear for the political reform movement. This position had its advantages and disadvantages. From a recruiting and political and economic support perspective the LCS was able to leverage their leadership position as a way to further their political education and participation goals, and to some good effect. Conversely, their leadership position in the reform movement also made them an easy target for their political opponents, and for the British government, as they could and would eventually focus their considerable power and resources on eradicating the LCS. In any event, the LCS leadership, and particularly Hardy and Margarot, worked hard to align the goals and objectives of all the reformist movements into a cohesive and common agenda that could be easily understood and communicated for the purposes of the General Convention. And while they had some success doing so with respect to the Convention, they had less success over the long term in coordinating the overall reform movement, and that lack of success would in no small way contribute to the demise of the movement as the decade ensued.

³⁴⁹ PRO TS 11/962/3508, fo. 152.

For better or worse, the LCS and its leadership tended to stick to their political guns and to stay on message, always reminding its membership as to why it was established in the first place. Indeed, the instructions given to the LCS delegates to the convention were that they should “on no account whatever, depart from the original object and principles, namely the obtaining annual parliaments and Universal Suffrage by rational and lawful means.”³⁵⁰ The instructions further detailed that the delegates should “support the opinion that representatives in Parliament ought to be paid by their constituents” and that “it is the Duty of the People to resist any Act of Parliament repugnant to the original principles of the Constitution; as would be every attempt to prohibit Associations for the purpose of Reform.”³⁵¹

From a more practical perspective, however, it soon became obvious that the logistics involved in staging a General Convention in Edinburgh were daunting. One of the first issues to arise was the inability of many of the provincial reform chapters to send any delegates at all due to, among other things, the cost involved in doing so. A fortnight in Edinburgh was a relatively expensive proposition for working class men, even when contributions were taken up amongst the membership. Communication and coordination were also issues. The General Convention was hastily proposed after the petition campaign failed, and from inception to execution it was a matter of just a few months, not enough time as it turned out for many of the outlying societies to conduct the meetings necessary to elect delegates, ratify instructions, raise the appropriate funds to send the delegates, etc.

³⁵⁰ BL, Add. MSS. 27814, fos. 75-6.

³⁵¹ Ibid., and from: Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, p. 293.

And there were more practical matters to consider, as these were working class men who could ill afford to leave their work or places of employments for any extended period of time, especially to attend a political reform convention that their employers, customers, or perhaps even family members might not approve of. The result of all of this was that the number of English delegates attending the General Convention was rather small compared to the number of Scottish delegates, but their voices were nevertheless quite significant. Equally important was the attention that both the London press and the government began to pay to the LCS specifically, and the reform movement more generally. In some respects the General Convention in Edinburgh might be seen as both the apex for the LCS and its efforts, and at the same time the beginning of its own demise in terms of the resources that would be arrayed against it after the Convention took place. In fact it was precisely because that English reformists played such a prominent role in the Convention that it drew such notice and attention, and it was also the reason that the governments of England and Scotland increasingly began to view the reform movement as something much more sinister and seditious, thus creating the showdown that was to come.³⁵² By this time, the revolutionary government in France was calling itself the National Convention, and the fact that British political reformists were planning something called a General Convention was to threatening for the government to ignore.

In October of 1793, just prior to the General Convention, the British government began to look in earnest for evidence of treasonable or seditious activities amongst members of the LCS and the reform movement. On October 26 the daily newspaper

³⁵² Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, p. 294.

Oracle, part of the ministerial press, ran the following description of their meeting to elect convention delegates:

London Corresponding Society

The members of this Society, to the amount of 700, met on Thursday [October 24th] in a house and paddock near Hackney, for the purpose of electing two Delegates to represent them in the Convention which is to be held at *Edinburgh*, for the purpose of concerting the necessary measures to obtain an EQUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE.

There were about 2000 present.

In order to convince the people of the erroneous sentiments which they entertained of the design of their meeting, Mr. GERRALD, Mr. MARGAROT, and Mr. JENNINGS, harangued them from the windows of the house, with such effect, that they declared, by universal acclamations their approbation of the views of the Society.

The members now proceeded to the Election of the two Delegates: JOSEPH GERRALD and MAURICE MARGAROT, were unanimously elected.³⁵³

Indeed, those in the ministerial press and the government had been keeping a watchful eye on the political reform movement for some time. Some thought that the General Convention for political reform would be their best opportunity for gathering the necessary evidence to convince the courts and the general public that the movement was dangerous at best, and treasonous at worst. Charles Stuart, a free lance reporter for many of the ministerial papers and eventually a government spy who would testify against some of the LCS leaders, sent several letter to the Home Office encouraging them to monitor the political reformists, and over his concern regarding their General Convention:

How are the London Corresponding Society, as I had heard, to pay for their Scotch delegates? - By the Press. - By the sale of "The Political Progress" now circulating as I've heard by them, throughout the three kingdoms - the profits of that, are to pay their expenses - Have you seen it? - I have got a copy of it within these few days - it is said to be written by the late Lord Fordenstoun [*sic*] - but I don't believe it - I have read it

³⁵³ BL, *Oracle*, October 24th, 1793

with attention and I see nothing in it but much dogmatical [*sic*]derision from the superficial view of things.

You cannot be too vigilant about the Scotch meeting – Gerrald, one of the banditti delegates, is a man, I believe, that is very, very violent – he is an American and Jacobin, too – well educated at Dr. Parr’s, and fluent in speech, and well primed in “sense half-mad.”³⁵⁴

The next day, October 28th, Stuart did indeed forward his copy of the pamphlet he indicated was circulating amongst the LCS membership. The pamphlet’s actual title was *The Political Progress of Great Britain; or, an Imperial Account of the Principal Abuses in the Government of this Country, from the Revolution in 1688. The Whole Tending to Prove the Ruinous Consequences of the Popular System of War and Conquest.*³⁵⁵ The pamphlet was actually authored by James Thomson Callender in 1792, and Callender had already been indicted for sedition.³⁵⁶ In his cover letter to the Home Office Stuart continued his heinous characterizations of the LCS: “In the meantime, permit me to add, that the L. Corresp. Society are worse than the worst of the Jacobins... Their pretexts at Reform, you will find, are all a farce. – In my simple opinion you will find them of the same kidney as the Conventicles of the last century in Scotland or the hideous of the most hideous Jacobins at present – and you see they are sending their Ambassadors to the Scotch meeting of to-morrow, I believe – You cannot have too horrid an opinion of them – and you cannot be too vigilant.”³⁵⁷

Stuart and others from the political opposition seemed particularly concerned with Margat from the LCS, who they believed to be one of the main drivers of the reform

³⁵⁴ Charles Stuart, *Letter to Lord Dundas*, October 27, 1793. Joseph Gerrald was born in the West Indies from British parents, but had practiced law in America from 1784 to 1788 before moving back to London. That may account for Stuart’s characterization of him as an American.

³⁵⁵ James Thomson Callender, Edinburgh: Printed for Robinson and Berry, No. 39, South-Bridge and T. Kay, 332, Strand, London. From: Lucyle Werkmeister, *A Newspaper History of England, 1792-1793* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), p. 433.

³⁵⁶ Werkmeister, p. 433.

³⁵⁷ Charles Stuart, *Letter to the Home Office*, October 28, 1793.

movement since he became chairman and president of the LCS at its founding. And indeed, the early actions of some of the attending delegates only increased this concern amongst the Scottish and English governments, and the conservative political factions that supported them. Before any the English delegates had arrived in Edinburgh in early November, the General Convention of the Scottish Friends of the People, attended by a respectable showing of about 160 delegates, had already voted to adopt a platform in support of universal male suffrage and annual parliaments, just as the LCS had wished. These were political positions that the Scottish judiciary had already declared radical and had legally defined as seditious in previous findings.³⁵⁸

Importantly, though - and this remained a theme for many of the political reformists throughout the decade of the 1790s - the Scottish Friends of the People had already demonstrated their respect for constitutional authority taking part in the petitioning campaign earlier in 1793.³⁵⁹ While this constitutional approach for reform was not adopted by every single reformist group, it was widely adopted amongst the more prominent and politically active groups. It remained important to nearly all of the political reformist groups that the methods they used to effect political change and to attain their goals and objectives be pursued in a way that was constitutionally defensible, and that there was a huge difference between what they wanted to see in Britain and what their brethren across the channel wanted to accomplish in France.

Hardy, Margarot, and many of the other reformist leaders had hoped to open the General Convention on the same day that Parliament opened, adding an air of historical significance and importance to their Convention. However Parliament was prorogued

³⁵⁸ Goodwin, p. 295.

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

once again, and while some of the reform leaders argued for a postponement of the Convention, the logistics of doing so would have been most inconvenient for the working class delegates.³⁶⁰ On November 4, 1793 the first British General Convention for political reform opened in Edinburgh. The leaders and attending delegates had hoped for some press coverage, given the magnitude of the event in their view, and they did manage to get some, little though it was.

The General Convention Opens

On both the mornings of November 4th and 5th, the *Morning Post* and the *Morning Chronicle* reported that “a numerous and respectable Delegation from all the Societies in Scotland, associated for the purpose of promoting a Parliamentary Reform, assembled in the Masons’ Lodge, Blackfriars Wynd...The Society meets to-morrow, for the dispatch of business...Delegates from all parts of England are expected to attend.”³⁶¹ Disappointingly for the reformers, that turned out to be the extent of the press coverage for their Convention. Press coverage was important to the reformists for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, favorable press coverage had the potential to extend the reach of the reformists, allowing them to politically educate readers of the press who might be sympathetic to their political goal and objectives. Secondly, some favorable press coverage would add an air of legitimacy to their efforts by giving the LCS and the other reformist groups a public, political voice, one that should be taken seriously in the realm of British politics. And finally, a modicum of respectable press coverage would continue to expand the growing public sphere amongst an emerging working and middle

³⁶⁰ Werkmeister, p. 434.

³⁶¹ *Morning Post* and *Morning Chronicle*, November 4 and 5, 1793.

class, allowing or even enabling more and more people to participate in the political dialogue of the nation.

That was Hardy's master plan all along - to create enough popular participation through education and recruitment that the political reform movement would take on a life of its own, tipping the popular scales with so many working class men that the political status quo would have no choice but to deal with them and their demands. Alas that sort of press coverage was not forthcoming for the LCS and the General Convention, and the delegates had to continue with the business of the Convention in relative anonymity, at least so far as the public was concerned.

Many of the English delegates arrived in Edinburgh on November 6th, and upon their arrival facilitated a General Committee meeting of all of the participating societies and associations. The purpose of the meeting was to engender an exchange of information, activities, and tactics, as a means to coalesce around a standard operating procedure for the combined reform societies of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Margarot was particularly interested in this, and assumed a leadership role in trying to bring it about.³⁶² However adept Margarot was as a political leader and lecturer, and he was adept, he was also prone to constantly exaggerating the progress of the movement overall, and in inflating its prospects for general success. He certainly did this in Edinburgh, indicating when asked about the progress of the reform movement in England that London was awash with reform and that whole provincial communities could speak of nothing else. Margarot grossly overestimated the overall support of the movement in England

³⁶² Goodwin, p. 295.

suggesting that as many as 600,000 – 700,000 males supported the reform movement, a number so daunting that the “ministry would not dare refuse our rights”.³⁶³

Margarot was convinced that once the reform societies of England, Scotland, and Ireland were united in their objectives and efforts, Parliament would have no choice but to make the reforms they demanded.³⁶⁴ The General Convention stretched out over nearly a month, from early November to early December, and saw a steady ebb and flow of the delegates from various societies and associations arrive, deliver the platform and preferences of their particular groups, and then depart. To say that there was a lack of cohesion and momentum at the Convention would be understating the matter. Indeed, one of the challenges that historians have in understanding this Convention was its rather helter-skelter nature, together the lack of a comprehensive set of minutes detailing the proceedings. While some minutes do survive from the Edinburgh General Convention, for the most part they are poorly written and consolidated, making it difficult to get a complete picture of this event and its importance in the short history of the LCS and the political reform movement of the 1790s.

In fact, the best surviving descriptions of the Convention were actually from the hands of the many government spies who attended. Those accounts of the activities of the delegates and their perceived attitudes toward their respective political institutions contributed to the English and Scottish governments inflated impressions of the seriousness of purpose that the Conventions represented, and the immediacy of the threat the reform movement posed. Said another way, the British General Convention was a crucial milestone in the political reform movement of the 1790s not only for its efforts to

³⁶³ BL, Add. MSS. 27814, fos. 75-6.

³⁶⁴ Goodwin, p. 296.

coalesce the reform movement, but equally for its impact on how the British government would deal with the reform movement as the decade progressed. The British government interpreted the Convention as representing a much more material and immediate threat than it actually was, and responded accordingly when faced with the perceived prospect that the political reform movement was gaining momentum amongst the working class.

A good example of this is the proceedings from a meeting of 180 delegates of the combined Scottish Societies of the Friends of the People on November 19, 1793 in Edinburgh. LCS leaders Hardy and Margarot attended this meeting and their influence can be detected. The English delegates from the LCS wanted to use the Convention as an example of the support and momentum the reform movement had acquired, and particularly for recruiting new members and continuing its extra-parliamentary efforts from a position of what they hoped would be perceived as broad and growing popular support. They wanted to establish the procedural and constitutional framework within the Convention structure that would allow it to become, under threat of government persecution or dissolution, a permanent emergency convention that would be popularly recognized. And finally, they wanted to establish the template for further joint conventions of British reform groups. All of these objectives were viewed by their political opponents as clear threats to the established constitutional authority – either as encouraging disorderly assembly and conduct, or as an attempt to modify Parliament’s legislative rights and authorities, and even as a means to conduct future and unconstitutional popular assemblies.³⁶⁵ All of these concerns led a series of English and Scottish governments to view the General Convention and its outcome as more than enough reason to put more effort into stopping the political reform movement.

³⁶⁵ Goodwin, p. 297.

That said, Margarot did continue to pique the interests of both the attending delegates and the government spies present by pushing for a referendum that would formally conjoin the English and Scottish reformers and reform movements. In the first week of the Convention Margarot suggested that a committee be established to “consider the means and draw up the outlines of a plan of General Union between Scotland and England in their constitutional efforts for a thorough reform of Parliament.”³⁶⁶ The motion passed quickly and a committee of thirteen delegates, including all four of the English delegates from the LCS, were duly appointed to serve on the committee.³⁶⁷ The committee began its work on November 21, and as reported to his government handlers by the spy known from his correspondence as ‘J. B.,’ LCS delegate Joseph Gerrald made an impassioned speech on the current and sad state of the British Constitution.³⁶⁸

According to the government informant, Gerrald recited the popular political myth of the reform movement regarding the slow but sure extinction of the Anglo-Saxon democratic ideals by the Norman conquerors and the constitutional backtracking that had been occurring steadily since 1688. Only, then, through a reform movement whose goals were the education of these facts to the public, could a restoration of these idealized constitutional principles be achieved.³⁶⁹ Part and parcel of that restoration would be the union of the political reform movements in England and Scotland, thus creating a united and popular front for the purposes of political and constitutional reform. This position and goal of the reform movement, perhaps as much as anything else in the Convention,

³⁶⁶ Report from the Government informant identified as ‘J.B.’ in correspondence, November 19, 1793. PRO HO 102/9, fo. 203.

³⁶⁷ Goodwin, p. 298.

³⁶⁸ Report from the Government informant identified as ‘J.B.’ in correspondence, November 19, 1793. PRO HO 102/9, fo. 210.

³⁶⁹ Goodwin, p. 298.

was what concerned the governments of England and Scotland the most. The very idea that, at least up to 1793, a relatively disparate and fractured political reform movement might be able to find a way to unite and coalesce efforts and resources was quite enough to alarm conservatives both in government and in the private sector.

Beyond the potential political disruption such a unified movement might cause, government officials also feared that the potential economic disruption could be severe, especially in a time of war. On Saturday, November 23, the Convention delegates from the SCI made a motion that proposed the entire Convention, and all of the various delegates representing reform groups within, should be renamed as “The British Convention of the Delegates of the People, associated to obtain Universal Suffrage and Annual Parliaments.”³⁷⁰ The motion was carried unanimously with about fifty delegates present, and was the clearest and most direct statement of intentions yet to the general public that a united reform movement might become possible. Further, there was some consideration given to a motion that would allow members (but not delegates to the Convention) from the Society of United Irishmen that was recently banned in Ireland, to address the Convention and subsequently vote on motions if they were duly delegated to do so.³⁷¹ This was also a clear indication to the conservative factions and forces opposed to the reform movement that things were starting to get serious, and that some focused attention on the whole matter was required.

³⁷⁰ *State Trials* (ed. T.B. and T.J Howell), vol. 23, col. 426.

³⁷¹ Report from the Government informant identified as ‘J.B.’ in correspondence, November 19, 1793. PRO HO 102/9, fo. 226.

The LCS Secret Committee

On November 28, 1793 and in some anticipation of a government intervention in their affairs, a motion was submitted and subsequently approved that authorized and required the establishment of a 'secret committee of four' whose purpose was to convene as an emergency body when and if the newly created "British Convention of the Delegates of the People" was ever denied their constitutional right to meet. The final resolution, written by Margarot, is worth considering in its entirety both for its directness and statement of intent from the delegates, and for its anticipation of the events to come:

That this convention, considering the calamitous consequences of any act of legislature, which may tend to deprive the whole, or any part of the people, of their undoubted right to meet, either by themselves, or by delegation, to discuss any matter relative to their common interest, whether of a public or private nature, and holding the same to be totally inconsistent with the first principles and safety of society, and also subversive to our known and acknowledged Constitutional Liberties, do hereby declare before God and the World, that we shall follow the wholesome example of former times, by paying no regard to any act which shall militate against the constitution of our country, and shall continue to assemble and to consider of the best means by which we can accomplish a real representation of the people and annual election, until compelled to desist by superior force. And we do resolve, that the first notice given to the introduction of a Convention Bill [a bill that the Irish Parliament had passed making public meetings for the purpose of political reform illegal], or any bill of a similar tendency to that passed in Ireland, in the last session of their Parliament, or any bill for the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, or the act for preventing wrongous imprisonment, and against undue delays in trials, in North Britain; or in case of an invasion, or the admission of any foreign troops whatsoever into Great Britain or Ireland; all or any of these calamitous circumstances, shall be a signal to the several delegates to repair to such place as the *Secret Committee* of this convention shall appoint.³⁷²

The delegates elected to this committee were Margarot, Skirving, J. Clark, and M. C. Brown. Each of the elected committee members was provided with a sealed letter

³⁷² BL, Add. MSS. 27814, fos. 75-6.

containing the pre-determined place of the emergency meeting if and when it ever became necessary.³⁷³ It was all very cloak and dagger, but nonetheless important to the overall reform movement on two levels. Firstly, if there were any questions prior to the Convention regarding the leadership of the movement those questions were put to rest with the appointment of these LCS leaders to the Secret Committee – all held roles at the LCS leadership levels. Their influence as leaders and their experience with organization and communications in the reform movement was now formally acknowledged. Secondly, and for really the first time, the reform movement had some sense, however illusory it would prove to be, of cohesiveness in terms of their collective goals and objectives and the means by which they would work to accomplish the same in the event of further government repression.

As a result of the General Convention, the movement and the LCS became more publicly visible, although not as visible as the LCS leadership would have liked. The Convention codified the reform movement's existence, including the fact that it was aware of itself and its own collective mortality, and therefore sought to take the kind of actions in the formation of a Secret Committee that might assist it in persevering the core principles of the movement should a crackdown on their activities and their ability to meet come to fruition.

Indeed, the newly appointed members of the Secret Committee had already sent instructions to their colleagues in London to report immediately on any reactions to the Convention from either the government or the ministerial press.³⁷⁴ Gerrald conspiratorially suggested that the passing of the Irish Convention Act was merely a way

³⁷³ Goodwin, p. 301.

³⁷⁴ Goodwin, p. 302.

for the British government “to feel the pulse of the people of Britain, that our rulers might know if it beat high with indignation, or if the blood run coldly in our veins, and we are willing to bow our necks to the yoke and suffer in fear and silence,” adding that the actions of the Convention were “not only a Resolution of words, but a rule of action.”³⁷⁵ And if that were not enough to rouse the government to action, the delegates at the Convention did themselves no favors in this regard as they began to mimic the salutary greetings and some of the organizational processes of the French revolutionaries.³⁷⁶

Convention delegates began addressing each other as Citizen and Citizens, patriotic donations were indicated in the minutes of each meeting, and retroactive to November 29 the calendar was changed to indicate that November 1793 would henceforth be known as the “First Year of the British Convention.”³⁷⁷ It was further suggested that the address commissioned to the Committee of Union to draft as a way to communicate to the general public the outcomes of the Convention should mimic, wherever possible, the French revolutionary *Declaration of Rights* format.³⁷⁸ While this may have played well amongst the Convention delegates, it was not a particularly astute political calculation. Any resemblance to the ways and objectives of the French revolutionaries was bound to alarm conservatives and the government even more, and would only serve to sharpen their response, when it eventually came. Further, such mimicry ran the risk of alienating political moderates who might have had some sympathies with the positions of the reform movement, but who would never go so far as to support a French style uprising in Great Britain.

³⁷⁵ *Edinburgh Gazetteer*, December 3, 1793.

³⁷⁶ Goodwin, p. 302.

³⁷⁷ *State Trials*, vol. 23, col. 435.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, and Goodwin, p. 302.

In fact such actions would come back to haunt members of the LCS in their subsequent sedition and treason trials, but as historian Albert Goodwin has pointed out in his *Friends of Liberty*, their actions were likely not “...so intentionally provocative or so insidiously revealing of an intention to assume the status or powers of a French republican convention” as much as they were the result of enthusiasm and a tendency toward histrionics and grand platitudes and proclamations.³⁷⁹ Nevertheless by December 4 there were enough indications to the delegates that the British government would take action imminently that Margarot and some of the other leading delegates decided to relocate. Before many of them dispersed however, a motion was introduced and passed indicating that any ‘non-constitutional’ cessation of the Convention by anybody other than the delegates themselves would be cause for triggering the initiation and activities of the Secret Committee.³⁸⁰

On December 5 a motion was put before the entire Convention delegation that called for, yet again, a petition to Parliament for reform.³⁸¹ Whether or not that motion was an effort to reinforce the moderation of their approach or the constitutionality of their of their objectives, it came too late and did too little to dissuade the government from action.³⁸² At that evening’s regularly scheduled session the Convention was informed by Skirving, who had just been released on bail, that he, along with Margarot, Gerrald, A. Scott, and W. and G. Ross had been arrested that very morning.³⁸³ No sooner was that information disseminated than the Lord Provost of Edinburgh, with magistrates in tow, entered the meeting hall and declared the meeting and the Convention dissolved as being

³⁷⁹ Goodwin, p. 303.

³⁸⁰ *Edinburgh Gazetteer*, December 10, 1793.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*

³⁸² Goodwin, p. 303.

³⁸³ *Edinburgh Gazetteer*, December 10, 1793, and Goodwin, p. 303.

illegal and unconstitutional.³⁸⁴ The very same thing occurred on the evening of December 6, when just a day after having been released on bail, Margat and Gerrald were arrested again as they presided over a meeting and were physically removed from their chairs.³⁸⁵

Things went further downhill from there. The government breakup of the first British Convention for political reform set in motion a series of events that would represent both the apex of the reform movement in 1794 and 1795, and its eventual demise. Many of the Scottish popular reform societies did not survive the collapse of the Convention and the subsequent legal crackdowns and strict enforcement of the Irish Convention Act.³⁸⁶ The threat of incarceration, and worse in many cases, was enough to scatter many of the working class Scottish and Irish men who had initially rallied around the flag of political reform, but ultimately needed to tend to the more mundane business of providing for their families through their trades or businesses. There was an attempt to reconvene the convention on December 12 after the arrests and the tumult that followed had settled a bit, but that only led to the arrest of Skirving and several of the other delegates who had the nerve to show up.³⁸⁷

All of the efforts that Hardy, Margat, Gerrald, and other LCS leaders had invested in the cultivation of the popular press in England as a way to legitimize their cause did not pay off for them as most of the London papers published very little about the British Convention, and those that did publish anything at all were part of the ministerial press corps. The Pitt government had intensified its suppression of most opposition press as a

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Goodwin, p. 304.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

result of the war with France, and it had become increasingly difficult for the popular press and their editors and owners to publish anything at all, lest they risk arrest for sedition and even treason.³⁸⁸ The ministerial *Oracle* did carry some news of the Convention and the arrests, but the coverage was primarily focused on the arrests and the validity of such an action. On December 16 the *Oracle* ran an item on the arrests of Margat, Gerrald, Sinclair, Callendar, Skirving, and Alexander Scott (editor of the *Edinburgh Gazetteer*), indicating, erroneously, that they were all thought to be delegates from “the London societies.”³⁸⁹

The daily *Morning Post* is a good example of the tightrope that those supporting the reform movement had to walk between publishing and prosecution, when on December 17 it reported on the arrests at the Convention: “We have received further particulars respecting the Sittings of the People, calling themselves the Convention of Delegates in Scotland; but as the legality of their Assembling is questioned, we shall not lay their proceedings before our Readers, it not being our wish to publish any article that may give offence to the existing Government of this Country.”³⁹⁰ While this sort of equivocation was understandable in the context of the government’s suppressive efforts, it was certainly not helpful to the cause of political reform. There was much confusion in the press over just who was arrested and on what charges they were being held. On December 18 the *Post* attempted to clarify the situation by reporting that “...several persons belonging to the Societies of the Friends of the People, had been apprehended in consequence of a warrant from the Sheriff” and published their names.³⁹¹ The *Post*

³⁸⁸ Werkmeister, p. 459.

³⁸⁹ *Oracle*, December 16, 1793.

³⁹⁰ *Morning Post*, December 17, 1793.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, December 18, 1793.

article did provide some further details that helped to illustrate for its readers the scene and circumstances of the arrest: “This day, at twelve o’clock, a vast crowd of people assembled near the Cock-pit, anxious to know the event. Previous to this, however, the Constables and other Peace Officers were ordered to attend, and the Magistrates were in waiting.”³⁹²

All of this exemplifies the challenges facing the leaders of the reform movement, and its supporters, in effectively and directly articulating its messages to a wider public. From the start, one of the strategies of the LCS was to take their message directly to the people, thus creating a popular political movement that would gain the necessary momentum and political power to effect change. Meetings, petitions, newspapers, conventions, pamphlets, etc. were the means by which this could and would, to one extent or the other, be done. However the opponents of the political reform movement knew this as well, and more importantly, had the political, social, and economic power to bring pressure to bear on these communication media. And by late 1793 and early 1794 they were doing exactly that. One by one the communication channels open to the LCS and other reformist groups were slowly being closed off through all the means available to those in the existing political power structure, and the effect was starting to show in undermining the momentum and the cohesiveness of the overall political reform movement.

In mid-December 1793, Skirving, Margat, Gerrald, Sinclair, and Scott were all indicted on charges of sedition. Sinclair decided to turn King’s evidence and avoided prosecution, while Scott, who had the means to do so, took flight after being released by

³⁹² Ibid.

posting bail.³⁹³ Gerrald was allowed to return to London to attend to some private matters, but only after he took a personal oath to return for trial.³⁹⁴ Skirving and Margarot were tried in the first two weeks of January 1794 respectively, and were, unsurprisingly, found guilty of sedition. The prosecution alleged and argued, that as two of the primary leaders behind the British Convention, both Skirving and Margarot had encouraged “...a determined and systematic plan to subvert the limited monarchy and free constitution of Britain, and substitute in its place, by intimidation, force and violence, a republic or democracy...”³⁹⁵

It helped not at all that Lord Justice Braxfield presided, and that Margarot was as bombastic and provocative as ever, prompting the Lord Advocate to describe him as “the most daring and impudent villain of the whole gang.”³⁹⁶ Skirving proved less troublesome, but both men clearly viewed themselves as martyrs in the fight for political reform and representative government. None of this had an impact on Braxfield, and for their troubles both men received nearly the harshest penalties allowed under the law – fourteen years’ transportation to an Australian penal colony. When Gerrald returned for his trial in the middle of March he undoubtedly knew what was coming, and in that way demonstrated a great deal of personal integrity and commitment to the cause of political reform just for returning, rather than fleeing. Once again it mattered not at all, as Braxfield sentenced Gerrald to the same fourteen years’ transportation he had the others. Gerrald, for his part, gave a spirited defense in the name of the cause, and in his summation defense he quoted from his own pamphlet authored in late 1793, providing

³⁹³ Goodwin, p. 305.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ Goodwin, p. 305, and *State Trials*, vol. 23, col. 545.

³⁹⁶ The Lord Advocate in a letter to the Home Office, January 15, 1794, PRO HO 102/10, fo. 76.

both inspiration and perhaps prophecy, to those who continued the political reform movement into 1794:

We must ever regard the suppression of the meetings of the people, (by the interference of power, however elevated), of which the guide is order, the object knowledge, and the end peace, as establishing principles, and deducing consequences, that must EXTINGUISH FOR EVER THE LIBERTIES OF OUR COUNTRY.³⁹⁷

Gerrald's steadfastness in the face of his punishment was admirable, but did nothing to dissuade the British government from their crackdown on the political reform movement. A showdown between the movement and the government seemed inevitable, and in 1794 both parties would have the opportunity to plead their cases in both the court of law and the court of public opinion.

Conclusion

The LCS struggled to get their message of political reform into the public sphere throughout 1793. They sought political reform by constitutional means, and this was reflected in their approaches toward achieving their goals. They struck upon a petition campaign as a way to demonstrate the widespread popular support for political reform. The LCS leaders believed that if they could get a sufficient number of signed petitions supporting political reform, the government would have no choice but to take notice and respond to the petitions. However internal differences inside the reform movement over strategy prevented the LCS from creating a united front among all the reform groups for purposed of the petition campaign.

As that reform approach faded, along with several others, the LCS and several other reform groups decided to stage a General Convention of political reformists in

³⁹⁷ *Address of the British Convention assembled at Edinburgh, November 19, 1793 to the People of Great Britain*, p. 24.

Edinburgh, Scotland. The concept of the idea was similar to that of the petition campaign – as a way to tangibly demonstrate the support for political reform in Britain. The Convention was planned and organized over several months, and November 4, 1793 the first British General Convention for the purposes of political reform was convened. The Convention lasted just over a month, and as a result of dispatched from imbedded spies, the British government began to take notice. On December 5 the government issued warrants and then arrested several LCS leaders, effectively ending the General Convention.

This action by the government began a series of crackdown attempts levied by the government against the LCS and the political reform movement. By the end of 1793 government spies were collecting evidence against several LCS leaders that might allow the government to bring them to trial on charges of sedition or treason. In France, the revolutionary government had just renamed themselves the National Convention, and the British government could not help but view the similarly named events as equally threatening to the state. All of this and more would lead the LCS and British government into direct confrontation in 1794.

FIGURE 1

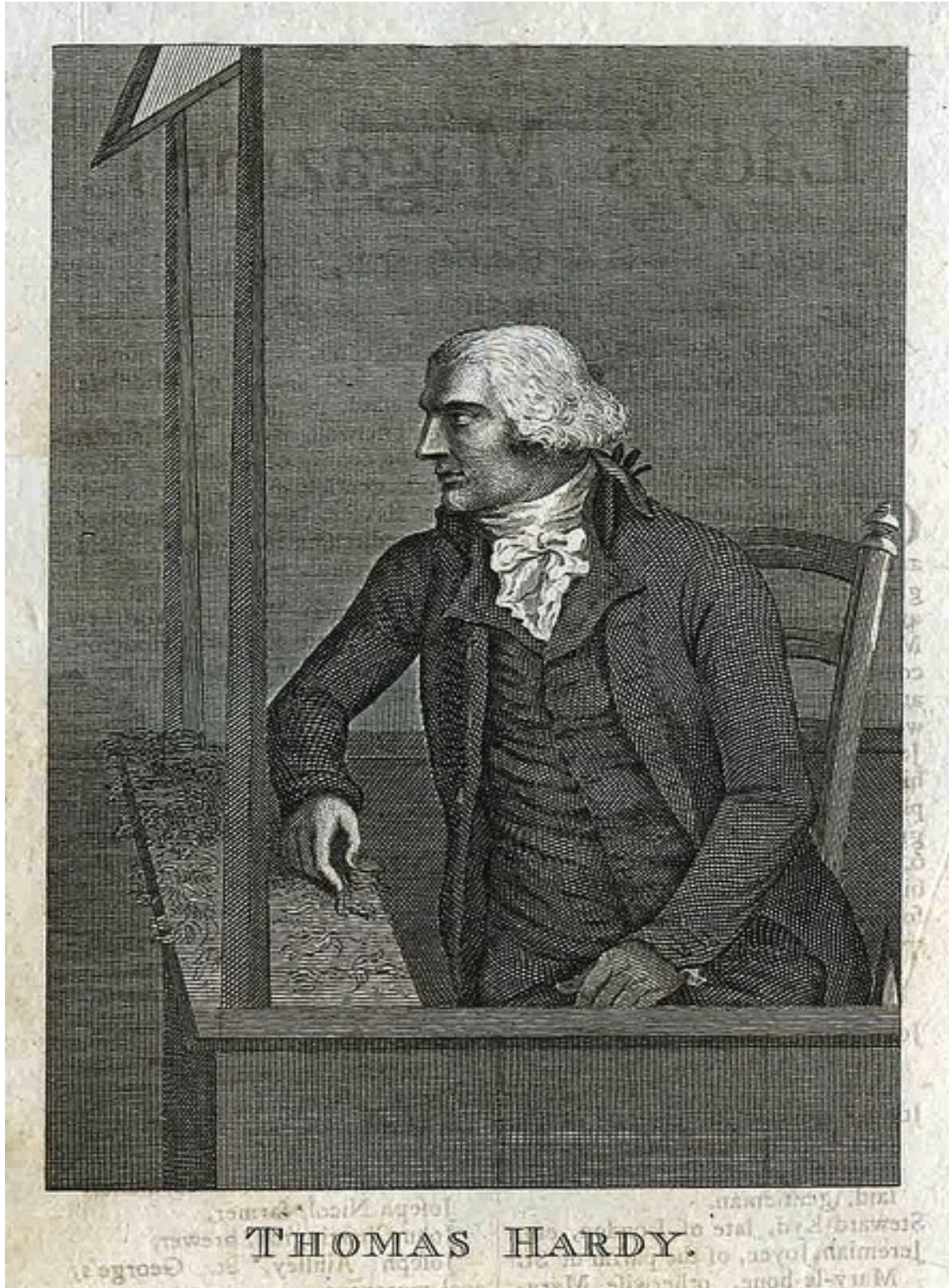


FIGURE 2

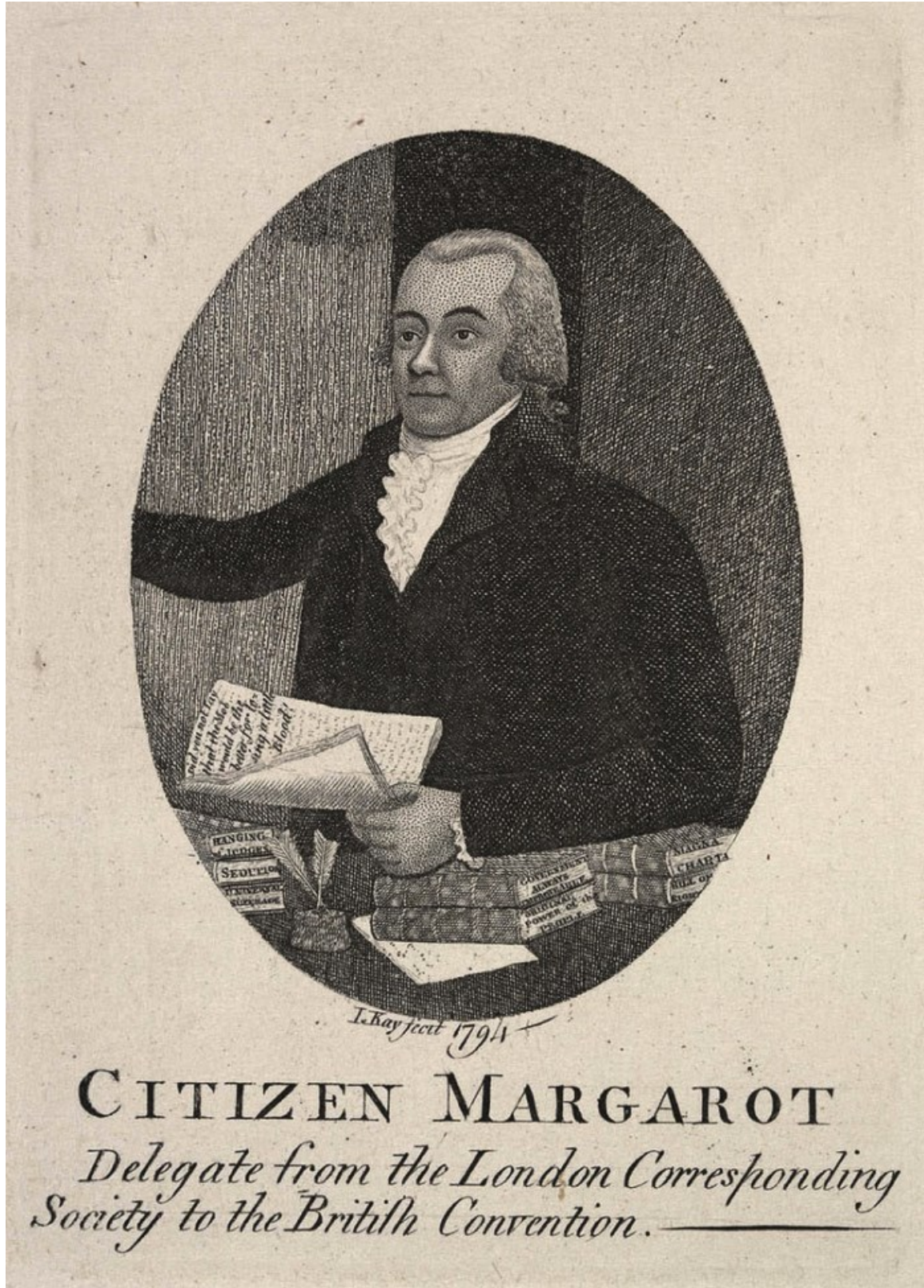


FIGURE 3



FIGURE 4



FIGURE 5



FIGURE 6



FIGURE 7



FIGURE 8



FIGURE 9



FIGURE 10



FIGURE 11



FIGURE 12



FIGURE 13



FIGURE 14



CHAPTER SIX – Accusations & Recriminations

*There was a man from vice and volley free,
 No danger could his steady soul affal;
 No slave to prejudice nor passion, he
 Esteemed his fellow man as brethren all.
 Integrity his shield, and Truth his guide,
 Unawed, he ventured in his country's cause;
 For that he lived, for that he would have died,
 A martyr to her liberty and laws –
 Firm to his purpose, virtuously severe,
 He feared high God, but had no other fear.*

- D. Macpherson, 1794, a poem about Thomas Hardy

The Aftermath of the General Convention

In January of 1794 the remaining leaders of the LCS, including Thomas Hardy, collectively pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and began to consider their next steps. The first ever British Convention of the Delegates of the People had seen its business unceremoniously concluded by the British government, its leaders arrested, tried for sedition, and deported. The leaders of the London Corresponding Society, the Society for Constitutional Information, the Friends of the People, and many others many had a decision to make. They no doubt knew and understood what lay ahead for them if they persisted in their efforts, based upon the Convention examples, and how the British government might respond given the recent actions of the Scottish government and judiciary. They could, of course, discontinue their efforts and go back to their respective

homes and places of business and get on with their lives. But to what end? Despite all of their work little had changed, and they would still not have the right to vote nor see annual elections for Parliament. And what of their social and economic prospects? As newly contributing members to an evolving working class, how would they advance their prospects and who would represent their interests in the larger political sphere? If they stopped their efforts what would become of their children and grandchildren, and what might they think of their abortive efforts at fashioning a more prosperous and representative future for them all? In the wake of all of this, and in an attempt to regain some political and public momentum, the leadership of the LCS, the SCI, and many other reform societies decided once again to carry their message directly to the people of Great Britain – the very people they were attempting to educate and welcome into the political public sphere of working class men. This included making it clear to the public at large that both the LCS and the SCI supported the efforts of the British Convention, and that they would carry on toward the achievement of their political goals and objectives.³⁹⁸

On January 17, 1794 the SCI held a meeting at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in London in support of the Convention, and to protest the trials and sentencing of the leaders of the Convention. LCS leader Joseph Gerrald, still in London attending to private matters before returning to Edinburgh for his trial (Gerrald had been previously elected as an associate member of the SCI), joined the meeting to lend his moral and oratorical support. The resolutions passed by SCI members that evening were reactions to the Convention and its aftermath, and were nothing if not inflammatory in their tone and implications; they were therefore politically provocative and, it must be said, poorly calculated in terms of pouring additional fuel on an already raging fire. With John Horne

³⁹⁸ Goodwin, p. 307.

Tooke presiding, and Gerrald providing the inspirational fervor, the first SCI resolution indicated the disdain in which the SCI viewed the judicial process in Scotland.

Resolved, That law ceases to be an object of obedience whenever it becomes an instrument of oppression. Resolved, That we recall to mind, with the deepest satisfaction, the merited fate of the infamous Jeffreys, once lord chief justice of England, who at the era of the glorious revolution, for the many iniquitous sentences which he had passed, was torn to pieces by a brave and injured people. Resolved, That those who imitate his example, deserve his fate.³⁹⁹

The second resolution was just as inflammatory as the first, and moved the SCI from a moderate fence sitter in the reform movement to an avowed catalyst for reform, and by extension, promoted the SCI and its leaders to the top of the British government's enemies list for 1794. It was also a bit of a nod to Gerrald, whose presence at the meeting seemed to move the SCI and its members off of the fence and into the political fray.

Resolved, That we see with regret, but we see without fear, that the period is fast approaching when the liberties of Britons must depend not upon reason, to which they have long appealed, nor on their powers of expressing it but on their firm and undaunted resolution to oppose tyranny by the same means by which it is exercised.⁴⁰⁰

The LCS also convened a general meeting on January 20, 1794 at the Globe Tavern on Fleet Street in London.⁴⁰¹ The meeting was very well attended by a combination of members and sympathizers, with most estimates putting attendance at between 1000 – 1500 people.⁴⁰² Like the SCI meeting, the discussions and speeches were enthusiastic and the resolutions supportive of the British Convention, and thus provocative to the British government. Several of the resolutions went so far as to call for some sort of

³⁹⁹ *State Trials*, vol. 24, cols. 558-9.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, col. 559.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, cols. 442-6.

⁴⁰² BL, Add. MSS. 27814, fo. 69.

defensive and militaristic action in the event of any potential confrontation with the government, although what that might be was never made clear.⁴⁰³ The members also approved a resolution that called for issuing a proclamation to the public, and instructed John Martin, an attorney, and John Horne Tooke to draft it. The purpose of such an address was to demonstrate the Society's commitment to all of the goals and objectives of the British Convention, and to reaffirm the Society's commitment to continue to work for political reform.

Titled *Address to the People of Great Britain and Ireland*, the finished address was sent to all of the reform societies in Britain and Ireland, and to any sympathetic newspapers that might publish it. The cost of publishing and sending the address was borne completely by the LCS, a matter that would start to cause more and more distress for the Society as time went by and their financial fortunes diminished. The most important thing about the address was that it was published. The reason that was important was that it allowed the LCS, and by extension most of the rest of the political reform movement, the opportunity to enter back into the public sphere with an updated platform of their collective objections and intentions. 1793 had been a difficult year in this regard, particularly with the British government's crackdown on the more supportive members of the press and their newspapers. This was an opportunity, albeit at some expense, to reconnect with their target audiences.

The address was a rehearsal of many of the initial grievances, injustices, and corrective actions supported by the LCS and the reform movement. It was also, however, a public show of support for the British Convention, and more specifically a supportive gesture for the Scottish reform societies that had suffered the brunt of the persecution

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

from the Scottish judicial system in the wake of the Convention.⁴⁰⁴ The address began with a reminder of the legally dubious actions, sentences, and transportations brought against some of the reformers at the Convention, “It is with surprise and indignation that this Society have beheld the late rapid encroachments made by some of the constituted powers in this country upon the freedom of Britons,” and continued with a public reminder of the slow but steady erosion of rights since the Magna Carta and the Glorious Revolution.⁴⁰⁵ The address also listed specific complaints about the acts of the Scottish judiciary, “...and more especially in the horror and execration with which we cannot cease to contemplate the conduct of certain Magistrates, particularly in the towns and county of Edinburgh.”⁴⁰⁶ Exclamations such as these would not win the LCS any favors when they confronted the English judiciary system later in 1794. Further, the address was full of salutations and grammatical flourishes in the style of the French Revolution, including the use of the word ‘CITIZENS!’ as in the French style no less than six times in the very short address (approx. 1000 words). The LCS was walking a very fine line here, attempting to engender enthusiasm and popular support for the reform cause, while at the same time trying not to give their conservative opponents too much political ammunition for comparisons to French revolutionaries.

The morale of the British reformist movement had sunk quite low by the beginning of 1794 due to the movement’s political failures of 1793 – the aborted petition campaign, the lack of press coverage, the infiltration and subsequent implications of being infiltrated by government spies, and the arrests and sentences in the aftermath of the British Convention. The combination of all of these had led to some consternation and

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

indecision in the movement, and in its *Address to the People of Great Britain and Ireland* the LCS hoped to regain some much needed momentum, along with regaining the political, constitutional, and moral high ground from the government and conservatives. The LCS was, however, risking increased scrutiny and the wrath of the combined resources of the British government by publishing a renewed declaration of purpose and intent. The government was already preoccupied with a war against its primary continental enemy, while also coping with any number of economic and political issues as a result of increased taxation and sanctions in support of the war effort. The Society's timing could not have been worse and yet the very survival of the reform movement was at stake; some sort of positive action was badly needed. In the middle of the address, the LCS made clear its position about what its leaders and members viewed as a politically factionalized system that inevitably led to corruption.

Though we are of no *party*, and behold with perfect indifference, the struggles and contentions of *interested factions*, we believe there can be, at this time, but one opinion (among *placemen, pensioners, and expectants* alone excepted) concerning the conduct and principles of the PRESENT ADMINISTRATION – an *Administration* which has only advanced with unparalleled boldness in its repeated *attacks upon our CONSTITUTIONAL LIBERTY*.⁴⁰⁷

Much like their American revolutionary brethren, Hardy and the other LCS leaders believed that political factionalism was anathema to a representative and democratic political system. In this regard the LCS sought to make clear that part of the reform they sought was the ultimate elimination of a multiple party system save for the kinds of political parties that represented their constituents in a fair and morally principled manner. This was idealistic, but it was part of an approach by the LCS to create

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

something around which working class men could rally – a political party that was concerned with their interests - and something that would encourage them to participate politically, even at the risk of losing their livelihoods and freedoms. Needless to say, that sort of popular commitment was an uphill climb in late eighteenth-century Britain, particularly in the context of what was transpiring in France, and the general fear and paranoia it generated amongst political conservatives in Britain.

The address concluded with a request from the LCS to their fellow citizens soliciting their support and opinions on how best to rectify the current state of political affairs: “Such, Fellow Citizens, is the measure relative to which we call upon you for your immediate opinion. If in such measure you will co-operate with us, let us know, without delay, the proposed means of your co-operation. Should any other appear more advisable, we will be happy to have your sentiments without delay.”⁴⁰⁸ This final passage in the Society’s address suggests that the LCS was less sure of its next steps, including any potential responses to the British Convention trials, than they might have liked their members and supporters to believe. In any event, and even though the LCS spent a great deal of their budgetary reserves to publish and distribute the address, it did not become the rallying point that the LCS had hoped for, and the general public took less notice of it than they did the rising price of food staples such as bread and beer.

The LCS and the Media

Nevertheless the LCS and the political reform movement trudged on. One of the most interesting socio-political aspects of reformist leaders such as Hardy - men of modest means - was their remarkable display of persistence in the face of both government pressure to stop and a deafening lack of interest from a broad section of their targeted

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

political audience. To understand why some of these men acted as they did and risked as much as they did seems as important as understanding what they did. After issuing their *Address* the LCS welcomed John Thelwall, an acquaintance of Horne Tooke into their leadership circle. By all accounts Thelwall was a solid if not gifted orator, poet, and publicist, and the hope was that Thelwall would help to reenergize the popular enthusiasm for the strategy of the LCS in early 1794.⁴⁰⁹

Thelwall was welcomed at a formal dinner of the London chapter of the LCS in January, where he sang republican songs and toasted the Edinburgh convention and the brave English and Scottish martyrs who suffered from it, including Gerrald, who was in attendance that evening just prior to his return to Scotland for his trial.⁴¹⁰ The evening concluded with a few words from Gerrald, who brave to the last, proclaimed that he and his fellow reformists should “rather die the last of the British freemen, than the first of slaves.”⁴¹¹ Also in the audience that evening were a number of government spies who reported the proceedings to their respective handlers. Some days after the dinner Hardy and the LCS decided to publish and distribute nearly 100,000 copies of the various speeches and toasts from the dinner, including Gerrald’s impassioned plea to forge ahead with the movement.

Early 1794 required a change in the media approach of the LCS. Prior to the British Convention and the arrests and trials that followed, the Society could count on sympathetic printers and publishers, and a few opposition newspaper editors, to assist in the dissemination of the perspectives and ideas of the Society specifically, and the

⁴⁰⁹ Goodwin, p. 310.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ John Taylor, evidence presented at 1794 trials on behalf of the government, *State Trials*, vol. 24, col.26.

reformist movement more generally. This helped a great deal with the financial burdens of the movement – primarily the costs of printing and distributing materials. However, the government crackdown on opposition papers and publishers since the war broke out with France, and the increasingly active surveillance and crackdown on the reformist movement, both conspired to place much more of the financial burden for the creation and distribution of materials on the LCS. This was not a small matter. As a working-class reform movement made up of men with modest means, the pockets of the LCS and the entire movement were shallow to begin with.

At the beginning of the movement in 1791-2, and certainly before the war with France, the LCS relied upon sympathetic presses to publish many of their pamphlets and broadsheets *gratis*. This policy had allowed the group to maintain the extremely modest membership. As working class men themselves, Hardy and his fellow Society members did not have the advantage of the kinds of deep political and economic connections that could support the activities of the reformist movement. While this may seem a bit mundane in the context of lofty political principles and goals that auger for representative democracy, it was in fact a critical element of the second half of the Society's existence, and the LCS and the rest of the reform movement were significantly hampered by financial trouble and debts through the rest of the decade. The British government worked to suppress the LCS as the focal point of the reform movement, knowing that one of the ways to suppress the movement was by preventing free publications and the membership recruiting benefits that went along with that. It was also the case that in other respects, the LCS and the movement simply ran out of ways to raise money

sandwiched as they were between their working class ethos and lack of supporters of significant means.

This is instructive on several levels. First, in a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing society, and despite some modest economic mobility among a nascent middle class, the distribution of the wealth created by that society lagged well behind its means to produce that wealth. Early industrialization began to create some modified expectations amongst the working class relative to their participation and representation in this new economic paradigm. On some levels that modification of expectations is what Hardy and other reformist leaders sought. This shift in perspectives may have even made some economic sense to the larger society on strictly an economic basis, however the social structure of late eighteenth century Britain was an altogether different thing, and changes to the structure would take much longer indeed.

Second, the LCS and the reform movement lacked the kind of political knowledge and experience needed to make their case to the existing political power structure in terms that might seem less threatening to them. That, of course, is understandable, given the backgrounds of most of the leaders and members of the movement, but it was also the reason that the LCS tried to recruit some men who were sympathetic to their positions and who were currently a part of the existing political structure. In a society still deeply stratified on the basis of hereditary social, political, and economic status that was a big challenge. It was not hopeless, however. There were those with political power who recognized the economic inequities in the new economic model of industrialization and urbanization, as well as the problems these inequities were causing, and therefore sought to assist and support the reform movement. The question was how to do so, and at what

cost to one's existing status. It was in this rather nebulous tidewater area that Hardy and other reform movement leaders attempted to bridge the gaps between the new working class and the existing socio-political power structures.

And finally, industrialization and urbanization began to change the way that political structures and systems worked in this period in important ways. While money had always had a place as the currency of political power, prior to the end of the eighteenth century it was usually less important than one's traditional family status – that is, the combined hereditary, social, economic, and therefore political status of a family name and social position. To be sure, money, in the form of landed property primarily, was the root of all of the aforementioned considerations, but it was not the only important consideration. Factors such as service to the Crown, participation in military endeavors when called upon, and prudent stewardship of one's lands and servants together defined a family's place in society. In the wake of both the American and French revolutions, as well as rapid industrialization, this began to change.

As hereditary considerations waned in importance of the new fortunes of industrialization and urbanization a slow but nonetheless steady shift began to occur in a family's relationship to the state. One's relationship to the production of wealth, hereditary or not, became more important, together with the political clout that wealth could create. That dynamic, in fact, is what Hardy and the LCS were trying to plug into for their own political purposes. That is why men such as Maurice Margarot, Joseph Gerrald, and John Thelwall were recruited to the Society's leadership circle. All three had positions in society above working class – Margarot a general merchant, Gerrald an attorney, and Thelwall, the son of a silk mercer – were sympathetic to the reform

movement. For the LCS, they represented the societal credentials that Hardy and most of the other LCS members lacked due to their socio-economic backgrounds.

Difficult Next Steps for the LCS

In the wake of all of the tumult of early 1794, including the seating of a new Parliament in late January and the lack of press coverage of their General Convention, the LCS and many other reformists were left to consider how to best revive their movement. In and around London many of the reform societies were in favor of more parochial goals – organizing popular support to end the war with France, relieving the severe economic distress in the city and in the nation, seeking the reversal of the verdicts in the Scottish trials, and somehow convincing the government to throttle back their oversight and persecution of the movement.⁴¹² In the case of the latter, it was not altogether clear how this might be accomplished. Some argued that the LCS and other reform-minded societies should invoke the emergency procedures created at the British Convention for just such a circumstance, and essentially take the movement underground. Others argued, and this was Hardy's position, that doing so would be a mistake in so much as all of the time and effort spent on building the presence of the movement in the political public sphere would be lost if the movement were to go quiet simply to avoid government pressure.⁴¹³

Rather, Hardy and others thought it might be possible to solicit the support of the Whigs in favor of their cause in Parliament - the so called Foxite Whigs⁴¹⁴ - thereby

⁴¹² Goodwin, p. 311.

⁴¹³ British Library, *Memoir of Thomas Hardy*, 65153A.

⁴¹⁴ The Foxite Whigs, active from roughly 1782 to 1806, emerged from the political crisis that followed the fall of Lord North's ministry in 1782, and the death of the Marquess of Rockingham later that year, to become the dominant exponents of Whig political identity at the end of the eighteenth century. Led by Charles James Fox, the group was formed around the political philosophy of restricting the arbitrary use of power, and more specifically the view that such an arbitrary use of power was what led to the soured

working within the government to achieve their goals.⁴¹⁵ The approach was a move toward political legitimacy, and its appeal was further grounded in the notion that it seemed a better public relations move to keep on fighting in the public sphere of British politics than to retreat to what might be viewed by the government as a more subversive position by taking the movement underground and conducting their affairs under the cloak of secrecy. However, while the Foxite Whigs of the new Parliament of 1794 were supportive, they had far too little political clout to help the movement from inside the government. Further, some of the reformist groups, such as the Association of the Friends of the People opposed such an approach, primarily because they were not in favor of the British Convention in the first instance, and they viewed this suggested strategy as simply a continuation of a flawed reform strategy.⁴¹⁶ The more radical reformists had long argued for a more militant strategy as a way to achieve change, even as Hardy knew that such an approach would quickly turn public opinion against the reform movement.

The reform groups had other reasons to be concerned about their collective futures and well being in the early spring of 1794. While the leaders of the LCS and the other societies debated what to do next, word came to them from a variety of political sources and operatives that the government was stepping up its measures to curtail the political reformist movement. Throughout February word trickled into the leadership circles of the movement that the government had been landing mercenary Hessian troops on the Isle of Wight, ostensibly as an additional national security presence during a time of war,

relationship with the American colonies and their war for independence. Among the many notable politicians who joined Fox in this coalition were Edmund Burke, Lord John Cavendish, and William Bentinck, third duke of Portland.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Goodwin, p. 312.

but in reality for deployment against the movement as a way to shut it down once and for all. Further fuel was added to that speculation when the Pitt government began to construct barracks in London, Birmingham, Liverpool, and other industrial cities. To the reformists this meant just one thing – the government was coming after them in no uncertain terms.⁴¹⁷ The government also formed something called the Volunteer Corps in the spring of 1794 as way to better prepare the nation in the event it might need to defend against an invasion from France. Interestingly, the Volunteer Corp, and particularly its cavalry unit, the Yeomanry, were commanded by the wealthier middle class and upper class members, who underwrote the considerable expenses required to supply the unit with horses and uniforms.

This development had a chilling effect on many members in the leadership circle of the reform movement, as they feared the potential for political and economic class warfare.⁴¹⁸ Some in the movement even advocated arming their members, at least for the purposes of self-defense, and conducting training sessions on the proper use of arms.⁴¹⁹ Cooler heads prevailed however, and no such arming or training ever took place in the reform movement, although it continued to be contemplated by some. Rather, these developments became the trigger for the suggestion that an emergency convention be

⁴¹⁷ Maurice Margarot, writing to Hardy from his prison cell in Edinburg opined, “Armed associations are I perceive, now set on foot by the rich, wherefore should not the poor do the same? Are you to wait patiently until 20,000 Hessians and Hanoverians come to cut your throats?” January 24, 1794, *State Trials*, vol 24., col. 480.

⁴¹⁸ Goodwin, p. 314.

⁴¹⁹ The memories of the Hessian role in the American Revolution were still fresh amongst many in the reform movement. Many in the movement believed that this period in the movement was a “now or never” point and that arming themselves was the next best logical thing to do. Richard Hodgson, a former Chairman of the LCS when Hardy was Secretary, authored a placard in mid-April 1794 that read: “The Ins tell us that we are in danger of invasion from the French. The Outs tell us that we are in danger from the Hessians and the Hanoverians. In either case we should arm ourselves; get arms and learn how to use them. *State Trials*, vol. 24, col. 837.

called for the purposes of charting the reform movement's course through these tumultuous times.

In many respects this was yet another crossroads moment for the political reform movement. On the one hand, the government's aggressive efforts to curtail the movement - the embedding of spies in the various reform groups, the crackdowns of sympathetic editors and publishers, the arrests at the British Convention, and the rumors of Hessian troops in the same industrial areas where the movement had its firmest footing - all demanded some sort of response. But what sort of response was warranted, and at what risk to the principles, goals, and objectives of the overall movement? For those more radical elements of the movement the course was clear - the reformers should be armed and should stand ready to defend both their lives and their civil rights. But if the reformist movement were to arm themselves, the Pitt government would surely accelerate its crackdown of the movement under the guise that it represented a direct threat to the security of the nation. In effect, the reformist movement would be put into the same political bucket as the French, a bucket that Hardy and some of the other reformist leaders had been desperately trying to keep the movement out of since 1791.

And so Hardy and others argued the other hand of the debate, and that was to stay the course they were on by continuing to carry their goals, objectives, and approaches to the general public as best they could in the hopes of igniting enough popular support to effect the changes they sought. Anything short of that, argued Hardy, would be a disservice to the goals and aspirations of the political reformist movement and to those who had staked their political and economic futures on its outcome.⁴²⁰ In the end, the moderate and radical sides of the movement could not agree, an omen of things to come in the reform

⁴²⁰ British Library, *Memoir of Thomas Hardy*, 65153A.

movement. A stopgap compromise decision was made by asking the previously appointed Secret Committee to consider whether or not a second British Convention, this time in England, should be considered as a way to reenergize the movement.⁴²¹

The LCS Secret Committee, as its members referred to themselves, was indeed secret. In fact very little documentation remains of their deliberations and discussions. No minutes were taken of their meetings and no reports were distributed for fear of government reprisal. The members of the committee, whose names are at least known to history, were scrupulously concerned with protecting their existence. The Secret Committee consisted of John Martin, an active leader of the LCS, John Baxter and Richard Hodgson, both former chairs of the LCS whose political views were generally more radical than Hardy's, Mathew Moore, and John Thelwall.⁴²²

The Secret Committee conducted several meetings from late winter to early spring in 1794, and we do know that it was the recommendation of this committee that another General Convention be called for the spring of 1794 as way to galvanize the movement: In part the LCS resolution read that "...there ought to be *immediately* a CONVENTION of the PEOPLE, by delegates deputed for that purpose from the different societies of the *Friends of Freedom* [this was an oft used generic moniker used to include all of the various groups and societies involved in the reform movement], assembled in the various parts of the kingdom."⁴²³ As Secretary of the LCS, Hardy set about contacting many of the other societies in and around London. In April he sent letters to the Whig Association, the Society for Constitutional Information, the Friends of the People, and many others. Hardy's objective was to make the case for a second General Convention,

⁴²¹ Goodwin, p. 315.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ British Library, *Memoir of Thomas Hardy*, 65153A.

despite the risks involved, and to reiterate the need for a more moderate approach to political reform that stayed within the bounds of constitutional privileges and rights, if not strictly within the bounds of some of the current laws on the books.

Hardy argued for the necessity of “a speedy convention” as a means of reinvigorating the short and long term objectives of the LCS, and thus the reform movement overall. In the short term that meant the need to demonstrate to the British government that the movement was not going to take the recent crackdown on their political and constitutional rights as a matter of course, and in the long term to continue to prepare the movement and the nation for “a full and fair representation of the people.”⁴²⁴ Hardy was nothing if not persistent, and given his humble origins one has to admire his intestinal fortitude for the cause, if not as much his political naivety in his persistent belief that the majority of his fellow citizens, including those currently sitting in the British government, would ultimately come around to his and the Society’s view.

As suggested previously, 1794 was a watershed year in many respects for the LCS and for the political reform movement of the late eighteenth century writ large, and the decisions and subsequent actions taken in 1794 would define the movement until the British government effectively outlawed political reform activism in 1797. Hardy remained intent on the notion that the best way for the LCS and the rest of the political reform movement to achieve their ostensibly shared goals (as the movement was beginning to show stress fractures in their solidarity) was through a “constitutional and legal method.”⁴²⁵ Among his contemporary reformist leaders in London, the SCI was not initially in favor of a second General Convention. The leaders of the SCI feared further

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

reprisals from the government, and instead favored an approach in which the movement would effectively go underground, a course of action that Hardy believed to be tantamount to giving up the cause.⁴²⁶

On the other end of the spectrum, Hardy and the LCS were trying to convince the more radical elements of the movement, including some members of the Friends of the People led by R. B. Sheridan, that arming the movement and making a public spectacle out of military drilling and preparedness would be their death knell.⁴²⁷ In his letter to Sheridan, Hardy argued for a measured response to the recent government backlash, specifying the abuses that required “immediate redress”: the government’s efforts to use foreign mercenaries in the country during a time of war with France, and the use of public funds to employ “a train of spies, more dangerous to society than so many assassins” against the reform movement.⁴²⁸

Hardy used a similar tack in his letter to the Whig Association, a political group of mostly elected officials generally sympathetic to the reform movement, by proposing that a “Convention of the Friends of Freedom,” to demonstrate a “full and effectual representation of the people” could obtain political reform through their force of will in “a legal and constitutional method” and in a strictly peaceful and lawful manner.⁴²⁹ Hardy emphasized in his letters that the LCS was determined to continue the movement with or without wider support based on its belief that “as there is no power which *ought*, so there is no power which *can* finally withstand the just and steady demands of a people

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Goodwin, p. 317 and BL, *Memoir of Thomas Hardy*, 65153A.

⁴²⁹ *State Trials*, vol. 24, cols.562-3 and *Goodwin*, p. 317.

resolved to be free.”⁴³⁰ Hardy was fighting for the life of the political reform movement and by all accounts he knew it.

The trials and convictions resulting from the Scottish General Convention, the infusion of spies into the movement, the crackdown on the sympathetic press, and the alarming importation of a foreign internal security force all placed great strains on the movement. Hardy believed that if the reform movement radicalized to the point of militarization, the full weight and force, including the military, of the British government would be brought down on their heads, with some loss of life no doubt, and the movement would not only be eradicated, but remembered to history as merely a quasi-militaristic fringe movement that left nothing of merit.

However, Hardy also knew that to take the reform movement underground might mean its survival, but for how long and to what end? Once underground the movement would be hard pressed to engage actively the public sphere they so desperately tried to appeal to in Britain, and much of their popular and tacit support would simply vanish. It was therefore Hardy’s belief, and by extension that of the LCS, that staying the course of determined and persistent action of a legal, constitutional, and peaceful nature was the best approach to achieving their political objectives – objectives that were, after all, wrapped in the warm cloak of British constitutionalism and the individual liberties and civil rights of its citizens.⁴³¹

Hardy’s letters were followed by a number of printed circular letters intended for the entire memberships of the various reform societies in England and Scotland. The letters were the work of a joint “committee of cooperation and communication” comprised of

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ British Library, *Memoir of Thomas Hardy*, 65153A.

members of the LCS and of the SCI.⁴³² The letters were less emphatic than Hardy's on the need to persevere and persist, but were rather more urgent in tone regarding the necessity to convene "another British Convention" before the government forbade such things, either legally or militarily. The letters were really an acknowledgement of the dire straights the reform movement found itself in, and a call to action as a way to recharge the movement.⁴³³

In that context the letters called for an immediate expression of radical reform solidarity through the staging of a nation-wide demonstration in support of political reform.⁴³⁴ Recognizing the precarious state of that solidarity, Hardy's letters also suggested a general airing of radical differences and recalibration of the "future operations of the friends in accordance with the views to be expressed by the delegates of the different societies assembled in conference."⁴³⁵ The letters stressed the need for speed and secrecy – a response was requested as expeditiously as was practical and a postscript to each letter written by Hardy suggested that each recipient group might consider forming a secret committee as the LCS and SCI had.⁴³⁶ Further, each recipient was asked to respond with the number of their delegates that might be expected to attend, and each was told in no uncertain terms to make ready, but that the location of the convention could not be revealed to them until all replies had been received and the number of attendees more firmly established.

The responses to the 'call to action' letters were mixed, and were reflective of the increasingly fractured state of the movement in the spring of 1794. The metropolitan

⁴³² PRO TS 11/952/3496(ii).

⁴³³ Goodwin, p. 317.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ *State Trials*, vol. 24, col. 481.

⁴³⁶ Goodwin, p. 317.

chapters of the Friends of the People flatly rejected the idea of a second convention, fearing that it would only serve to bring more attention and repression down on the movement.⁴³⁷ Their fears were no doubt warranted, and the recent rumors that additional Hessian mercenaries had docked in London contributed to their nervousness over just how far the government would go to put down the movement. On the other hand, the Society for Constitutional Information sent a response of complete support for the convention, and further recommended that a joint committee be established immediately. The committee would meet in John Thelwall's lecture room at No. 2 Beaufort Building off the Strand, and should with all haste "consider the proper methods of obtaining a full and fair representation of the people."⁴³⁸

Further, the SCI proposed that "a regular and pressing correspondence" should be initiated with any of the provincial associations inclined to send delegates as a means of coordinating activities and messages, and that a standing "committee of co-operation and communication" be established for the express purpose of receiving delegates from the provincial societies who found themselves in London "from time to time."⁴³⁹ In that request, which was enthusiastically adopted at the LCS meeting of April 10 1794, the SCI succinctly characterized one of the core obstacles facing the movement from its inception to its premature demise – cooperation (or command) and control. The absence of coordinated leadership and communication was the Achilles heel of the political reform movement throughout the late eighteenth-century, even given the very modern means of publication of information available to them at the time.

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

⁴³⁸ *State Trials*, vol. 24, cols. 564-5.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

The British Government Responds

This gave the British government, the very model of coordinated bureaucratic activity in the late eighteenth-century, the upper hand from the start in terms of suppressing the movement. Throughout the duration of the London Corresponding Society's existence, roughly 1792 – 1799, they never quite hit upon the means, try as they might, to effectively coordinate the activities of the many and sundry associations and societies that comprised the movement. Their disadvantages in attempting to do so were many – not the least of which was the complete lack of experience many of these reformists had in coordinating anything more than their familial activities before they joined the movement. This is not to say that many of these men were not intelligent, creative, and clever actors in the movement, as some most assuredly were, but their lack of practical political and organizational experience created a considerable learning curve for any of the men who suddenly found themselves trying to hold together a geographically dispersed and politically diverse movement. In terms of command and control the government certainly had the advantage, and once they began paying attention to the reform movement, it used that advantage very effectively.

Further, the political reform movement suffered from having no efficient way to coordinate activities between metropolitan and provincial chapters and societies, save arduous and lengthy travel that many of the working men involved in the movement could ill afford. Even in the rapidly modernizing and industrializing late eighteenth century, geography still mattered. The core of administration in the political reform movement for Hardy and the LCS, was thus an exercise in logistics. Beyond the political education lectures and the debates over goals and objectives, a great deal of time was

spent at each and every chapter meeting on the basic logistics involved in scheduling meetings, finding places to meet, communicating the arrangements to members, traveling to meetings, recording meeting minutes, discussing future meeting schedules and locations, and a multitude of other sorts of items that all revolved around the effort to simply keep the movement running. Some associations did that better than others, and some geographical locations were more conducive to such activities than others. The metropolitan or urban-based groups had an easier time of it. If one belonged to a chapter in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, etc., it was generally easier to know when and where meetings of one's particular society or association were to occur. If one belonged to a more provincial or rural-based chapter, however, it was often more difficult to keep in touch with the activities of one's own group. In either event, coordination and control of the movement bedeviled the working class leaders of political reform and it was something they were constantly working on.

From 1793 onward the British government was keeping a constant and watchful eye over the movement. Once again geography and logistics proved important as it was easier for the government to imbed spies into the urban-based movements given their generally larger and more diverse memberships. Beginning in the middle of 1793 the LCS became a particular target for infiltration and observation as the government believed the Society to be the de facto leader of the broader movement, whether that was actually the case or not. As early as the middle of 1792 the government had been receiving reports on the activities of the LCS through one George Lyman, a former ironmonger who had become a delegate to LCS division No. 23 in Walbrook.⁴⁴⁰ As mentioned previously, John Taylor, another government informer on the activities of the

⁴⁴⁰ Goodwin, p. 318.

LCS, had become a member “in good standing” in January of 1794.⁴⁴¹ In both cases these spies provided the government with detailed reports on the activities, economics, and future plans of the LCS that the government would refer to extensively later in 1794 at the treason trials of Hardy and several other LCS leaders. It was very difficult for a nascent political organization such as the LCS, and for its inexperienced leaders and organizers, to properly screen potential members and delegates. In as much as one of the main strategies of the Society, and of the movement more generally, was to reach a critical mass of popular support, there was more concern given to increasing membership by whatever means than to carefully vetting those interested in joining. In fact, one of the few behaviors that might get one expelled from the LCS was nothing less than repeated public drunkenness.⁴⁴² In the series of lectures given by Thelwall at Beaufort in the lead up to the second convention at Beaufort the spies present received a rich trove of anti-government information for their purposes. This episode is important to the story and trajectory of the LCS as it was from Thelwall’s lectures that the British government compiled a damning legal indictment of the LCS specifically, and the political reform movement more generally by proxy.

For several weeks in March and April of 1794 Thelwall held court at Beaufort and delivered his lectures. What concerned the government as much as the content of the lectures were the numbers of people who attended, and most particularly the social and economic makeup of the crowds. The LCS charged 6d. for admission, a cost intended to allow as many as possible to hear Thelwall speak, while also being able to cover the expenses associated with the events. The government spies who attended the lectures

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴⁴² British Library, *Memoir of Thomas Hardy*, 65153A.

noted that many men from the more well-heeled classes attended, perhaps for their amusement, but in many cases apparently left with Thelwall's lectures having made something of an impact on them.⁴⁴³ In his report to the government after one of the lectures, the spy Taylor reported that Thelwall began many of the lectures by rehearsing a well known list of political and economic injustices – the wars with France and her proxies, the corrupt judicial system, the increasing number of the needy in urban areas, the necessity to persevere in the cause, etc. – all as a way to encourage those attending to either join the movement or stay the course in the movement. Thelwall went further however, as he was well read in the most contemporary trends of radical political thought, quoting liberally from Daniel Eaton's *Politics for the People*, and Samuel Godwin's *Political Justice*.⁴⁴⁴ To the horror of the spy Taylor, Thelwall also included a complement to the French and their revolution, and particularly the French radicals' efforts to eradicate religious superstition.⁴⁴⁵

Thelwall was a good orator, despite his rather high-pitched voice and a lisp, and in his lectures effectively weaved the topics of the day into a historical narrative of political oppression and tyranny. More than that however, Thelwall mixed his politics with broader social causes, appealing directly to his working class audiences when he lamented the difficulty of reliable transportation to industrial centers to earn a wage, the mistreatment of the poor, and even the employment of the Hessian mercenaries when British citizens and soldiers might have served the same role.⁴⁴⁶ Much like today, political and social causes were often conjoined as a way to pull people together into a

⁴⁴³ Goodwin, p. 319.

⁴⁴⁴ John Taylor, evidence presented at 1794 trials on behalf of the government, *State Trials*, vol. 24, col.26.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

more effective political force. By appealing to the many social ills of late eighteenth-century England, Thelwall was making an emotional connection with much of his audience – people who could relate their lots in life to Thelwall’s descriptions of society’s many ills. In fact many radical and reformist political commentators of the day did the same thing, and taken together this was the decade where the political and social messages that would provide the fuel for the 1832 Reform Act were rehearsed, honed, and implanted in the consciousness of the British public sphere. This was also the decade, as suggested earlier, in which organizational methods, techniques, and disciplines necessary for political reform in the first part of the nineteenth century were practiced, modified, and established.

The importance of the last decade of the eighteenth century in the context of popular political reform cannot be understated. Indeed, the 1790s were the culmination of nearly a century of the kinds of popular political participation that included the heretofore disenfranchised elements of British society. Although the nineteenth century would be remembered for the gains and advances in British political reform and the organized labor movements, the eighteenth century, and particularly the 1790s, is where those movements cut their teeth. Even the government crackdown on the LCS and the political reform movement more generally in the 1790s served an important purpose toward the reforms to come – it provided the political reform movement with the kinds of experiences and adversity required to harden their methods and approaches.

The political and social fallout from the American Revolution, the political introspection over the French Revolution and how it compared, or did not, to British constitutionalism, the increasing pace of industrialization and the urbanization it begat,

and the wars that would rage across Europe in the Napoleonic era, all combined to contribute to what one might reasonably view as the hardening of the British popular political reform movement. Though they were likely unaware of it at the time, Thelwall, Hardy, Margarot, Horne Tooke, and countless others were laying the foundations for a more organized, active, and effective movement in the first half of the nineteenth century. In fact, Thomas Duncombe, one of the early political supporters of the Chartists in 1842, noted the lineage in the inaugural Chartist petition: “those who were originally called radicals and afterward reformers, are now Chartists.”⁴⁴⁷

Eventually Thelwall’s lecture series in the spring of 1794 grew to include nearly 600 attendees, and during that time the LCS played a cat and mouse game with the government, moving from one location to the next as a way of staying one step ahead of the suspension and revocation of landlord’s licenses in an effort to prevent the lectures from continuing.⁴⁴⁸ By the end of the spring of 1794 the lectures were often attended by “bludgeon men” hired by wealthy aristocrats whose purpose was intimidation and if possible to break up the meetings. Thelwall was protected at these lectures by the working class men who attended, and he even took to carrying a small concealed sword for his own protection “in the case of extremity.”⁴⁴⁹

Nevertheless, the government spies in attendance continued to feed damning information to their government handlers, and they particularly emphasized Thelwall’s scathing criticism of laws deliberately intended “to aggrandize the rich and oppress the poor.”⁴⁵⁰ This was serious mischief indeed because it explicitly criticized the political

⁴⁴⁷ Thomas Duncombe MP, *Chartist Petition*, presented to Parliament on May 2, 1842.

⁴⁴⁸ Goodwin, p. 320.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ John Taylor, *State Trials*, vol. 24, col. 481.

elites, and was recognized as such by those beyond the halls of Parliament. John Reeves, one of the leaders of the Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers, encouraged the government to tighten their security measures against such groups, especially in the context of what he viewed as their increasing boldness. Reeves, like many others in the government and the aristocracy, was concerned with the way that Thelwall and the LCS were able to attract more than just the working class: “The mischief of these lectures is of a new kind,” in so much as there were “serious people” in attendance whose very presence added some credibility and validity to the political positions of the movement, and could exert some political influence on their colleagues and contemporaries.⁴⁵¹

However, it must be said that throughout his series of lectures, Thelwall was as careful as he could be in following the moderate approach of Hardy, Horne Tooke, and of the LCS more generally. He always tried to contextualize his commentaries within the fundamental laws of custom and constitution, and he never once advocated a violent or unlawful action to his listeners.⁴⁵² Thelwall and the others leaders of the LCS continually said that tearing down the constitution was never their aim, rather it was to see the constitution and the rights it represented and reflected made applicable to all. That said, Thelwall would occasionally stray off script when condemning his political opponents whose opinions were that “the people had no business in discussing political affairs,” including the economic severities caused by the war and the injustices perpetrated by the Court of Justiciary in Scotland in the wake of the first British General Convention.⁴⁵³

⁴⁵¹ PRO TS 11/965/3510A(ii).

⁴⁵² British Library, *Memoir of Thomas Hardy*, 65153A.

⁴⁵³ John Thelwall, *The Natural and Constitutional Right of Britons to Annual Parliaments, Universal Suffrage and the Freedom of Popular Association* (London, 1795), p. 86.

With respect to Thelwall's perceived criticism of the monarchical system, and by extension the Society's criticism of the same, Thelwall carefully contended that:

There was no great mischief in royalty itself, it was in those, who, having the Treasury at their back and corruption in their hearts, had introduced a system of spies and informers to stop the free use of man's intellectual faculties, who had introduced an Inquisitor General among us in the person of the immaculate Mr. Reeves, and who are endeavoring to wrest from the people their few remaining rights and liberties.⁴⁵⁴

Careful or not, from the government's perspective – in a time of war with a radical revolutionary foe - this sort of dialogue was tantamount to publicly declaring oneself a revolutionary, and indeed, that was the British government's interpretation of Thelwall's lectures and actions.⁴⁵⁵ On May 1, 1794 a copy of one of Thelwall's lecture was submitted as evidence for a possible libel prosecution at the Court Leet of the Duchy of Savoy.⁴⁵⁶ In his lecture of May 2, Thelwall proclaimed his innocence noting, rather provocatively, that his real crime was not libel or even treason, but instead was something that “was infinitely more offensive to men in power,” that being his call for a “bold and open investigation” of the means by which these men “were plunging the country into irretrievable destruction.”⁴⁵⁷

At the same time, the government was growing increasingly worried over the activities of supposed French revolutionaries in England, and particularly with a secret emissary of the French Committee of Public Safety, the Reverend William Jackson. Jackson was a prominent member of a group of British and Irish exiles who had taken up residence in Paris, and he had been spotted and followed by the spies of the British

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Goodwin, p. 321.

⁴⁵⁶ Goodwin, p. 321.

⁴⁵⁷ John Thelwall, lecture of May 2 1794 entitled, *The characters and Views of the present Reformers and their opponents, in answer to Mr. Mainwaring's charge to the Grand Jury*. PRO TS 11/957/3502 and Goodwin, p. 321.

government upon his arrival in London in the spring of 1794. Jackson's secret mission confirmed the worst fears of the government – to collect opinions and information relating to the probable reception that French invasion forces might get from the general population of England.⁴⁵⁸ As is often the case with radical and revolutionary movements, those at the centers of such movements have an overly optimistic opinion toward the more general acceptance of their cause by non-stakeholders. This was certainly true of many French revolutionaries who believed that the English populace would overwhelmingly support French attempts to overthrow the British government, irrespective of several centuries of political, cultural, and military conflict. Why these French opinions were so strong is unclear, but one possible explanation might be found in the rather politically skewed correspondence between the LCS and other such British reform groups, and the French revolutionaries. In much of that correspondence there is an overly simplified view of the political similarities and objectives between British and French revolutionaries, and the zealotry with which British reformists would carry out their political missions. In any event, Jackson had been sent to London to ascertain the true nature of any potential support for French incursions.

The LCS, as the de facto leader of the political reformist movement, was especially vulnerable to government accusations of conspiring with the French despite the best efforts of Hardy and others to discourage such activities. In fact, British leaders of radical, reformist, and Whig Opposition groups were all unanimous in their convictions that while they may hold political sympathies with the French, by the spring of 1794 all outward support for them had withered under the British governments declaration of war and their effective anti-revolutionary propaganda efforts. As William Smith, MP and

⁴⁵⁸ Goodwin, p. 323.

spokesman for the Unitarian interests in Parliament opined, the Pitt government had been successful “in raising a strong spirit of attachment to every branch; I might almost say, to every abuse of the constitution.”⁴⁵⁹ Smith took his analysis a step further, essentially suggesting what others in the reform movement had been advocating, and that was to go under ground: “We should only wrap our Cloak more tightly around us, like the man in the Storm, and refuse every offer of Fraternity that came to us in so questionable a shape.”⁴⁶⁰ Jackson, however, continued his secret mission on behalf of the French and traveled to Dublin to attempt to rally support for the French amongst Irish radical groups, but instead was arrested by the Irish authorities on April 28.

Momentum was building for some sort of aggressive actions by the British government. To that end, several of Jackson’s contacts in England and Ireland were also arrested, and combined with their conspiratorial suspicions toward the French and those in England who supported them, the British government was poised to take their anti-reformist activities to the next level; one of their key targets would be Hardy and the London Corresponding Society.

Conclusion

The beginning of 1794 found the LCS and the larger reform movement struggling to decide what to do next. The General Convention of late 1793 ended in arrests by the government that impacted the leadership ranks of the LCS. As Hardy and the other LCS leaders considered their next moves, they faced increased government crackdowns on their efforts. Chief among those crackdowns was the elimination of the access the LCS had enjoyed to sympathetic members of the press. The government outlawed the printing

⁴⁵⁹ State Trials, vol. 25, col. 1262.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., col. 1263.

of seditious material and that had the effect of persuading those media channels sympathetic to the reform movement to discontinue printing the letters and pamphlets of the LCS.

The reform movement was faced with difficult choices, and this caused some splintering between the various reform groups. Hardy and the LCS continued to advocate for reform by constitutional means, but others thought that the only way to combat the escalating government activity against them was to push back hard, and violently if necessary. Still other reform leaders believed that the movement should align itself closer with the new French revolutionary government. Hardy knew that any move to radicalize the political reform movement in Britain would result in its quick and violent dissolution by the government. He therefore walked a fine line through the first part of 1794 as he tried to hold the wobbling movement together.

Still in all, the importance of the last decade of the eighteenth century in the context of popular political reform cannot be understated. Indeed, the 1790s were the culmination of nearly a century of the kinds of popular political participation that included the disenfranchised elements of British society. Although the nineteenth century would be remembered for the gains and advances in British political reform and the organized labor movements, the eighteenth century, and particularly the 1790s, is where those movements cut their teeth. Even the government crackdown on the LCS and the political reform movement more generally in the 1790s served an important purpose toward the reforms to come – it provided the political reform movement with the kinds of experiences and adversity required to harden their methods and approaches.

CHAPTER SEVEN – Trial by Fire

*At half past 6 o'clock on Monday morning the 12th of May 1794 Mr. Sausan gave a thunderous knock at my door No. 9 Piccadilly before the shop was open, and having no suspicion of what had been prepared for me, instantly went half dressed and opened the door, when Sauson darted in, and told me he had a warrant to apprehend me on a charge of high Treason, and beckoned to the other men at the door to come in.*⁴⁶¹

-Thomas Hardy, recounting in his memoir his arrest for treason

The Government Builds Its Case

April and May of 1794 turned out to be momentous months for the political reformist movement in Great Britain, and for the government's efforts in curtailing its influence. Within a month's time three of the most prominent political reformist associations held meetings or issued resolutions to the general public that provided the British government with the ammunition and evidence it sought to crack down on the movement with a series of arrests. On April 7 the Sheffield Constitutional Society held an open-air meeting wherein resolutions were read calling for radical changes to the structure of the government. On April 14 the LCS conducted a large open-air meeting of their own at Chalk Garden that was attended by several agents of the government, there for the express purpose of gathering evidence against Hardy, Thelwall, and the other LCS leaders. And on May 2 the Society for Constitutional Information held an anniversary dinner in London, again attended by several government agents, in which the wine and ale got the better of some of the toasters, whose toasts were less than complimentary of many members of Parliament.⁴⁶²

The Sheffield Constitutional Society referred to themselves as the "Friends of Justice, Liberty, and Humanity," and their event of April 7 was coordinated by Joseph Gales, one

⁴⁶¹ Hardy, *Memoir*, p. 127.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*

of the editors of the Sheffield Register.⁴⁶³ The Register was a daily paper that supported the political reformist movement and had not as yet been shut down by the government.⁴⁶⁴ The meeting was held on Castle Hill, and many contemporary reports put attendance at nearly ten thousand that number was probably inflated by Gales and his newspaper in order to enhance the political importance and impact of the Sheffield group. The main focus of the meeting was to put forward the assertion that continued petitions of Parliament were useless, a waste of time and energy, and that it might be time to consider more direct actions to spur the reform movement forward.⁴⁶⁵ To that end, Henry Yorke, the chairman of the meeting, proceeded to give a nearly hour-long speech on the hypothetical possibilities and outcomes of such actions.⁴⁶⁶

The rhetoric employed by Yorke was as hypothetical and innocuous as he could possibly make it, understanding that government agents were likely in the crowd and were recording as much of the proceedings as they could. Yorke referred to Anglo-Saxon “precedents,” that might be rekindled to produce a sort of “revolution of sentiment” in which the disenfranchised would claim their proper and vested role in society.⁴⁶⁷ Yorke also cited John Locke’s *Second Treatise on Civil Government* in defending a citizen’s right to resist tyranny and arguing that a society’s citizens ought to be universally represented in a mutually formed government.⁴⁶⁸ Many of the reformist associations formed by working class men had experienced having their petitions to

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁶ *Proceedings of the Public Meeting held at Sheffield, in the open air, on 7 April, 1794.* Sheffield Central Library, Local Pamphlets, vol. 80(3), pp. 3 – 10.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., and Hardy, *Memoir*.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

Parliament be summarily rejected due to the use of “low” or “un-parliamentary” language.

Yorke commented on that to the assembled crowd: “...for if the grievances, abuses, complaints, and truth are to be discarded from that House, because not dressed in a gentlemanlike language, how are we, plain mechanics, ever to obtain redress, who are not gentlemen, and who are consequently ignorant of those polite and courtly expressions which are necessary to gain a hearing in that House?”⁴⁶⁹ This dilemma was a serious one, and was one of the reasons that the LCS eventually started to recruit some men from a more gentlemanly background in order to have their petitions read into the House of Commons. This was not the case for the Sheffield Constitutional Society, however, and the government and its agents’ interpreted Yorke’s remarks as laying the political rationale for the organization of a Second British Convention, this time on English soil, which was something that the British government would not allow. Moreover, the government seized a cachet of papers from Hardy and other LCS leaders, confirming the plans for such a convention and for the distribution of weapons, if deemed necessary, to the reformers who attended.⁴⁷⁰

Just a week later on April 14, 1794, the LCS convened their twice-postponed open-air general membership meeting at Chalk Farm, where the Hampstead Road met the Primrose Hill.⁴⁷¹ The LCS was much more straightforward about the purpose of the meeting – it was explicitly to lay the legal, historical, and political groundwork for convening a second general convention. That was as far as the meeting was supposed to

⁴⁶⁹ *Proceedings of the Public Meeting held at Sheffield*, p. 35.

⁴⁷⁰ *Second Report of the House of Commons Committee of Secrecy, Parliamentary History.*, vol. 31, col. 739.

⁴⁷¹ Hardy, *Memoir*, p. 141.

go however, as no motions or resolutions would be advanced for the actual calling of such a convention. Thelwall, Hardy, and the chairman for the meeting, John Lovett, knew full well that the field was full of government informers. The gathering was also attended and closely watched by a number of magistrates, who did not allow any food or drink to be either sold or distributed, and by a detachment of mounted troops who discretely kept their distance but were nevertheless ready to intervene if necessary.⁴⁷²

Thelwall did most of the speaking for the LCS, and expressed admiration and commendation for those persecuted for their participation in the first British Convention in Edinburgh, most notably LCS members Margarot and Gerrald.⁴⁷³ He went on to criticize the behavior of the authorities, jurists, and magistrates in the subsequent trials after the convention, provocatively decrying “the arbitrary and flagitious proceedings of the court judiciary in Scotland” which Thelwall compared to “the doctrines and practices of the star chamber, in the times of Charles I.”⁴⁷⁴ However, the most damning rhetoric for the LCS, and the most ultimately threatening to the government, was when Thelwall put forward a resolution that suggested the right of action by the reformists if their constitutional liberties were curtailed further:

...any attempt to violate those yet remaining laws, which were intended for the security of Englishmen against the Tyranny of Courts and Ministers, and the Corruption of dependent Judges, by vesting in such Judges a legislative or arbitrary power (such as lately been exercised by the Court of Justiciary in Scotland) ought to be considered as dissolving entirely the social compact between the English nation and their Governors; and driving them to an immediate appeal to that incontrovertible maxim of eternal justice, *that the safety of the people is SUPREME, and in cases of necessity, the ONLY law.*⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷² Hardy, *Memoir*, p. 145.

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁴ *State Trials*, vol. 24, col. 738.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

This resolution, more than anything else said or done at the meeting, was interpreted by the authorities as an attempt to incite popular resistance against the government, and was subsequently censured in both houses of Parliament, as was the London Corresponding Society.⁴⁷⁶

Finally, the Society for Constitutional Information held its fourteenth birthday celebration at the Crown and Anchor on May 2, 1794.⁴⁷⁷ The gathering was intended to be completely social in nature, and as a gesture of friendship and mutual support several members of the LCS were invited, including, ironically, the government spies Groves and Taylor.⁴⁷⁸ All of the reports of the dinner put attendance at nearly 300, and the tone was all but set when the SCI invited the MP from Beverly, Mr. Wharton, to serve as the guest chair of the dinner.⁴⁷⁹ MP Wharton was well known in the political reformists circle, as nearly a year prior he had submitted a resolution in the House of Commons calling for a committee to investigate and recommend ways in which civil and constitutional liberties gained through the Glorious Revolution, and since lost, might be restored.⁴⁸⁰

A politically conservative choice this was not, and his remarks included a discussion of recent French military victories, providing even more radical fodder for the government spies in attendance. But it was the various and sundry toasts more than anything that caught the attention of the informers, and subsequently their government masters. Horne Tooke, as inebriated as anybody there by all accounts, chose to toast to the demise of nothing less than the British constitution, and went so far as to suggest that

⁴⁷⁶ *First Report from the Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons on Seditious Practices. Parliamentary History*, vol. 31, col. 496.

⁴⁷⁷ Goodwin, p. 330.

⁴⁷⁸ Hardy, *Memoir*, p. 152.

⁴⁷⁹ Goodwin, p. 330.

⁴⁸⁰ *Parliamentary History* vol. 30, col. 965.

the SCI be disbanded as there was no longer any viable constitution for them to discuss and follow.⁴⁸¹ Toasts were also made and drunk to a great many other things, including to such things as “The armies contending for liberty...” and “The persecuted patriots of England.”⁴⁸² Indeed, Wharton even made a toast to Thomas Paine upon the encouragements of the gathered diners, even though he later admitted that he had to make it up on the fly. On a more serious note, however, the anniversary dinner marked another occasion – one that could not be known at the time in lieu of the government crackdown to come – the dinner would be the last time the Society for Constitutional Information would ever meet.⁴⁸³

The aggregation of these three events in such quick succession provided the Pitt government with the alleged legal and political justification it needed to make arrests. The government had surmised, correctly as it turned out, that the LCS was planning to call for a second British Convention just as soon as they had heard from all of their provincial chapters. This supposition was combined with the threat of a French invasion, as well as with the increasingly violent demonstrations in Ireland, and caused the government to take action. At 6:30 in the morning on Monday, May 12, 1794, Hardy, the secretary of the LCS, and Daniel Adams, the secretary of the Society for Constitutional Information, were arrested in their respective homes and charged with treasonous practices. Along with the arrests the police confiscated large caches of the various correspondences of each organization.⁴⁸⁴ Home Secretary Dundas announced the arrests in the House of Commons later that day, quoting from the summons that the arrests were

⁴⁸¹ Taylor’s report on the dinner, PRO TS 11/955/3499, and Goodwin, p. 330.

⁴⁸² *State Trials*, vol. 24, cols. 571-2.

⁴⁸³ Goodwin, p. 331.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

based upon the actions of both reformist groups toward “a pretended general convention of the people, in contempt and defiance of the authority of parliament, and on the principles subversive of the existing laws and constitution, and directly tending to the introduction of that system of anarchy and confusion which has fatally prevailed in France.”⁴⁸⁵

Hardy is Arrested

On a personal level, the arrests were a terrifying affair for Hardy and his pregnant wife. They were both roused out of bed at 6:30 in the morning in their nightclothes. When Hardy demanded to see the documentary evidence under which he was being arrested, there was little forthcoming: “I desired him (Mr. Sausan) to show me by what authority he did this. He then took out of his pocket a sheet of paper stamped at one corner, and held it in his hand for about a minute or two. Before I could read a [bit] of it he folded it up again and put it in his pocket.”⁴⁸⁶ On the following day, May 13, the Pitt government ordered that a committee of MPs should be formed immediately to review the confiscated papers of Hardy and the other arrested leaders of the movement to ascertain their level of threat against the nation.⁴⁸⁷ Unsurprisingly, the committee formed consisted mainly of conservatives and Pitt loyalists, as well as Pitt himself, and it also included one of the gentlemen who had been raising the loudest voice against the movement – Edmund Burke.⁴⁸⁸

James Fox, his supporters, and others who generally had a favorable impression of the political reform movement were not included in either of the committees formed from

⁴⁸⁵ *Parliamentary History*, vol. 31, col. 471.

⁴⁸⁶ Hardy, *Memoir*, p. 143.

⁴⁸⁷ Goodwin, p. 332.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

both Houses despite their vehement protestations.⁴⁸⁹ And the arrests did not end there. The government continued to round up members of the movement - mostly delegates from the urban chapters of the various societies – until they felt that they had enough of a cross section of the radical reformists with which to go to trial. In particular the chairpersons of, and speakers at, the recent public meetings were targeted for their public status and name recognition. The arrests included John Thelwall and the Reverend Jeremiah Joyce, both involved in the LCS general meeting, Horne-Tooke and John Lovett, both involved in the SCI general meeting, and many others.⁴⁹⁰

Once the arrests began, and in part due to the underground communications channels developed by many of the reformist societies, many of those targeted by the government were able to evade arrest either by hiding away elsewhere or sneaking out of the country. Men such as Thomas Wardle and Richard Hodgson, both of whom held high-level leadership positions in the LCS at various times, were able to evade their warrants indefinitely with the help of sympathetic friends in the government.⁴⁹¹ Other leaders of the reform movement were served warrants much later in the summer. Such was the case for John Baxter, a journeyman silversmith, who became the chairman of the LCS after Maurice Margarot was arrested the previous year for his participation in the first general convention in Edinburgh.⁴⁹²

Hardy was remanded to a halfway house until May 29, at which time he was taken to the Tower of London to await his trial, a date which Hardy described in his memoirs as

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., and *State Trials*, vol. 34, col. 212.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

“A very remarkable day in the history of England.”⁴⁹³ Sadly his wife did not fare well during the period of Hardy’s incarceration while he awaited trial. On June 11 a group of supposed government supporters, most of whom were in fact unemployed dockworkers paid by the Pitt government for their services, converged upon Hardy’s house and proceeded to attack the building with bricks and stones. The assault was only broken up when a couple of constables happened to hear the ruckus from the next block over and arrived to investigate the matter. Mrs. Hardy was inside the house along with an elderly caretaker and by all accounts was not only quite shaken by the whole episode, but was physically injured by some of the flying objects and broken glass. Whether the trauma of the assault contributed to her condition or not is not known, but the child Mrs. Hardy was carrying died upon premature birth in August of that summer, and within a few hours of that Mrs. Hardy died as well.⁴⁹⁴ On the day she died Mrs. Hardy had begun a letter to her husband that she never completed:

⁴⁹³ Hardy, *Memoirs*, p. 17. Hardy was assisted in the compilation of his memoirs by at least one, and perhaps several, unidentified note takers whose recording and writing skills were superior to Hardy’s. One of the note takers took to adding his own comments to the comments he recorded from Hardy, perhaps in anticipation of the formalization of the memoir. The note taker’s comments from Hardy’s description of his arrest and the preparations for his trial reads as follows, and are illustrative of the polarizing political sentiments of the time: “The whole weight of the arms of power was employed in order to crush Hardy. Never was such a host of Crown lawyers employed against any person for High Treason. For if his ruin could be once accomplished, the other eleven who were accused were reckoned upon as easy victims – It appears that so confident the government felt of a conviction, that they had prepared eight hundred warrants; three hundred of which were actually signed, and some of those were to be executed that very night and the next morning in case a verdict of guilty were returned. Who the persons thus marked out for apprehension were, Hardy did not learn, but he is compelled to believe the authority upon which he states the damning fact.”

⁴⁹⁴ Hardy, *Memoirs*, p. 21. This was another section in which Hardy’s note taker added his own version of the incident: “On 11th June 1794 a large group of ruffians went to his house No. 9 Piccadilly well known that he was confined to the Tower – and without the least economy began to attack with stones, and bricks, the windows which they were soon demolished...The unfortunate Mrs. Hardy at that time being with child was in the house with only an old woman who attended her as a nurse. Weak and enfeebled as she was from her own condition as well as what she suffered from the days of her husband’s detention, it is no wonder that she should be terrified by the threats and rude rants of such a crowd of ruffians...She was very much injured by the bruises which she received in the afflicting business and when brought to bed soon afterwards the child had died – it may very reasonably and plainly be supported that it received its death on

My dear Hardy,

This comes with my tenderest affections for you. You are never out of my thoughts sleeping or waking. Oh, to think what companions you have with you! None that you can converse with, either on Spiritual or temporal matters; but I hope the Spirit of God is both with you and me; and I pray that he may give us grace to look upon Christ. There all the good is that we can either hope of wish for, if we have but faith and patience, although we are but poor sinful mortals. My dear you have it not in...

The Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons made its initial report to the full House on May 16, 1794, just one day after its foemation and only days after Hardy's arrest and the confiscation of his papers.⁴⁹⁶ That the Committee would not have had the time to perform more than a cursory review of the confiscated papers is without question. The Committees of the both the Lords and Commons were never charged with carefully examining the evidence to produce an accurate reading of the state of the radical political movement in England. Rather, both were constituted to pass quick judgment on the gravity of the threat to the government and the nation as a way to justify not only a trial, but also further "necessary" actions by the Pitt government. It was thus a foregone conclusion that the committees would come down hard on the LCS and the rest of the movement in their initial report. As Albert Goodwin has suggested in his vital survey of the late eighteenth century political radicalism in Great Britain, *The Friends of Liberty*,

that vey occasion...On 27 August 1794 she was taken into labour and delivered a dead child after which she declared she felt her own death fast approaching (which was about four hours afterwards).

⁴⁹⁵ Hardy, *Memoirs*, p. 21.

⁴⁹⁶ *Parliamentary History*, vol. 31, col. 475.

“[Edmund] Burke himself could well have written it [the report] the day before its appointment.”⁴⁹⁷

The report contained a general history of the metropolitan reform societies since about 1792, and noted that throughout the period it had been the express goal of the movement to “...affect the internal peace and security of these kingdoms.”⁴⁹⁸ Additionally, the Committee of Secrecy noted that the movement, and particularly the LCS and the SCI, had adopted the views of Thomas Paine and the French radicals and revolutionaries, and were therefore “uniformly and systematically pursuing a settled design, which appears to your committee to tend to the subversion of the established constitution, and which has of late more openly avowed and attempted to be carried into full execution.”⁴⁹⁹

The Committee of Secrecy did not stop there however. For some time the more conservative members of Parliament had been looking for an opportunity to grant extra-legal powers to Pitt as a means to eradicate all of the various and sundry political and social reform movements in the kingdom that had resulted from the tumultuous 1790s. Confiscating the papers of the LCS and the SCI presented them with that opportunity, and they wasted little time leveraging their advantage. The critical section in the report of the Secret Committee read as follows:

From a review of these transactions your committee feel it impossible not to conclude, that the measures which have been stated are directed to the object of assembling a meeting of which, under the name of a general convention, may take upon itself the character of a general representative of the people. However at different periods the term of parliamentary reform may have been employed, it is obvious that the present view of these societies is not intended to be prosecuted by any application to parliament, but, on the contrary, by an open attempt to supersede the

⁴⁹⁷ Goodwin, p. 333.

⁴⁹⁸ *The First Report from the Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons, Parliamentary History*, vol. 31, and *LCS Papers*, Davis (ed.), pp. 3 – 14.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, and Goodwin, p. 334.

House of Commons in its representative capacity, and to assume to itself all the functions and power of a national legislature.⁵⁰⁰

This was the point from which the Pitt government accused the LCS and the rest of the movement of crossing over a constitutional and legalistic line, and from which the constitutional jurists and scholars of the Pitt government would justify future actions. And if that were not enough, the Committee of Secrecy also noted with great alarm that the LCS and the other societies had made plans to arm themselves if necessary, and in the absence of some of their leaders, were still making plans to conduct a Second General Convention in or around London.⁵⁰¹ In addition to accusing the leaders of the reform movement of a direct assault on the British governmental system from within, the Secret Committee also used their report as an opportunity to demonstrate the movement's collusion with the French revolutionaries. Tying the political goals and objectives of the reform movement to the French Revolution was important to the Committee of Secrecy in order that the British general public might see the reform movement as something much more insidious and threatening to the nation.

In light of French military advances across Europe and the general spread of the revolution, and in light of Britain's declaration of war against France, the government was keen to portray the LCS and the other leading reformist groups as mere pawns in a much bigger game. From the British government's perspective, doing so would diminish the political and constitutional rationale upon which the reform movement was based by re-casting it as a foreign threat, thus undermining the credibility of the movement and its claims of constitutional injustices. The government intended to argue that the LCS and

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ *Parliamentary History*, vol. 31, col. 475, and Goodwin, p. 334.

other reformist groups were well meaning, at best, but were being manipulated by forces that they did not understand. And at worst, the government intended to argue that the political reform movement was a deliberately seditious and treasonous effort to undermine the security and sovereignty of Great Britain in a time of war. The members of the Committee of Secrecy made this point clear in their comments concerning the larger and more dangerous aims of the reform movement:

When, in addition to these considerations, the committee reflect on the leading circumstances which they have already stated, of the declaration approbation, at an early period, of the doctrine of the Rights of Man, as stated in Paine's publications; of the connection with French societies, and with the National Convention; and of the subsequent approbation of the French system; and consider that these are the principles which the promoters of a convention evidently make the foundation of all their proceedings; they are satisfied that the design now openly professed and acted upon, aims at nothing less than what is stated in his majesty's message, and must be considered a traitorous conspiracy for the subversion of the established laws and constitution, and the introduction of that system of anarchy and confusion which has fatally prevailed in France.⁵⁰²

The report of the Committee of Secrecy had the intended effect; based upon its findings a bill was introduced by Pitt himself that authorized a limited suspension of habeas corpus.⁵⁰³ Despite some protestations from a number of Whigs who were generally sympathetic to the reformists, the bill passed the House of Commons by a vote of 146 to 28. It subsequently breezed through the House of Lords and was signed into law on May 23, 1794.⁵⁰⁴ The suspension was limited to those whom the government identified as being complicit in the reformist movement, and it was of limited duration,

⁵⁰² *The First Report from the Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons, Parliamentary History*, vol. 31, and *LCS Papers*, Davis (ed.), pp. 3 – 14.

⁵⁰³ Goodwin, p. 334.

⁵⁰⁴ *Parliamentary History*, vol. 31, col. 475, and Goodwin, p. 334.

set to expire eight months later in late January 1795. However and importantly, those limitations did not prevent the Pitt government from holding the reform movement leaders already arrested, and anybody else in the movement who might still be arrested, for an indefinite period of time without charging them with a crime or crimes.⁵⁰⁵

The news got worse for Hardy and the others already arrested when government agents found a cache of weapons – pikes and battle axes - stashed away in a home in Edinburgh that belonged to a wine merchant and a supporter of the reform movement. Robert Watt was actually a former government agent who seemed to have been persuaded by the meetings he attended to convert from spy to supporter of the movement.⁵⁰⁶ Watt and his co-conspirators had planned to stage a coup in Edinburgh seizing key government officials and offices, hoping this would force the Pitt government to end the war and dismiss itself. It was an ambitious plan to be sure, and one that had been in the planning stages for several months when Watt received Hardy's LCS circulars calling for plans to be made for a second General Convention in England. This circumstance allowed the government to tie Watt's conspiracy directly to Hardy and the LCS, arguing that Watt's would-be insurrection was in support of a planned convention whose purpose was to rally support for seizing power from the British government.⁵⁰⁷ On the evidentiary strength of finding the weapons, Watt and one of his key accomplices were arrested immediately on the charges of high treason. Both men were tried in September of 1794 and were found guilty. Watt was executed in October while his

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁶ *State Trials*, The Trial of Robert Watt, vol. 23, and Goodwin, p. 334 – 335.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

accomplice, a goldsmith named David Downie, was pardoned evidently as a result of his very limited role.⁵⁰⁸

The Secret Committee produced a second report on June 6, 1794. It was much longer, more detailed, and ultimately more damning than the first report. Where the first report was short on conspiratorial details, this second articulated them to a fault. Broadly, the members of the Committee of Secrecy focused on three main points, all of which were intended to paint the LCS and all of the reformist associations with the same broad-brush strokes of treason. In the first instance the report went to great pains to demonstrate that the leaders of the reformist movement were planning to incite violence amongst their members. The Committee presented the evidence of the Watt affair, the collection of arms by LCS members in Sheffield and other locales, and the training of some LCS members in their use.⁵⁰⁹

In the second instance the Committee of Secrecy argued that the stated objectives and goals of the LCS and the rest of the movement – to obtain real and lasting political reform via constitutional and lawful means – were merely a cover to hide their secret plans for revolution through the vehicles of national conventions. In this argument the committee paid special attention to the history of the LCS and the SCI, and the communications both associations had with the French revolutionaries.⁵¹⁰

And in the third instance, the report argued that the resolutions from the first General Convention were meant not just to usurp government authority through extra-legal means, but were in fact an attempt to create a legislative body that would be separate

⁵⁰⁸ *Parliamentary History*, vol 31., col. 696.

⁵⁰⁹ *Parliamentary History*, vol 31., cols. 689 – 696, ad Goodwin, p. 336.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*

from Parliament and therefore be extra-constitutional in nature.⁵¹¹ The Secret Committee wrote that there was “...no doubt of the nature, extent, and malignity of the extravagant designs of which have been formed, of the regularity and system with which these designs have been pursued, or of the rapid progress of the measures which had been taken in order to attempt to carry them speedily into execution.”⁵¹²

On June 13 the House of Lords moved to approve an address to the King that cast a dim and damning light on the activities of the LCS and the other leading reformist groups.⁵¹³ The debate was short and the wording sharp, alluding to “...a seditious and traitorous conspiracy, directed to the subversion of the authority of your majesty and your parliament and to the utter destruction of the established constitution and government of these your majesty’s kingdoms.”⁵¹⁴ In a debate in the House of Commons on June 16th, James Fox took up the cause of Hardy and the other arrested leaders of the reform movement. He argued that in the unlikely circumstance that a second General Convention were organized and conducted, it would pose much less of a threat to the kingdom and the constitution than Parliament’s own actions in pre-judging the innocence or guilt of Hardy and the others in the public sphere. Fox deemed the motions that passed both Houses as tantamount to prejudicing the public, and any potential jurors, before a fair and legally unencumbered trial could occur, and as such saw those motions as much more threatening to the constitutional moorings of the nation than the political reform movement.⁵¹⁵

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

⁵¹² *The Second Report from the Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons, Parliamentary History*, vol. 31, cols. 689 – 696, and *LCS Papers*, Davis (ed.), pp. 15 – 114.

⁵¹³ Goodwin, p. 337.

⁵¹⁴ *Parliamentary History*, cols. 912.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., vol. 31, col. 296.

Fox's concerns were indeed prescient in as much as the proclamations from Parliament did foster a negative attitude in the general public toward Hardy and the other alleged conspirators. The charges were in fact a culmination of a concerted effort by the British government to gin up enough smaller charges so that the leaders of the movement could be charged with treason. In January of 1794 the Attorney General, Sir John Scott, had requested his legal advisers to begin building a case against the SCI and its leaders. Along with the LCS, the SCI was considered the other de facto leader of the reform movement, and Scott wanted them stopped.⁵¹⁶ After several weeks of work however, his advisers responded to his request by reporting that while the SCI was involved in potentially seditious behavior, they had always been careful enough to keep their actions and activities "...within the bounds of misdemeanor, and out of the reach of a heavier charge."⁵¹⁷ This, of course, had been the plan of both the LCS and the SCI all along. Throughout their short histories the leaders of both groups had always been conscious of the legality and constitutionality of their efforts, and had worked hard to see that the actions of their respective memberships stayed within the law. Hardy always insisted that the LCS operate within the existing constitutional parameters of the land, so that their actions could never be construed as illegal or seditious.

Hardy and the LCS are Charged with Treason

Nevertheless, and despite a lack of concrete evidence to support it, Scott charged Hardy and the other arrested leaders of the movement with the gravest of offenses - high treason. Scott based his decision in part on the opinion of several of the judges who had the opportunity to interview Hardy and the others. Many of the judges were convinced

⁵¹⁶ Goodwin, p. 338.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

that the activities of the LCS and the SCI justified the charge of high treason.⁵¹⁸ Scott was less convinced of the evidence, and later indicated that he felt himself ensnared in the kind of legal dilemma that prosecuting attorneys often find themselves in. Scott believed that he could get convictions with the charge of sedition, a lesser charge than treason, based on the evidence. However, putting the accused on trial for high treason, a charge that the political elites pushed him to use, would create a high evidentiary bar for conviction. If in the course of the trial that bar could not be reached he ran the possibility that the charges might be dismissed and the accused set free to continue their political reform efforts.⁵¹⁹

Scott had an overriding concern, however, that trumped his concerns regarding the weak case for a treason charge. Much like the reformist groups themselves, who made every effort to appeal to the broader public sphere as a way to communicate and educate, Scott wanted to make this same public sphere aware of how dangerous things might become if the reformists were allowed to conduct a second General Convention.⁵²⁰ He was concerned that a General Convention of radical political reform groups on English soil could take the country in a dangerous political direction, and send the wrong message to France and her allies during a time of war.⁵²¹ It was for this reason that Scott based his trial strategy on what can only be described as an exhaustive rehearsal of the history of the political reform movement with a particular emphasis on the LCS and the SCI as the

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., p. 339.

⁵¹⁹ *Lord Eldon's Anecdote Book*, ed. A.L.J. Lincoln and R.L. McEwen (London, 1960), p. 56.

⁵²⁰ Ibid.

⁵²¹ Ibid.

clear leaders, as a way to convince the nation of the inherent danger of allowing these sorts of groups to organize and carry on.⁵²²

In this regard Scott was acting as a political alarmist rather than a judicial prosecutor with a case to make, and he seemed to make a conscious decision to do so. By admitting the full breadth and depth of the entirety of confiscated LCS and SCI correspondence and documentation since 1792, Scott knew that that the trial would be laborious and fraught with the potential prosecutorial risk of confusing any jury. He especially wanted to drive the point home that these sorts of groups and activities could not be tolerated during a time of national emergency due to the war with France: “It appeared to me to be more essential to securing the public safety that the whole of their transactions should be published, than that any of these Individuals should be convicted.”⁵²³ In short, it was more important to Scott to demonstrate that the mere existence of the LCS and the reform movement posed an ongoing threat to the nation, even at the risk of the jury acquitting Hardy and the other defendants for lack of specific evidence to support the charges against them.

On October 6, 1794 the grand jury appointed by Parliament presented a bill charging twelve of the members of political reform movement with high treason. Six of the accused were members of the London Corresponding Society and the other six were members of the Society for Constitutional Information. The LCS members accused were Thomas Hardy, John Richter, Matthew Moore, John Baxter, John Thelwall, and Richard Hogdson. All, at various times, held important leadership positions inside of the London chapter of the LCS. The SCI members accused were John Horne Tooke, Thomas

⁵²² Ibid.

⁵²³ Ibid.

Holcroft, Thomas Wardle, Stewart Kyd, Jeremiah Joyce, and John Augustus Bonney.⁵²⁴

Four of the accused – Moore and Hogdson from the LCS along with Wardle and Holcroft from the SCI – had not been arrested at the time the charges were handed down. In a bit of a public relations coup that would prove beneficial as the trial commenced, LCS member Holcroft voluntarily remanded himself to the authorities in Newgate so convinced was he that the charges were groundless, and that the reform movement could only achieve lasting legitimacy through legal and constitutional means.⁵²⁵

As it happened, Holcroft's friend and fellow political reformist William Godwin happened to be visiting friends in Newgate at that time. Upon Holcroft's arrest Godwin wrote his essay *Cursory Strictures* over the following week, and it appeared in the *Morning Chronicle* on October 20.⁵²⁶ Godwin, who had a distinguished career of political radicalism and is perhaps best remembered as the founder of philosophical anarchism, penned a scathing critique of the government's evidence against the accused, and provided Thomas Erskine, the lead defense attorney for the group, some further ammunition with which to combat the charges. Never one given to understatement, Godwin wrote that the trial "is the most important crisis in the history of English liberty, that the world ever saw."⁵²⁷ Godwin's main contention, and one that would prove crucial to the defense, was that the evidence was built upon "constructions and implications" that together did not reach the necessarily high evidentiary bar of treason.⁵²⁸ He also raised the issue of the constitutional damage the nation might endure if such charges were

⁵²⁴ *State Trials*, vol. 24, cols. 200 – 10.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*, col. 214.

⁵²⁶ Goodwin, p. 341, and Paul C. Kegan, *William Godwin: His Friends and Contemporaries* (London, 1876), Vol. 1, p. 118.

⁵²⁷ *Cursory Strictures on the charge delivered by Lord Chief Justice Eyre to the Grand Jury, Oct. 2, 1794*, *Morning Chronicle*, October 20, 1794, p. 24.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*

allowed to be so haphazardly levied: “If men can be convicted of High Treason, upon such constructions and implications as are contained in this charge, we may look with conscious superiority upon the republican speculations of France, but we shall certainly have reason to envy the milder tyrannies of Turkey and Ispahan.”⁵²⁹

Godwin’s point was an important one, and one that the prosecution would struggle with – if the government was permitted to use legal grounds to create reasons and actions for treasonous prosecution not contained in the current laws for treason, where might that end? It was the difference between judicial interpretation under the law and constitution, and the legislature’s ability to simply pass special legislation as a way to bring treasonous charges to bear against individuals and groups. Godwin’s essay was helpful in the court of public opinion as to the disposition of the accused, and raised important questions and doubts about who in fact were the conspirators in this trial – the accused or the Pitt government?⁵³⁰

The Treason Trials Begin

As the trial began in late October 1794 several of the accused, including, Hardy, Thelwall, and Tooke, had been locked in the Tower of London for many months. For Hardy, as recounted earlier, the ordeal was especially trying in the wake of the deaths of his wife and unborn child over the summer. However, the imprisonment was painful for Tooke and Thelwall as well, each of whom had their records and assets confiscated, and who had families that needed their financial and patriarchal support.⁵³¹ Tooke started a prison diary that helped to take his mind off of his ordeal, and as his diary indicated, he was steadfast in his belief that he and the others were innocent: “ I cannot find any one

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

⁵³⁰ Goodwin, p. 342.

⁵³¹ Ibid.

Action that I have committed, any word that I have written, any syllable that I have uttered, or any single thought that I have entertained, of a political nature, which I wish to either conceal or recall.”⁵³²

On October 24, 1794 the prisoners were moved to Newgate in preparation for the commencement of the trial. On October 25 the defendants were formally arraigned and charged with treason. All pleaded not guilty. The defense counsel team of Thomas Erskine and assistant defense attorney Vicary Gibbs requested that the defendants be tried separately, allowing for a fair and particular rehearsal of the evidence against each one of the accused. The prosecution team agreed and indicated that LCS Recording Secretary Thomas Hardy would be the first of the defendants tried.⁵³³ The prosecution elected to try Hardy first for several reasons. As a founding member and the current sitting secretary of the LCS Hardy was an influential figure in the overall reform movement, and as such, as the prosecution calculated, if Hardy could be convicted then the others would follow suit. The prosecution also had a large cache of Hardy’s letters and circulars on behalf of the LCS calling for a second General Convention on English soil. At the time of his arrest Hardy had also been corresponding with the Norwich chapter on the matter of securing arms for the planned convention.⁵³⁴ And finally, Hardy and the LCS were seen by the government as the principal engineers of the entire political reform movement, having replaced the more conservative Society for Constitutional Information in that capacity.⁵³⁵

⁵³² British Library, John Horne Tooke, *Divisions of Purley*, vol. 1, p. 103.

⁵³³ *State Trials*, vol. 24, col. 138.

⁵³⁴ Goodwin, p. 343, and *State Trials*, vol. 24, col. 238.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*

Prosecutor Scott, however, stuck to his plans to frame his trial plan around the idea that the LCS and the SCI should be taken together as guilty co-conspirators in a movement whose goals were seditious and treasonous. He intended to put an insidious spin on the activities of Hardy and the others, by suggesting that the entire political reform movement only appeared to be working within constitutional boundaries by advocating for parliamentary reform, while they were actually planning for nothing less than the overthrow of parliament through extra-constitutional means.⁵³⁶ To this end, Scott opened the trial with a nine-hour introductory speech in which he carefully rehearsed the entire history and a good part of the captured documentation of the reform movement for the exhausted jury.⁵³⁷ He recounted for the jury most of the contents of the first and second reports from the Committee of Secrecy from the House of Commons, and in so doing hoped to build a foundation upon which a convincing case for treason could be constructed. The argument of the prosecution was that the Secret Committee used “constructive reasoning” to extrapolate that a second General Convention of the reform movement would have required the King to resist on the grounds that it was a presumptive political coup, and in a worst case scenario (at least for the King) the King would have been deposed and executed.⁵³⁸ Of course this was a thinly veiled allusion to the French Revolution that the jurors would have undoubtedly recognized.

Along with rehearsing the details of the findings of the Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons, Attorney General Scott and his prosecution team also decided to review nearly all of the correspondence that had been confiscated from Hardy and the

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

⁵³⁷ *State Trials*, vol. 24, pp. 241 – 370.

⁵³⁸ Goodwin, p. 344.

others.⁵³⁹ Only in this way, or so Scott believed, could the jurors be convinced of the depth of the conspiracy. The highlights of Scott's evidence included such items as nearly all of the minutes from LCS and SCI meetings from 1792 onward, letters of congratulations and support to French Jacobin societies and the French National Convention, nearly every pamphlet ever produced and circulated by the LCS and the SCI, their organizational bylaws based upon those of French revolutionary societies, and the speeches and toasts from the first General Convention held in Edinburgh.⁵⁴⁰

In an attempt to prove that the political reform societies were simply hiding behind a thin curtain of change by constitutional means, Scott invoked the movement's affection for the writings of Thomas Paine, particularly Paine's call for "representative government" that obviated the need for a monarchy.⁵⁴¹ Scott also suggested that the radical, yet ostensibly constitutional, petitions to Parliament in 1793 were really just political diversions to distract attention away from the true motive of organizing unlawful conventions whose purpose was to bring down the government.⁵⁴² He pointed out that the recent radicalization of the government in France started with the same sorts of mass gatherings that became violently supported. He further alleged that all of the hue and cry over the political and judicial treatment of those arrested from the first general convention was less than genuine, and was part of this same political diversionary tactic to buy time for the movement so that they could continue to organize and plan future conventions.⁵⁴³

⁵³⁹ *State Trials*, vol. 24, cols. 264 – 5, and Goodwin, p. 344.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*, and Paine, *Rights of Man*.

⁵⁴² *State Trials*, cols. 327 – 8.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*

The prosecution did not stop there however, as Scott went on to detail Hardy's role, thin as it was, in the manufacture and acquisition of weapons for the planned Second Convention in England. He also presented rather trumped up evidence that Hardy was secretly a member of a military society in Lambeth, who were acquiring and stockpiling muskets for an eventual government coup. The prosecution's implication was that this group was actually an even more radical offshoot of the London Corresponding Society, a charge for which they could offer no evidence.⁵⁴⁴ During the course of the trials of Hardy and the others, the alleged conspirators went to great lengths to couch their comments and recollections in the context of political change by constitutional means, and they argued that it was only within the narrow legalistic terms of what was permitted under the constitution for such activities that the charges against them should be framed. As an example of this, during the trial Hardy and the defense team repeatedly disputed the assertion that the only reason there was no violence or unlawfulness at the Scottish Convention was because of the efforts of the authorities, primarily the constables. Rather, Hardy maintained that it was the due to the reasonableness of behavior from their members, and the seriousness with which they cared for their cause, that the convention was free of mischief. Baser men, of a less forthright and gentlemanly nature, could not have remained peaceful, according to Hardy.⁵⁴⁵

The first day of the trial of Thomas Hardy began at eight in the morning and lasted until nearly midnight, when defense counsel Erskine recommended a recess for the evening. The hour was so late that temporary quarters had to be quickly arranged for the

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., cols. 368 – 9.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid.

jurors who slept on hastily prepared mattresses at the Old Bailey.⁵⁴⁶ A precedent was thus set for the remainder of the prosecution’s presentation of evidence against the reformists. Scott’s team began each day around eight o’clock with the introduction of additional evidence and witnesses against the accused, and each day’s adjournment was not until well after midnight. It was a grueling and exhausting affair for all involved. It was as if Scott and the prosecution team believed that a voluminous mountain of evidence, combined with an exhausting presentation, would ultimately wear down the judge and jury. Scott was convinced that he needed to employ such tactics in order to convince the jury that the political reform movement in England was inexorably linked to the revolution in France, and that for all their protestations to the contrary, Hardy and the others were simply “...determined Republicans, going out of their way to express their zeal in the cause of Republicanism.”⁵⁴⁷

For his part, Erskine and the defense team imposed a withering cross-examination on nearly all of the prosecution’s witnesses. The defense’s core strategy was to repudiate the evidentiary foundation upon which the prosecution’s case was built. To accomplish this Erskine and his defense team worked to diminish the credibility of the prosecution’s witnesses in the eyes of the jury. Erskine could then construct his defense around the assertion that the government’s evidence against Hardy and the others fell well below the evidentiary bar required to prove sedition, let alone treason. It must be said that Erskine was no sainted attorney himself, and by all accounts his tactics against many of the prosecution’s witnesses were bullying and abusive, so far as he could get away with it. In one illustrative exchange with a government witness, Erskine cross-examined a Mr.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., cols. 419 – 20.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., col. 1366.

Henry Alexander, a linen draper from Manchester, who served as a government informant in the Manchester chapter of the LCS: ‘Erskine: “You need not look at me. I shall hear it well enough; why do you hesitate? – come, cough it up, answer me that upon your oath; are you acquainted with Mr. Dunn of Manchester?” – “No.” – ‘Erskine: “Then you do not speak the truth, I suppose, unless when you are upon oath?” – “Yes I do.”’⁵⁴⁸

The first several days of the trial proceeded in this way, with a constant volley from Scott and counter-volley from Erskine. Attendee accounts from the trial indicated that as each day went by, the exchanges between the two men became more intense and hostile, and the tension in the courthouse grew steadily.⁵⁴⁹ During all of this Hardy remained calm and sanguine, confident that his actions and behaviors as the recording secretary for the LCS did not constitute treason against his country. In the short remarks each of the accused was allowed to make before the trial commenced, Hardy was brief and prophetic: “My Lord Justice Clerk, I have only a few words to say. I shall not [speculate] upon the severity or leniency of my sentence. Were I to be led this moment from the Bar to the Scaffold, I should feel the same calm and serenity which I now do. My mind tells me, that I have acted agreeably to my conscience, and that I have engaged in a good – a just and glorious cause, a cause which sooner or later must, and will prevail. And by a timely reform save this country from destruction!!”⁵⁵⁰

Attorney General Scott and the prosecution rested its case on Saturday November 1st, just after midnight. Mindful of the hour and his physical state of exhaustion, Erskine requested that more time be allowed before he opened his defense later that same

⁵⁴⁸ *State Trials*, Col. 645.

⁵⁴⁹ Goodwin, p. 346.

⁵⁵⁰ Hardy, *Memoir*, British Library, Add’l MS 65153B.

morning. The request was made to the judge that the defense might have time to read and digest some of the documents submitted by the prosecution as part of its closing statements, but in reality it was so that Erskine could get some rest before his opening speech.⁵⁵¹ The Lord Chief Justice agreed and gave Erskine, his defense team, and a tired jury until noon on Saturday before resuming. This proved to be a bit of a tactical advantage for Erskine in terms of his defense, as his opening remarks would be the last thing the jury would hear before recessing until Monday.⁵⁵²

The Defense of Hardy and the Reform Movement

At noon on Saturday Erskine opened his defense. The trial transcript records that he spoke for nearly seven hours, and that in his speech he evoked both the brilliance and the late ill treatment of the British Constitution by over zealous bureaucrats.⁵⁵³ What the transcripts did not record, however, was the passion and fervor employed by Erskine in his speech to the jury. Many who heard it in person knew that they were witnessing more than a trial attorney's speech. No less an orator as Horne-Tooke himself suggested after the trial that "This speech will live forever."⁵⁵⁴ Thomas Holcroft later commented that Erskine's opening oratory in support of Hardy would be "engraved upon the hearts of your hearers!" and that in spirit and outcome Erksine had "*saved a nation*, and a nation's tears, a nation's blessings, a nation's love, will follow you to the grave."⁵⁵⁵

Erksine's primary argument in defense of Hardy and the entire political reform movement a straightforward one. In the eyes of British law, there was a difference

⁵⁵¹ *State Trials*, vol. 24, cols. 861-3.

⁵⁵² Carl B. Cone, *The English Jacobins* (New York, 1968), p. 205.

⁵⁵³ *State Trials*, vol. 24, cols. 867-9.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, col. 877.

⁵⁵⁵ Thomas Holcroft, *A Narrative of Facts relating to a Prosecution for High Treason, etc.* (London), 1795, p. 124.

between the alleged consequences of an action, and the evidentiary intentions of an action.⁵⁵⁶ Therefore, Hardy and the LCS ought not to be judged upon what they might have done or what might have happened should a second General Convention have come to fruition as the prosecution argued, but should rather be judged upon their intention in such a course of action: an honest and sincere desire to improve the nation. Erksine emphasized this basis for his defense at the outset of his remarks: “Let not him [Hardy] be hurried away to a pre-doomed execution from an honest enthusiasm for the public safety. – I ask for him a trial by this applauded constitution of our country.”⁵⁵⁷

At every opportunity Erksine contrasted his defense approach and arguments with those of the Scott’s prosecution, carefully and methodically highlighting the constitutional distinctions and injuries to the jury. Indeed, Erksine argued that convicting Hardy and the others on the charge of treason based upon what *might have happened* in the wake of a second General Convention would set a precedent that would have allowed the government to prosecute its enemies at will. More specifically, Erskine focused on the prosecution’s use of the term “overt acts” to make his point about the difference between consequences and intentions. According to Erskine, “The moment you get right upon the true meaning and signification of this term, the curtain is drawn up, and all is light and certainty.”⁵⁵⁸ To Erskine, that “true meaning” made all the difference. There was no question that Hardy, the LCS the SCI, and the reform movement had intended to conduct a second General Convention on English soil. Their plans had been progressing and they had every intention to carry through on these plans. That, however, was a far cry from the prosecution’s charges that Hardy and the others were planning a General

⁵⁵⁶ Goodwin, p. 347.

⁵⁵⁷ *State Trials*, vol. 24, col. 878.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, col. 894.

Convention “for the purpose alleged, of assuming all the authority of the state, and in fulfillment of the main intention against the life of the King.”⁵⁵⁹ That, according to Erskine, was an altogether different matter. If such a threat to the nation and crown was indeed real, it was incumbent on the prosecution to prove that there were “overt acts” that demonstrated both the intention and the ability of Hardy and the others to carry out such acts. If the prosecution could not do that, then Hardy and his co-defendants could not be found guilty of treason for what they may or may not have thought or hoped might happen.⁵⁶⁰

Erskine’s defense could be applied to many of the specific charges against the defendants, making his strategy particularly useful. Such things as the unlawful distribution of materials and publications intended to organize a convention, the meeting resolutions and discussions about a second general convention on English soil, and even the alleged production and stockpiling of arms would have to be proved in the context of specific and incontestable evidentiary terms. According to law, these were only treasonable “overt acts” acts if they could be connected to the ultimate attainment of treasonous goals and objectives.⁵⁶¹ For legal and historical context Erskine cited the Treason statute of 1351 under Edward III’s reign and one of the oldest legal statutes in English history. The statute had been modified several times since its establishment, but at its core it held that a threat against the King had to be “direct and manifest” and that a treasonous act could not be proved through “consequential presumptions and inferences.”⁵⁶² This line of reasoning, however, was just what Scott and the prosecution

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., col. 911.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁶¹ Goodwin, p. 348.

⁵⁶² Ibid., and *State Trials*, vol. 24, cols. 891.

had used to build their case against Hardy and the others, asking the jury to make the necessary inferences that would allow them to find the defendants guilty of treason.⁵⁶³

In the grand conspiracies of which Scott had accused the LCS and SCI specifically, and the political reform movement more generally, the prosecution's argument was that the movement's goal of universal male suffrage was in and of itself treasonous. The reason it was treasonous was because, according to Scott, it necessarily led to the end of the hereditary nobility, and that in turn would inevitably lead to the overthrow of the King and the end of the monarchy. In the same manner then, the organization and execution of a second general convention in support of universal male suffrage must lead to the same end: the erosion of royal authority, civil unrest, the overthrow of the monarchy, and the death of the King.⁵⁶⁴

As Erskine opined to the jury, such an inferred chain of consequences was beyond speculative: "Gentlemen [of the jury], if the cause were not too serious, I should liken it to the play with which we amuse our children. This is the cow with the crumpley horn, which gored the dog, that worried the cat, that ate the rat, etc, ending in the house that Jack built."⁵⁶⁵ Reducing the prosecution's argument to a child's bedtime story was a brilliant legal tactic on Erskine's part, and illustrated nicely that when the jury was asked to decide what was and was not treasonous, they could "distinguish between an intention to kill the King and an intention to reform the House of Commons."⁵⁶⁶

Having set out the basis upon which the charges should be viewed and the corresponding legal boundaries of such charges for the jury, Erskine pivoted the direction

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁵ *State Trials*, vol. 24, col. 906.

⁵⁶⁶ Thomas Holcroft, *Letter to the Rt. Honourable William Windham on the Intemperance and Dangerous Tendency of his Public Conduct* (London, 1795), p. 11.

of his comments to focus on the true political makeup and motives of his clients. Erskine's strategy was to link Hardy's political motivations to the question of intent, therefore demonstrating to the jury that the LCS had very clear political goals, and therefore limits, upon which their efforts were based. To this end he rehearsed the political education of Hardy and the others, reminding the jury that the men on trial were grounded more in the political philosophies of the Duke of Richmond and his call for reform, rather than on the more radical philosophies of representative government advocated by Thomas Paine.⁵⁶⁷

In point of fact there were a great many admirers of Paine amongst the LCS membership, but Erskine played down such radical connections to demonstrate to the jury that these men were not political radicals but were political reformists, or in legal terms the difference between the charge of sedition and treason. Erskine emphasized the importance to Hardy of the Duke of Richmond's 1783 letter to the Lieutenant Colonel Sharman of the Irish Volunteers, which served as his inspiration for forming the LCS. The LCS had, on several occasions, reprinted the Duke's letter in full or in part as a way to stake out their political goals and objectives. Much the same was true for many of the other political societies, including the Sheffield Constitutional Society, who in 1792 reprinted the letter to their membership with the proviso that "The principles laid down in that letter comprehend and include all and every object they have in view with respect to a reform in Parliament, etc."⁵⁶⁸

On the matter of the plans for a second General Convention, one of the lynchpins to the treason charges levied by the prosecution, Erskine adroitly argued that the call for the

⁵⁶⁷ Goodwin, p. 349.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, and Sheffield Central Library, Local Pamphlets, vol. 184.

second Convention was simply a logical continuation of the outcome from the first General Convention.⁵⁶⁹ It was no more and no less than the LCS and other reform societies carrying on with their business in a lawful and constitutional manner. In any event, those who were arrested and tried after the first convention were prosecuted on dubious legal grounds at best, and even in that context none of the defendants from those trials were convicted of treason, but rather sedition.⁵⁷⁰

Erskine concluded the second part of his comments with the legally delicate matter of correspondence and fraternization with the revolutionary French National Assembly. This was an area where the prosecution was able to make some headway in demonstrating the alleged conspiratorial nature of the LCS and the SCI specifically, and the political reform movement more generally. Erskine argued that the correspondence should be viewed as more intra-societal diplomacy that was cordial but did not reach the legal bar of war-time collusion with the enemy, in so much as the vast majority of the correspondence had occurred before war with France was declared.⁵⁷¹ Cleverly, Erskine deflated the issue of revolutionary rhetoric, and specifically the idea that the political reform movement in Britain had taken on the rhetoric and mannerisms of the French revolutionaries, with a historical review of various British movements in the eighteenth century. In this way he was able to link such politically charged words as *citizen*, *delegates*, and *conventions* to prior use by both Irish and English reformists who were active well before 1789.⁵⁷² His hope was that such an approach would have a neutralizing effect on how the jury viewed such correspondence, and in the end it did.

⁵⁶⁹ *State Trials*, vol. 24, col. 950.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, col. 943.

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*, col. 947 and Goodwin, p. 350.

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*, cols. 914-15, and Goodwin, p. 350.

Erskine concluded by addressing the charges leveled against Hardy that he had sought to acquire arms for the second General Convention. The prosecution had introduced evidence in the form of a letter that Hardy had received from the Lambeth Loyal Association (est. in 1793). The letter was from a Mr. Richard Davison of Sheffield on April 24, 1794, offering to supply LCS members with pike heads for the price of one schilling apiece.⁵⁷³ Davison further requested that Hardy pass along an unopened letter to the LCS chapter in Norwich and to the other political reform societies there. Erskine was able to show, however, that Hardy had never returned any correspondence to Davison, and had never forwarded the other letter as requested by Davison. Further, Erskine successfully argued that even if there was a plan afoot to obtain weapons, it was only in the context of potential use for self-defense should convention attendees have to protect themselves from any Church and King mobs that might not agree with the politics of reform.⁵⁷⁴

Indeed, the prosecutors had used the testimony of two witnesses, William Broomhead and William Camage, both former secretaries of the Sheffield Constitutional Society, to demonstrate that there had been an organized and concerted effort to produce and procure weapons for the purposes of violently overthrowing the Crown. Upon cross-examination by Erskine, however, it became quite clear that both gentlemen were much more concerned for their own local welfare in Sheffield.⁵⁷⁵ On several occasions, they testified, their lives and properties had been threatened by those with opposing political views, and that they had been continually harassed by the local magistrates. Both men

⁵⁷³ Ibid., col. 955.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., col. 956.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., col. 957.

did admit to possessing a “pike or two” for personal protection, but that was a far cry from assembling an armory that would be used to overthrow the King.⁵⁷⁶

Erskine also used this part of his address to the jury to deal with the prosecution’s charges that, separate from the issue of obtaining weapons from them, Hardy was somehow instrumental in the establishment and organization of the Lambeth Loyal Association.

Scott and the prosecution had argued that the LCS and Hardy had encouraged the Lambeth group to form, and as a result were culpable in the group’s plans to manufacture weapons and train its members to use them. In fact the Lambeth Loyal Association was less a political reform group and more a local fire brigade and riot squad whose purpose was to augment the local resources. It was only after forming that the group’s founder, a Mr. Franklow, became familiar with the mission and work of the LCS and attended one of their meetings in London. As Erskine demonstrated, that was a very thin evidentiary line to connect for the purposes of planning and executing an armed revolt against the government.⁵⁷⁷

As Erskine concluded his remarks to the judges and jurors, after nearly twelve hours, his voice and physical stamina began to fail him. His voice grew so quiet from hoarseness that it could not be heard and so his words had to be repeated by another member from the defense team close by him. Erskine had poured all of his considerable mental and physical faculties into the defense of his clients, and he only hoped that it would be enough to spare Hardy from a death sentence for treason.⁵⁷⁸ His final remarks to the jury were on Hardy’s behalf, describing his character to those who would besmirch

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., col. 696.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid.

it as “religious, temperate, humane and moderate, and his uniform conduct all that can belong to a good subject and an honest man.”⁵⁷⁹

When Erskine finally sat down just after midnight on what had become Sunday morning, spontaneous applause erupted amongst those in the courtroom and the crowds that had gathered outside. When court adjourned minutes later until Monday, the judges could not get to their carriages due to the crowds who had begun to hiss and hoot at them. It took Erskine’s personal intervention with the crowds to allow the judges to retire to their respective quarters. Erskine himself could not escape the admiration of the crowd however, and had to repair with them to the Serjeant’s Inn for a nightcap.⁵⁸⁰ When the trial reconvened on Monday morning the jury heard from some of the other members of the prosecution and defense teams who presented additional evidence and witnesses. The trial went on for two and half more days, until the presiding judge recapped the proceedings and the task of the jurors on Wednesday morning. Each evening the crowds grew in number and voice, until by the morning of Wednesday, November 5th (which just happened to be Guy Fawkes Day, a coincidence that helped matters little in terms of crowd control), the Lord Mayor had to request military reinforcements to contain and control them.⁵⁸¹

The Defense Rests

At 12:30 pm on Wednesday the trial concluded and the jury was sent to consider the evidence against the accused. Hardy’s fate, and the fate of the LCS and the political reform movement more generally, now lay in the hands of a group of peers. Throughout the proceedings Erskine and the defense team had argued that Thomas Hardy was more

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid., col. 970.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid and Goodwin, p. 353.

like each of the jurors than not, and was simply and lawfully exercising the rights that all English citizens were born into. The difference between them was that Hardy had exhibited the intestinal fortitude and courage to act upon his convictions, and suffering great personal loss no less, and woe to that citizenry that does not exercise its constitutional rights for fear of government reprisal. According to the defense, Hardy's trial was a referendum on the difference between *having* rights in theory and *exercising* those rights in practice.

The jury returned a mere three hours later and declared that Hardy was not guilty. Upon hearing the verdict, Hardy turned directly to the jury and said, "My fellow countrymen, I return you my thanks."⁵⁸² A great chorus of applause erupted in the crowds that had gathered once again, and Hardy was taken by them in a coach to his brother-in-law's home in Lancaster Court where he would spend the next two weeks recovering from the ordeal of the trial.⁵⁸³ By 10:30 that evening the crowds had dispersed, helped no doubt by a prolonged and drenching rain, but despite the enthusiasm and size of the crowds there had been no rioting or civil unrest of any manner. Erskine and another member of his defense team were that last to leave the Old Bailey that evening. They drove home quietly and prepared for the next reformer's trial, that of John Horne Tooke.

The jurors and judges were given a break before the Horne Tooke trial, and did not reconvene until Monday, November 17th. For this trial the attention was turned from the LCS to the Society for Constitutional Information, and Scott and the prosecution still held

⁵⁸² *State Trials*, vol. 24, col. 1384.

⁵⁸³ Hardy, *Memoirs*, and Cone, p. 206.

out hope that they could get a conviction for the crime of treason.⁵⁸⁴ The reason they thought so was that their evidence would show that the SCI had played a primary role in the copying and distribution of Paine's writing both through their membership and the general public at large. The prosecution also believed that they could prove that Horne Tooke was the driving force behind the SCI's relationship with the French National Assembly, and in particular their address to the Paris Jacobin Club in 1792.⁵⁸⁵ Despite Hardy's victory, Horne Tooke's trial would be far from an easy acquittal, as the prosecutor Scott held a personal dislike for Horne Tooke that he did not harbor against Hardy, primarily as a result of Horne Tooke's perceived duplicitous nature, his higher social status, and his support and even orchestration of the political reform movement.⁵⁸⁶ All of this meant that the prosecution would not reduce its efforts to get a conviction for treason, and to make an example of those who shunned their class peers and supported such a movement. For this trial, however it would be the Solicitor General, Sir James Mitford, who would lead and present the prosecution's case.⁵⁸⁷ To Mitford's credit he paid little attention to the charges of arms acquisition and he did not choose to use any government spies as witnesses, no doubt as a result of the way both were handled by Erskine in Hardy's trial. Erskine noticed that and commented off the record to an associate, that "...the abortive evidence of arms has been abandoned, even the solitary pike that formerly glared rebellion from the corner of the court, no longer makes its appearance; and the knives have retired to their ancient office of carving."⁵⁸⁸

⁵⁸⁴ *State Trials*, vol. 25, cols. 2-745 (entire trial).

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸⁶ Cone, p. 207.

⁵⁸⁷ *State Trials*, vol. 25, cols. 27 – 71.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

Rather, Mitford decided to emphasize Horne Tooke's and the SCI's addresses and correspondences with the French National Convention as a way to prove that he and the SCI had much more than domestic political reform in their minds. For such an approach to succeed Mitford had to focus on Horne Tooke's political actions and conduct - his "overt acts" - as opposed to the principles he espoused, to demonstrate the treasonous intent of the accused.⁵⁸⁹ Mitford focused his prosecution on Horne Tooke's prominent standing in the political reformist movement – his leadership in the SCI, his shepherding of Hardy and the LCS, his introductory and diplomatic efforts between English and French radicals, and his participation in the planning of a second general convention on English soil.⁵⁹⁰

To this Erskine responded with an effective defense of Horne Tooke's actions and political thought over the preceding decade. Erskine also emphasized that Horne Tooke's somewhat more fortunate societal station should not effect the way he is viewed and judged by the jury, particularly when the stakes of a guilty verdict were so high. Erskine also managed to have Hardy's acquittal admitted as evidence by referencing it over and over in his defense of Horne Tooke. This was a brilliant move that created the legal foundation for Horne Tooke's acquittal if Erskine could convince the jury that the cases against each man were similar.⁵⁹¹ To that end, Erskine attacked the prosecution's charges one by one, but only after winning some of the juror's sympathies for Horne Tooke as a result of his more advanced age, his various medical conditions (of which he had several), and the toll his incarceration in the Tower had taken on him.⁵⁹²

⁵⁸⁹ Goodwin, p. 355.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁹¹ *State Trials*, cols. 261 – 2.

⁵⁹² Ibid., and Goodwin, p. 335.

As to Horne Tooke's political thoughts and actions, Erskine rehearsed his many writings against radical political change outside of legal and constitutional bounds, his support of the monarchy and Parliament over the past several decades, and his role as a moderating political influence on Hardy and the other leaders of the political reform movement.⁵⁹³ Erskine also argued that while Horne Tooke did contribute to the planned defense of Thomas Paine in the English courts, he was never a supporter of the more radical elements of Paine's political philosophies, especially those advocating for the abolition of the monarchy and hereditary privilege.⁵⁹⁴ Finally, Erskine argued for the logic of legal precedent. If Hardy, who had been widely viewed as what Scott and the prosecution termed the "chief conspirator" had been acquitted, then it must follow that Horne Tooke could not reasonably be found guilty of the same charges given the evidence presented.

The major difference in the manner in which Erskine handled Horne Tooke's trial as opposed to Hardy's was that he allowed the accused to be a participant in his own defense. Horne Tooke was a skillful orator, and his remarks and even cross-examinations on his own behalf did much to influence the jury. By all accounts he severely damaged the credibility of the government spies who were called as witnesses, particularly William Sharp and Daniel Adams, by arguing that they were motivated by the promise of pay and protection from prosecution.⁵⁹⁵ At every turn Horne Tooke spoke of his moderating influence on the LCS and the SCI, and reiterated that while he was a fervent believer in the cause of political reform, it must only come from within the constitutional framework. In an example of his oratory skills and persuasiveness, he successfully

⁵⁹³ *State Trials*, vol. 25, cols. 319-20.

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, cols. 84-98.

argued that he had turned the SCI into a “mere club” with modest political ambitions and a membership that was in decline. This was not altogether true but Horne Tooke’s skills convinced the judge and jury nonetheless.⁵⁹⁶ He also defended his hand written emendations to the resolutions and addresses of the LCS as merely his way of assisting Hardy and the other much less politically experienced members of the LCS in avoiding the pitfalls of public writing and speaking, including the very real threat of libel. As Horne Tooke argued, his was not the role of political maestro and manipulator of the LCS, but was much more the role of benevolent counselor.⁵⁹⁷

Throughout his defense Horne Tooke remained deferential and respectful to the judge, jury, and court proceedings, despite several attempted provocations by the defense lawyers. This approach undoubtedly aided his cause, and as Erskine remarked later his demeanor and skills were a great enhancement to Erskine’s already well-articulated defense of him. Such was the effectiveness of the combined defense approach for Horne Tooke that the jury took a mere eight minutes to acquit him – an astounding outcome given the government’s influence on the jury selection and the formulation of the charges.⁵⁹⁸ When the verdict was read and entered into the court transcripts, crowds inside and outside of the courtroom erupted in shouts and applause. And as a final nod to the estimable skills of Horne Tooke, many of the jurors were moved to tears when he personally thanked them, one by one, for sparing his life.⁵⁹⁹ He also publicly thanked the presiding judges and his defense team of Erskine and Gibbs, and in one last shot at the government scolded the Attorney General for bringing innocent men to trial on such

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid, vol. 25, col. 731, and Goodwin, p. 356.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid, col. 743.

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid.

trumped up charges, warning the government “not to attempt to shed men’s blood upon lame suspicions and doubtful inferences.”⁶⁰⁰

The trial of LCS member John Thelwall, whose influence on Hardy and the LCS was nearly as pronounced as Horne Tooke’s, was next on the docket. Thelwall was a much less talented orator than Horne Tooke, and was of a weaker constitution, despairing as he did in the Tower that he was unprepared to die. Thelwall later described how he and Horne Tooke, who had been his neighbor in the Tower, had discussed the prospect of suicide and rejected it, with Thelwall taking inspiration from Horne Tooke’s retort that, “I will either live to be useful, or die usefully.”⁶⁰¹

Thelwall’s trial began on December 1, 1794, and ended on December 5. Thelwall wanted to emulate Horne Tooke’s approach of speaking in his own defense, but Erskine wisely vetoed that idea. Thelwall could be a preachy and laborious writer and orator, and Erskine correctly calculated that exposing those characteristics to the judge and jury would do much more harm than good. At one point during the short trial Thelwall became uncomfortable with Erskine’s defense approach, and slipped Erskine a note that read “I’ll be hanged if I don’t plead my own cause,” to which Erskine replied in writing – “You’ll be hanged if you do.”⁶⁰² Suffice to say that Thelwall did not utter a single word in his own defense. In some respects Thelwall’s defense was more tenuous for Erskine than those of Hardy and Horne Tooke; he had written several of the more radical addresses of the LCS, and had even gone so far as describing himself in writing as an English *sans-culotte*.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid., col. 745, and Goodwin, p. 357.

⁶⁰¹ Thelwall, *Tribune* (1796), vol. 3, p.211.

⁶⁰² Earl Stanhope, *Life of Pitt* (London, 1861), vol. 2, p. 273.

Thelwall was also the leader of the LCS's Secret Committee formed in the wake of the failed petition drive when the LCS and the rest of the movement felt that stronger actions might be required to effect the change they desired. Thelwall had also given a series of popular political lectures – lectures the government prosecutors entered as evidence of Thelwall's guilt.⁶⁰³ Unlike the trials of Hardy and Tooke, the transcripts of Thelwall's trial somehow were not preserved, so any description of the proceedings is a bit anecdotal. Historian Albert Goodwin has suggested that given the writing style of Thelwall the trial was likely a bit tedious and tiresome if the prosecution read those writings into the court record, which they probably did.⁶⁰⁴ In any event the trial concluded after five days, and the jury deliberated for all of two hours to return a verdict of not guilty.

After Thelwall's trial the government requested some time to consider their next steps, and more precisely whether or not to proceed with additional trials. After ten days, on December 15, 1794, the government decided not to bring the remaining defendants to trial. After nearly two months, the trials accusing members of the LCS and the SCI of high treason were over with no convictions. The British government intended to use the state trials as an indictment of the entire political reform movement by exposing their alleged seditious and treasonous intents to the general public. While the trials did not work out the way the government intended, they nevertheless played a key role in the declining fortunes of the political reform movement, in ways that neither the government nor the LCS could have imagined.

⁶⁰³ John Thelwall, *The Natural and Constitutional Right of Britons to Annual Parliaments, Universal Suffrage and the Freedom of Popular Association* (London, 1795), p. 85.

⁶⁰⁴ Goodwin, p. 358.

Conclusion

The spring of 1794 was a tumultuous time for the LCS, and for the British political reform movement. The movement began to splinter in the wake the failed attempts to organize and execute a second General Convention of reformists, this time on English soil. The British government increased their reconnaissance on the LCS and many of the other reform groups, and began compiling the kinds of evidence that might be used to bring the LCS leaders to trial.

In May of 1794 Hardy and several of the other leaders were arrested. A government committee (The Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons) was appointed to review the evidence against the arrested men and recommend charges. The Committee of Secrecy noted with great alarm that the LCS and the other societies had made plans to arm themselves if necessary, and in the absence of some of their leaders, were still making plans to conduct a Second General Convention in or around London. In addition to accusing the leaders of the reform movement of a direct assault on the British governmental system from within, the Committee of Secrecy also used their report as an opportunity to demonstrate the movement's collusion with the French revolutionaries. Tying the political goals and objectives of the reform movement to the French Revolution was important to the Committee of Secrecy in order that the British general public might see the reform movement as something much more insidious and threatening to the nation.

After being held in the Tower for several months, the defendants were formally arraigned on October 25, 1794 and charged with treason. The government prosecutor, Attorney General Sir John Scott, believed that the evidence supported charges of sedition,

a charge that Scott thought he could get convictions under. However, pressure from political elites to eradicate the movement once and for all caused Scott to bring the more evidentiary tenuous charges of high treason against Hardy and the other defendants. Hardy was the first of the accused to be tried, and was defended by Thomas Erskine, the lead defense attorney for all the defendants. Hardy's trial lasted for nearly two weeks, as lead prosecutor Scott presented the government's case for treason by introducing large caches of evidence, including all of the reports from all of the government spies who had infiltrated the LCS and the wider movement since 1792. It seemed to many present that Scott was trying to overwhelm the jury with a mountain of evidence.

Scott rested his prosecution and on November 1, 1794, Erskine began his defense of Hardy. Erskine's primary argument in defense of Hardy and the entire political reform movement a straightforward one. In the eyes of British law, there was a difference between the alleged consequences of an action, and the evidentiary intentions of an action.⁶⁰⁵ Therefore, Hardy and the LCS ought not to be judged upon what they might have done or what might have happened should a second General Convention have come to fruition as the prosecution argued, but should rather be judged upon their intention in such a course of action: an honest and sincere desire to improve the nation.

In the end this proved an effective defense, and Hardy was acquitted of the charges of treason. The trials of John Horne Tooke and Thomas Thelwall, both members and leaders of the LCS, followed Hardy's trial in short order. Like Hardy, both men were acquitted of the charges of high treason – Horne Tooke was acquitted in an astonishing eight minutes of jury deliberation time. After these acquittals, the Government requested some time to reconsider the charges against the remaining defendants. On December 15,

⁶⁰⁵ Goodwin, p. 347.

1794, the government decided not to bring the remaining defendants to trial, thus ending the government's legal action against Hardy, the LCS, and the political reform movement. The trials, while a short term victory for the movement that spurred some increased membership and reform activity, proved to be a longer term victory for the British government who, unlike Hardy and the LCS, had the political and economic stamina to see the matter through.

CHAPTER EIGHT – The LCS After the State Trials: Philosophies & Finances

The finances of the Society have been for the last six months in so feeble a state that we have not been able to publish anything worth sending to you. Such a communication as you intimate the Corresponding Society wishes to open with us would be very acceptable to us, and very useful in forwarding a cause which only seeks truth and justice.⁶⁰⁶

- William Chow of the Sheffield Constitutional Society, in a letter to Citizen Hodgson of the LCS, December 3, 1794.

After the State Trials

The repercussions in the aftermath of the treason trials of the LCS and SCI were many and manifest, but in the main did not provide the LCS and the political reform movement with the impetus it needed to achieve its goals. For the movement writ large, the months following the trials provided a much-needed influx of new members. For the LCS in particular, the surge in new members provided some short-term enthusiasm and financial support, but at a cost. That cost was the resignation of Thomas Hardy from his position as Secretary of the Society, and while Hardy would stay involved, the personal toll he endured for the cause proved to be too much for him to remain any more than a figurehead going forward. Paradoxically, the acquittals benefited the government more than the reform movement over the next few years, particularly after the initial energy generated by those acquittals waned, and political and economic reality set back in for the LCS and the rest of the movement.

In the first instance, the trials did help to create a new set of boundaries for legal public political expression. The public sphere for the working class was now on firmer constitutional ground than it had been prior to the trials, and working class men,

⁶⁰⁶ Hardy, *Memoir*, BL, Add'l MS 65153B

including members of the LCS, were more secure in their legal rights when speaking publicly about their political beliefs. After the trials the government curtailed its infiltration and spying efforts regarding the LCS, as much of what had occurred behind closed doors in Society meetings had been exposed at the trials. The quasi-legal notion of constructive intention would no longer be in the quiver of the government as a way to allege crimes against the state, allowing the LCS and other groups to speak more freely about their goals and objectives. To be sure, the government could still bring political agitators to trial, and occasionally did so; but the risk of being charged with such high crimes as sedition and treason had diminished.⁶⁰⁷ Moreover, the trials helped the LCS in what was its core mission all along according to Hardy, Place, Gerrald, and other leaders: to educate the general public, and particularly the working class, on their political rights. The trials brought great attention to the goals and objectives of the LCS, and from the end of 1794 until the Reform Act of 1832 the notion of parliamentary reform remained in the public consciousness.⁶⁰⁸

For all of the good that resulted from the very public trials of late 1794, there were several counter-balancing negatives for the LCS specifically, and the political reform movement more generally. The loss of Hardy from active membership was certainly a blow, but by early 1795 it was obvious that the LCS would need to recruit some new members as a way to collect dues and shore up its rapidly deteriorating finances. And for the first half of 1795 the LCS was able to do just that. Interestingly, and perhaps as a result of the trials, the LCS did not keep records of its meetings, minutes, correspondence, or any other activities from roughly January to July of 1795. It may

⁶⁰⁷ Cone, p. 219.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid.

have been a short-lived paranoia related to government spying, or it could have been something as mundane as a lack of a competent secretary to record the meetings after Hardy's departure.⁶⁰⁹ However from records compiled later in 1795 it is clear that the LCS was able to increase its membership during the first six months of the year. The number of LCS divisions had increased from fourteen to twenty-three between March and June of 1795. In April eight of those division had submitted dues – it had always been the case that not all LCS division submitted their dues faithfully, or at all - and by July sixteen of the twenty-three divisions were submitting their monthly dues.⁶¹⁰ As Francis Place opined during this period: “The more thinking part of the common people joined the reforming societies in great numbers.”⁶¹¹

For the LCS the first half of 1795 was about reorganizing itself after the trials and about leveraging any public goodwill from the acquittals and the subsequent publicity to advance the goals of the LCS. In February and March of 1795 the LCS published several letters and distributed them broadly, including a letter to the Earl of Stanhope thanking him for his support on their behalf in the House of Lords. The letter was signed by new LCS president James Powell, and by their new secretary, a Mr. J. Burks.⁶¹² On February 15 a letter was written to the Duke of Portland, inviting him to send a representative to a general committee meeting, another indication that the LCS was trying to get back to business. On May 9, a circular letter was written and distributed to the Scottish Patriotic Society, asking about the potential for new members, and explaining that since the trials

⁶⁰⁹ Thale, *Selections*, p. 241.

⁶¹⁰ Hardy, *Memoir*, BL, Add'l MS 65153B

⁶¹¹ Ibid.

⁶¹² Thale, *Selections*, p. 242.

“our sole attention has of necessity been toward the liquidation of our debts.”⁶¹³ These are debts that had accumulated both as a result of the LCS having to pay for publishing its correspondence, and for the defense of Hardy and the other LCS members put on trial. The letter also indicated the number of LCS was “rapidly” increasing, and that the Society was continuing with its plans to educate “that part of our Countrymen who are ignorant of the true source of their sufferings”⁶¹⁴ through the publication of a number of free, or at least affordable, newsletters advocating for universal suffrage and annual parliaments. The letter concluded by indicating the LCS was hopeful about collaborating with the remaining reform societies as a way to share costs and provide a united front for reform to the general public. The letter was signed by a new LCS Secretary, John Ashley, a good indicator that the LCS officer ranks had become, (and would remain), a bit of a revolving door.

From 1795 to 1797, a period that might be considered the last third of the Society’s publicly active life, two issues would predominate, one lofty and the other rather mundane, but just as lethal to the Society’s well-being: the reorganization of the Society, including its constitution and regulations, and its finances. This period in the history of the LCS was defined by internal divisions, reactive rather than proactive planning and decision-making, and instability in the leadership positions. As opposed to the period prior to the state trials, the LCS became more inwardly than outwardly focused as an organization. The trials had a pronounced membership effect on the Society, providing an excuse for many longer term members to leave as a way to avoid the kinds life-altering experiences that Hardy and the other defendants had endured, while at the same

⁶¹³ Ibid.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

time exciting other men who had been watching from the sidelines to join. On balance this turned out to be a negative development for the LCS, as many of the new members, eager as they were, lacked some of the fundamental beliefs and organizational principles that had set the LCS on its original path. Many new members were less interested in the carefully constructed meeting decorum that Hardy had established, making the meetings in this period of the LCS less disciplined and more about who could shout the loudest. For most of 1795, the LCS was in a fractious state, with internal arguments over important and not so important matters: “Our unanimity was disturbed, and our very existence endangered, by the unhappy dissensions of some of the most active members; the result of which was the contending parties seceding, and forming two Societies [The London Reforming Society and the Friends of Liberty].”⁶¹⁵ While this left the LCS intact, these two new reformist groups contributed to the erosion of the unanimity of purpose in the overall movement.

A central component of the Society’s turmoil in 1795 was the retreat of any semblance of non-working-class support in the cause. This was true of the larger reform movement as well. The treason trials, although favorably perceived by the general public, put real fear into many men of modest but respectable means who were not in a position to risk everything; they had too much to lose. That fear was augmented by a growing nationalism over the war with France, such that middle-class men could not afford to be perceived, politically, socially, or economically, as being against the war. And as these men abandoned the LCS and the reform movement, they were replaced by working class men anxious to find their political voice. What these men brought in enthusiasm, however, they lacked in self-discipline, experience, and organizational and writing skills.

⁶¹⁵ Hardy, *Memoir*, Add’l MS 65153B, and Thale, p. 242.

This was a setback for the LCS and the political reform movement, for without some middle class connection to the public sphere, not to mention the House of Commons, it became increasingly difficult to hold the political reform coalition together.⁶¹⁶

The trials also had the effect of fracturing the tenuous connections between the metropolitan and provincial reform societies and chapters.⁶¹⁷ Hardy and the LCS had gone to great lengths in 1792 and 1793 to position the Society as the most inclusive of all the reform groups, making special trips to help form chapters in the outlying areas, and making it a point always to extend invitations to provincial chapter officers to attend the general meetings in London. This effort was aimed at forming a community of reform as it were, allowing the provincial societies to feel as necessary to the cause as the metropolitan ones, and demonstrating to the general public the overall cohesiveness of the political reform movement. That cohesiveness was always tenuous however, given the geographical and financial challenges to tightly connecting the provincial chapters to the urban ones. Additionally, the ordeal of the trials and the threat of additional government action – even though in practice the government had curtailed its activities against the reform movement - was enough to sever whatever ties remained. And while the government had backed off on their anti-reform movement activities, they had not stopped them completely, evidenced by the 1795 trial of Henry Yorke, who was brought to trial and convicted of conspiracy for his efforts in Sheffield in 1794.⁶¹⁸

In fact, the acquittal of Hardy and the others did not stop the government from pursuing arrests and trials against the political reform movement, it simply altered their approach to a more targeted and focused one, and one in which they felt they could get

⁶¹⁶ Ibid.

⁶¹⁷ Cone, p. 210.

⁶¹⁸ Cone, p. 210.

convictions. Two of the new leaders of the LCS in 1795, John Gale Jones and John Binns, were arrested and tried for sedition. Binns was acquitted, but Jones was found guilty and was imprisoned for several years.⁶¹⁹ The judicial pattern established after the treason trials of the LCS was based upon what the government learned from those trials. Going forward, the government would continue its harassment of the reform movement, including bringing charges against reformers, but was careful not to over extend its accusations as a way to get more convictions.

Conversely, the treason trials had created a perception amongst the public, and therefore amongst jury pools, that the government was politically over zealous but legally under equipped in terms of getting major convictions. So a judicial cat and mouse game ensued from 1795 until 1798, with reformers understanding that so long as they restricted their activities to the realm of reform activism they could avoid being charged with the major crimes of sedition and treason.⁶²⁰ It was also as clear as it had ever been however, that the British government would continue to bring its considerable resources to bear against the political reform movement, and any would-be reformers now certainly understood the risks of the game.⁶²¹

The LCS and Middle Class Men

The absence of a strong middle class presence in the leadership ranks of the LCS, and the reform movement more generally, from 1795 onward had other implications besides those noted previously. While fundamentally a working class movement at its inception, from 1792 – 1794 Hardy, the LCS, the SCI, and other groups, benefitted greatly from the presence and support of middle class men who brought political credibility and social

⁶¹⁹ Ibid.

⁶²⁰ Ibid, p. 211.

⁶²¹ Ibid.

connections to the movement. These men were able to provide some organizational and operational discipline that helped to stabilize the political reform movement through the early part of the decade. John Horne Tooke and Francis Place are good examples of such men. In the wake of the treason trials of Hardy and the others, middle class men became more cautious about openly supporting the movement, though some did continue their efforts in a more underground manner.⁶²² To be sure, the political ties that bound middle and working class men together were quite tenuous in the 1790s, to the degree they existed at all, and would not start to meld until the passage of the Reform Bill of 1832 and the decades beyond that.⁶²³ But in the early 1790s they were important nonetheless, and even fundamental to the development of popular politics and a political voice for the less enfranchised demographic of a rising industrial class with political, social, and economic expectations to match.

In 1795 however, the LCS was in survival mode, as was much of the rest of the political reform movement. The initial goals of the LCS – universal suffrage and annual elections for Parliament – seemed more out of reach after the treason trials than ever before, for all of the reasons previously mentioned. The question on the minds of a new set of LCS leaders in the summer of 1795 was what they should do next. Interestingly, while the prospects of the LCS seemed to be dimming, a whole array of popular and radical protest movements arose after the treason trials. Much of the cohesiveness of the reform movement had been focused on and around the goals of the LCS, but after the trials and the departure of Hardy from an active role in the movement, reformists began to focus on a variety of perceived social inequities, from the welfare of the poor, to the

⁶²² Ibid., p. 212.

⁶²³ Ibid., and Hardy, *Memoir*, Add'l MS 65153B.

price-fixing of bread, to the housing shortages in industrializing cities. 1795 was a year of food shortages and bread riots in England, and for a time the issues of the LCS seemed secondary to more urgent social and economic imperatives.⁶²⁴ All of this led the new leaders of the LCS to chart a different course from 1795 until their demise in 1798, a course in which the philosophical underpinnings of the Society would be challenged, and one in which the established pattern of metropolitan and provincial chapter meetings would be replaced by mass general meetings designed to demonstrate popular support of the goals of the LCS.⁶²⁵

The advent of mass general meetings as a replacement for several smaller chapter meetings was a philosophical and organizational notion borne of necessity. One of the organizing principals of the LCS had always been to grow popular support organically by creating a widespread base of working class political consciousness throughout Great Britain. It was Hardy's belief that the best way to create popular political support and activism was by educating common people of their political rights. And he and the initial generation of LCS leaders believed that was best accomplished through smaller but numerous chapter meetings and activities. In the aftermath of the trial and the general falling away of middle class and provincial support, the LCS had to rethink their tactical approaches for remaining politically viable.

One of the motivations for having a series of large meetings by the new LCS leadership, primarily the aforementioned Jones and Binns, was as a political counterbalance to the bread riots that had erupted in July of 1795. Riots in Blakeney, Norwich, Yarmouth, Cambridge, and many more communities were fanning the flames

⁶²⁴ Goodwin, p. 360.

⁶²⁵ Ibid.

of more radical protest movements and moving the Pitt government toward ever more stringent political and civil actions.⁶²⁶ While a calculated risk, the new LCS leadership hoped to demonstrate to the Pitt government, as well as to the public at large, that political activism could occur without turning violent. In fact, the organizing of mass public meetings to engender and demonstrate popular support for a cause, while novel in the 1790s, would become one of the political hallmarks of the nineteenth century in Britain.⁶²⁷

Deteriorating Finances

Even with an influx of new members in the aftermath of the state trials, the finances of the LCS remained in a precarious state. This led the new LCS leadership to work on ways to raise revenue through even more new memberships and publications, strategies that while initially successful, turned out to be unsustainable for the LCS. The Society was still recovering financially from the legal defenses of Margarot and Gerrald it had helped to support the previous year, in the wake of the Edinburgh trials after the first general convention. The treason trials of Hardy and the others only added to the financial burdens of the society. In both instances, the LCS contributed to defense attorney fees, particularly Erskine's, and the publication and distribution of pamphlets that supported the actions and characters of those on trial. The Society even solicited its members to help directly support the families of those that had been imprisoned awaiting trial.⁶²⁸ The LCS always had rather shallow pockets given its working class ethos and nominal membership dues, and in 1795 they had fallen into a financial deficit of a serious nature. Before the treason trials the LCS could from time to time rely on the generosity of some

⁶²⁶ R. Quinalt and J. Stevenson (eds.), *Popular Protest and Public Order* (London, 1975).

⁶²⁷ Goodwin, p. 360.

⁶²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

of the members of the SCI, supportive business owners, and even some sympathetic members of Parliament. After the treason trials that all changed for the LCS. The SCI was now effectively defunct, and the middle and upper class financial support that was the financial safety net for the LCS had dried up as well.

Additionally, with the demise of the SCI and the growing timidity on the part of some of the more moderate and middle class LCS members in the wake of the treason trials, the political activities of the LCS began to take a turn away from Hardy's moderating ways, and toward a more activist approach favored by some of its new leaders and members. The treason trials, while not ending in convictions, did manage to lay the groundwork for any future trials of members of political reform societies by establishing some legal principles according to which those trials would be held. The most important principle was that of collective responsibility. In essence the judges in the treason trials had determined that in the future all members of popular political societies of any kind were responsible for the words and actions of any individual members of that society if that individual member acted in accordance with a membership-approved resolution or activity. This principle was challenged, but upheld on appeal and accepted by the Crown.⁶²⁹ This ruling certainly had the effect of furthering the anxieties of middle class and more moderately political men who had more to lose from an association with the LCS or some other popular political reform group.⁶³⁰ It had the net effect of decreasing the number of politically moderate LCS members and increasing, by attrition, the number of more activist LCS members from the working class. This demographic shift in LCS

⁶²⁹ Goodwin, p. 364, and Hardy, *Memoir*.

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*

membership would have implications for the activities and resolutions of the LCS from 1795 to 1797.

In January of 1795 John Ashley, another shoemaker as it happens, officially replaced Hardy as the secretary of the LCS. Ashley had held the position on an interim basis during Hardy's imprisonment and trial. He had known Hardy for some time, and shared the political goals and objectives that Hardy had for the LCS along with the means of accomplishing through public sphere political education.⁶³¹ Years prior, Ashley had introduced Francis Place, a long time friend of his, to Hardy and the LCS. Place was a journeyman tailor and a good example of the kind of self-educated new man of the late eighteenth century the LCS sought as members.⁶³² Place had immersed himself in the political philosophies of those he admired most – Price, Paine, and the like. In 1795 Place would serve as chairman of the General Committee and as a member of the LCS Executive Committee.⁶³³ As mentioned previously, John Gale Jones and John Binns also joined in late 1794 so that by January and February of 1795 a new LCS leadership group was in place.

Besides having to deal with financial difficulties and splinter reform groups, the new leadership team also faced the prospect of running and growing a political reform society under the continued suspension of *habeas corpus*. Even though they lost the treason trials, or perhaps partly as a result, the Pitt government was in no mood to lift its suspension of legal and civil rights. Before the treason trials had commenced, in July 1794, several conservative ministers banded together to form a coalition for the purposes of more vigorously prosecuting both the foreign war with France, and the domestic battle

⁶³¹ Ibid.

⁶³² Ibid.

⁶³³ Mary Thale, *The Autobiography of Francis Place 1771 – 1854* (Cambridge, 1972), preface.

over political reform. These conservative Whigs were led by the Duke of Portland, who had been unhappy for some time with the what he perceived as the weak responses by the Pitt government to both of the aforementioned matters.⁶³⁴ In December of 1794 at the opening of the new parliamentary session, a group of moderate Foxite Whigs had, in the wake of the treason trial acquittals, moved to repeal the act suspending *habeas corpus*, which was set to expire in any case at the end of February 1795.⁶³⁵ The Duke of Portland and his political allies garnered the necessary support, and the motion to repeal the act was decisively defeated on January 5, 1795 by a vote of 185 to 41.⁶³⁶

The political game of claiming the high ground in the public sphere in the wake of the treason trials and the reorganization of the LCS was now under way. Both sides – the LCS and the Pitt government – saw 1795 as the year to succeed in their respective efforts at the expense of the other, and both sides put a tremendous effort into doing just that. No sooner than the Duke of Portland coalition celebrated its victory to keep the *habeas corpus* suspension act in place, the Solicitor General, Sir John Mitford, began to publicly reframe the outcome of the state treason trials. Mitford reiterated his belief that the LCS was continuing to conspire secretly to topple the government, the acquittal of the accused members notwithstanding, and he suggested that “...the only effect of the late verdicts was that the persons acquitted could not be again tried for the same offence.”⁶³⁷ On the heels of that, one of Mitford’s deputies, Sergeant Adair, publicly noted that while the existence of reasonable doubt was still enough for a judge or a jury to base an acquittal

⁶³⁴ F. O’Gorman, *The Whig Party and the French Revolution* (London, 1967), chapter five.

⁶³⁵ *Parliamentary History*, vol. 31, cols. 995-6.

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.*, col. 1130.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, cols. 997 – 998.

on, it was not in and of itself proof that the accused was “entirely innocent.”⁶³⁸ The government continued to cast doubts as to the innocence of the LCS in the minds of those in the public sphere. In late January 1795 William Windham, the conservative Whig and MP from Norwich, referred to Hardy in a speech as “an acquitted felon.” And as if that was not injurious enough, Windham went on to suggest that the acquittals in the state treason trials did not mean that Hardy and the others were not guilty, but rather that it indicated a lack of conclusive evidence only, and “by no means proved that they were free from moral guilt.”⁶³⁹

The LCS leadership team, along with the Foxite Whigs and several other political reform societies were quick to react to such public proclamations, claiming that these statements only served to further trivialize the constitutionality of the legal process under the Pitt government.⁶⁴⁰ In subsequent speeches, several members of the LCS and their supporters, including Earl Stanhope, went on the attack to defend the acquittals in the treason trials as a triumph of the rule of law, and by extension for all English men, and should therefore be celebrated for the constitutional victory it was.⁶⁴¹ Try as they might, however, the public perception of the LCS and the political reform movement seemed murkier after the state treason trials than before. Despite efforts to emphasize the group’s strictly legal and constitutional conduct, many people focused instead on the question of morality and conduct of the LCS and its members.

This focus on the morality of working class men had been one of Hardy’s approbations from the start, as he knew that the LCS would be judged as much, if not

⁶³⁸ Ibid., col. 1000. And Goodwin, p. 366.

⁶³⁹ Ibid., col. 1029.

⁶⁴⁰ Goodwin, p. 367.

⁶⁴¹ British Library: Place Collection, *Substance of Earl Stanhope’s speech on 4 Feb. 1795*, vol. 37.

more, by the conduct of its members as on their political goals and objectives. That is precisely why Hardy and the other founders of the LCS had spent so much time on meeting organization and protocol, the tone and character of their published letters and resolutions, and educating the membership on not just their political rights, but on the appropriate way to engage in a public and civil discourse. Windham's denunciation of the morality and conduct of LCS leaders was a serious attack upon the group, its history, and its accomplishments. However that is exactly what the Pitt government was succeeding in doing, and the LCS and its new leadership had to develop a response strategy, and quickly.

A Lack of Cohesion in the LCS

In March 1795 the Pitt government was determined to press its advantage. They did so by approaching the new LCS assistant secretary, Joseph Burks, and offering him a substantial bribe for reporting on the plans and activities of the society. Burks was offered an initial bribe of fifty guineas as a starter, not an insignificant amount, and a further guinea a week for a weekly report.⁶⁴² To his credit, Burks rejected the bribery attempt, and in a public letter with tongue firmly in cheek invited the Home Secretary, the Duke of Portland, to nominate somebody to sit on the LCS General Committee as a way for the government to get timely and accurate information on the society.⁶⁴³ The Home Secretary declined. What Burks did not know until sometime later however, and what made 1795 such a difficult and even dangerous year for the LCS, was that the government had already infiltrated the group at the highest levels. One of the society's acting presidents, James Powell, had been supplying the government with inside

⁶⁴² Goodwin, p. 368.

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

intelligence for several months.⁶⁴⁴ It is unclear as to why Powell decided to spy for the government after having been a member of the LCS for some time. Perhaps it was financial gain, a newly found patriotism, or something else. Whatever the case, Powell supplied the government with evidence that would be used against the LCS later in 1795.

The new leadership of the LCS had difficulty deciding whether to adhere to Hardy's original approach for the LCS, or try something different, perhaps even radical. This lack of leadership cohesion, along with continued financial difficulties dogged the LCS throughout. In the wake of the treason trials, Burks's own LCS division serves as an instructive example of the mood of the movement. Weary of fighting over whether or not to rework the constitution of the LCS, and in a bitter fight with another division over the matter of spies in one another's ranks, Burks renamed his division the London Reforming Society while still remaining loosely associated with the mother LCS.⁶⁴⁵ Interestingly, as a historical footnote, Burks's new offshoot group devised and implemented something they called the Book Plan that for all practical purposes served as one of the first noncommercial book clubs in British history. Its purpose was mostly but not strictly political, and in practice it provided financial and logistical support to provincial reform societies toward the purchase of books that "[produced] uniformity of sentiment in the Nation in proportion to the diffusion of knowledge."⁶⁴⁶ By all accounts the program was a success in terms of the widespread distribution of political texts at an affordable and accessible price, and in 1795 Burks and his Reforming Society distributed such books as Joseph Gerrald's *A Convention the Only Means of Saving Us from Ruin* (1794), Yorke's

⁶⁴⁴ PRO Privy Council papers 1/23/A38. This archive holds the rather detailed reports Powell provided the Pitt government in 1795 and 1796.

⁶⁴⁵ BL, Add. MSS. 27814.

⁶⁴⁶ London Reforming Society letter to the LCS, May 9, 1795, Add. MSS. 27814.

edited edition of Locke's *Thoughts on Civil Government* (1794), and a reprint of the Friends of the People pamphlet, *Report on the State of the Representation of England and Wales* (1793).⁶⁴⁷

The differences between various divisions and the LCS leadership over whether or not to rework their constitution proved quite divisive. Several LCS divisions followed the lead of Burks's No. 16 division and seceded from the Society to form their own groups, at once independent but still loosely coupled with the mother LCS. This caused great consternation within the LCS and the larger reform movement, and did little to foster the public perception of a cohesive, united, and politically capable public movement.

The leadership and financial strains over the first six months of 1795 caused a further splintering of the LCS. From January to June of 1795 the number of divisions increased, and then decreased, as if members were not sure whether to stay with the LCS or not. As an example of the tumult in the membership ranks, six divisions comprised mostly of Methodists were threatening to secede after unsuccessfully attempting to ban atheists and Deists from their midst (that was against the constitution the LCS was then operating under) to form an association to be called The Friends of Religious and Civil Liberty.⁶⁴⁸

However, LCS membership began to increase again in the summer of 1795 due to at least a couple of external factors. In July the division count increased from seventeen to thirty, and by September the division count had increased to forty. The first factor for this was the war with France and the recent setbacks experienced by the European anti-French coalition. Many believed that the coalition was ready to collapse and that Britain would be left to fend for itself against the French. Tuscany, Prussia, Holland, Spain, and

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸ John Powell's report to the Pitt government from September 24, 1795, PRO Privy Council Papers 1/23/A 38, and Goodwin, p. 371.

Sweden had all made peace with France by the summer of 1795.⁶⁴⁹ Political reformers and much of the lower and middle classes believed this to be an opportunity for England to petition for peace with France, and joined or rejoined the LCS and other such associations as a way to focus their political power toward peace with France.

The second factor was a belief, and a palpable anxiety amongst the lower classes and the poor, that the vast flooding in June of 1795 would have a negative impact on the crop yields for that growing season, thus driving up the prices for flour and bread as winter approached.⁶⁵⁰ Both of these crises led to some renewed enthusiasm for the LCS and the political reform movement, and if little else, it did demonstrate that the LCS was still perceived as a relevant voice in the public sphere, one that could, with the right support and resources, make a political difference. The LCS leadership seemed to recognize this and quickly canvassed the new divisions as to potential next steps. And despite the financial challenges of another large outdoor meeting, the membership strongly supported a referendum to hold what they all hoped would be their largest protest meeting to date. Amongst the LCS leadership, Francis Place was the least enthused about a large outdoor meeting on the grounds that it would drain the financial coffers of the society even more than they already were.⁶⁵¹

Place was overborne by the general enthusiasm of the LCS divisions however, and newspaper advertisements, handbills, and broadsheets were created announcing a meeting for June 29, 1795, in St. George's Fields. The meeting proved successful on many levels, but perhaps not on the level that mattered to the LCS, and the larger political reform movement, the most. In a shrewd public relations move, on the day before and

⁶⁴⁹ *Histoire des Relations Internationales* (ed. P. Renouvin), vol. 4. (Paris, 1996).

⁶⁵⁰ Goodwin, p. 372.

⁶⁵¹ Mary Thale, *The Autobiography of Francis Place 1771 – 1854* (Cambridge, 1972).

day of the meeting, the LCS contracted for the baking and distribution of large basket-loads of biscuits to the poor. The biscuits were stamped on one side with the words ‘Unanimity, Firmness, Spirit,’ and the other side ‘Freedom and Plenty, or Slavery and Want.’⁶⁵² The biscuits and the media attention had the desired effects in terms of attendance, and nearly every London newspaper reported that “vast” crowds had attended.⁶⁵³ However, nobody seemed to have a precise number of attendees, and the estimates by many of the newspapers, the government, and the LCS ranged from 10,000 to upwards of 100,000.⁶⁵⁴ The high estimates came from the LCS and seem unlikely, and the low estimates came from the government and seem equally as unlikely. It seems fair to say that attendance was in the tens of thousands, a real boon given the precarious state of the LCS and the political reform movement.

The meeting was gaveled to order at 3:00 sharp by John Gale Jones, the new chairman of the LCS and a radical orator of some note, who set the tone by presenting something of an indictment of the Pitt government. Several resolutions were offered and approved, and once again the call for universal manhood suffrage and annual parliaments, as a historical and political right of the people, was widely supported. There were several speeches aimed at the hardships caused by the “the cruel and unnecessary war with France” and the need to bring such an unjust war to a speedy end by acknowledging the existence of the new French Republic.⁶⁵⁵ There were resolutions thanking Citizens Erskine and Gibbs for their valorous work during the state treason trial trials of Hardy

⁶⁵² Reports in the London newspaper *Sun*, June 30, 1795.

⁶⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁵ Hardy, *Memoir*, BL, Add'l MS 65153B, and *History of the Two Acts* (London, 1796), pp. 92 – 102.

and the other defendants, and condemning the high cost of daily goods and provisions.⁶⁵⁶ The meeting was adjourned quite peacefully at 8:00 and the crowd dispersed in an orderly manner.

On the positive side, the large crowd and its peaceful behavior cast the LCS in a favorable light, and demonstrated that they could still rally and organize supporters in orderly gatherings, one of the foundations of a legitimate political movement. The LCS leadership repeatedly emphasized the need for peaceful behavior so as to not give the government an excuse to intervene. They also crafted the agenda quite carefully so as not to go too far in their criticism of King and Country, both to keep the crowd in a peaceful mood. Finally, they set the price of tickets for inside the enclosure that had been constructed at 6d. in an effort to screen out potential bad behavior.⁶⁵⁷ A large contingent of local constables and a detachment of the guards and cavalry also had a calming effect on the crowd.⁶⁵⁸

The peacefulness of the meeting also demonstrated to the country that the political reformers could organize, execute, and behave in a legal and constitutional manner – one of the key public political sphere goals of the LCS from its inception. This is no small matter. One of the enduring legacies of the LCS was the nature of its operations and how such operational principles guided its leaders, membership, and supporters. Context and perspective always matter, and the LCS was considered politically radical in most if not all of the conservative quarters of the British public and government. However, as a result of the Society's insistence on operating within legal and constitutional norms, there was a growing segment of British society – lower, middling, and even some upper class

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁷ *LCS Correspondence*, BL, Add. MSS. 27808, fos. 38 – 40, and *The Sun*, June 30, 1795.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid.

segments – that came to see the LCS as at least a measure of political legitimacy. That was no small shift in public perceptions from just twenty years earlier, when Wilkes and his followers were publicly demonized, arrested, and put on trial, for their political views and occasionally violent operational methods. Hardy and some of the other LCS founders no doubt learned lessons from that period and applied them judiciously.

In the aggregate, though, the large general meeting did not have the kind of political impact that Jones, Place, and the other LCS leaders had hoped for. One of the key justifications for organizing a large outdoor meeting, despite the financial and logistical burdens involved, was to exert public political pressure on the government to recognize the demands of the LCS and its supporters and respond accordingly. This did not occur. At the meeting a resolution was approved that led to the creation of an Address to the King, a document that itemized the burdens on the people caused by the government and a number of specific actions that the LCS petitioned the King review and refer to Parliament. An LCS contingent presented the document to the Home Secretary, the Duke of Portland, in July of 1795, but the Duke emphatically refused to forward it or even acknowledge its existence.⁶⁵⁹ This was not unexpected by the LCS leadership, as it had repeatedly in the past.

By October of 1795, the LCS had reached its zenith in terms of raw numbers of divisions, with between seventy and eighty recognized as chapters in good standing. In June four hundred new members were added across all divisions, and in July that number doubled to eight hundred new members.⁶⁶⁰ And whether the LCS wanted it to be so or not, the impetus for this growth had less to do with the group's political reform agenda,

⁶⁵⁹ *LCS Correspondence*, BL, Add. MSS. 27808, fos. 38 – 40, and Goodwin, p. 373.

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

and much more to do with economic distress and support for the poor and needy. Thomas Holcroft, one of the leaders of the defunct Society for Constitutional Information, observed first-hand the distress of thousands of cloth industry workers in Norwich: “There can be no doubt of the distress of the poor in this city. A comber who used to employ sixty men, now is able to employ only fifteen. A hotpresser whom I know, assured me that all the hotpressers in this city do not employ so many journeymen as he alone did before the war.”⁶⁶¹ And on it went. One of the reasons memberships climbed in the latter half of 1795 was that many individual artisans and trades-people were looking for a forum in which to articulate their distress, and through which their voices might be heard. Membership in a division of the LCS helped provide that.

The Political Reform Movement Splinters

The latter half of 1795 was also a time of some splintering of political reform groups that increased the anxiety of the LCS leadership over the unity of their movement, the continuity of their cause, and the consistency of their message. To take one example, in the summer and fall of 1795 a group of political reformers in Norwich – mostly artisans and shopkeepers – formed the Norwich Patriotic Society (NPS). In many ways the new looked looked and sounded very much like an LCS division, perhaps providing a nod to the model that the LCS had created. The NPS declared its political goals to be universal male suffrage and annual parliaments, just like the LCS, and declared to pursue these goals with “reason, firmness, and unanimity.”⁶⁶² The newly formed society lamented the “numerous, burdensome, and unnecessary taxes” as a result of the war with France, and,

⁶⁶¹ Holcroft, p. 40.

⁶⁶² *The Declaration and Constitution of the Norwich Patriotic Society established the twentieth of April 1795 to obtain a reform in the House of Commons of Parliament.* Millennium Library, Norwich, Heritage Center Special Collections, Colman Collection, 25E.

like the LCS, thought that the necessary corrective was equalized representation in the House of Commons.⁶⁶³ It charged the same monthly dues as the LCS, an affordable one penny per week, and it organized itself in an identical fashion as the LCS, with thirty member divisions and meetings each fortnight.⁶⁶⁴ The NPS contacted the LCS in the summer of 1795 requesting an active correspondence and the exchange of proceedings, to which the LCS happily agreed. Similar groups were created in Birmingham and Sheffield, so that by the fall and winter of 1795 there were several LCS ‘shadow’ organizations acting toward many of the same goals as the LCS had, but doing so independently of one another.

While on the surface this would seem to be a positive development for the political reform movement, in fact it slowed progress and support by diluting and localizing the activities of many dozens of political reform groups across Britain. This had the unintended effect of causing some confusion to the public at large as to just who was trying to reform what, leaving the political reform movement in the position of having its messages devolve into just so much localized noise. The formation of so many similar sounding, but unaffiliated groups, also played into the hands of the British government, who began to isolate and pick off the groups one by one, a task made much easier for them by the size and localization of the reform groups.

The plight of the poor, the hungry, and the unemployed became the impetus for another large outdoor meeting on October 26, 1795. The LCS was the sponsoring organization of the meeting, but many other, more recently formed reform societies had a hand in its organization, agenda, and execution. The location chosen was the

⁶⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid and Goodwin, p. 377.

Copenhagen House in Islington, a popular tea garden location at the time.⁶⁶⁵ The goal of the meeting was to demonstrate broad public support for the petition to the King that resulted from the St. George's outdoor meeting, and was summarily ignored by the Home Secretary.⁶⁶⁶ The date of the meeting was chosen for political purposes as well, as October 26 was just a few days before the opening of the next parliamentary session. The LCS and the other meeting organizers were hoping to generate a strong public showing to the new parliament as to their seriousness of intent.⁶⁶⁷ It must be said that there was another reason for the LCS and the larger political reform movement to take on, yet again, the financial and logistical burdens of a large outdoor public meeting, and that was to demonstrate that the reform movement was still alive and relevant.

From the Society's inception, Hardy and the other leaders believed that time was on their side, and if they collectively persevered and stuck to their political goals and objectives in a legal and constitutional manner, their time would come. Perseverance and focus were the touchstones of the LCS, at least before the state treason trials, and in some sense these outdoor meetings of 1795 were an effort to get those elements back into the political reform movement. The splintering of reform groups and the corresponding dilution in political power for the movement had already provided a key leverage point for conservatives in and out of the British government to take advantage of, and indeed they had. The outdoor meetings at St. George's field and the Copenhagen House were seen by Jones and some of the other LCS leadership as a way to demonstrate renewed

⁶⁶⁵ *Account of the Proceedings of a meeting of the London Corresponding Society held in a field near Copenhagen House, Monday Oct. 26, 1795. Printed for Citizen Lee, at the TREE OF LIBERTY, BL, Add. MSS. 27808, fos. 38 – 40, pp. 7-8.*

⁶⁶⁶ *LCS Correspondence, BL, Add. MSS. 27808, fos. 38 – 40*

⁶⁶⁷ *Ibid and Goodwin, p. 384.*

commitment and common purpose once again, and to signal to the enemies of the political reform movement that they were not going away.

Additionally, LCS leaders John Gale Jones and John Binns thought the recent hardships the poor and many others in the country had been experiencing as a result of the protracted war would provide some impetus for the movement. Jones and Binns also planned to reiterate to the large gathering, and to the press, that the LCS would continue to employ only constitutional, legally responsible, and peaceable means to achieve its goals in the hopes that public support and perception would take some of the government pressure off of the LCS.⁶⁶⁸ Once again it is difficult to get an accurate account of the number of attendees, but taking the generous estimates of the LCS and the conservative estimates of the government, most newspapers reported that crowd at very nearly 100,000.⁶⁶⁹

Copenhagen House

The LCS had learned its lessons from St. George's Field. One of the complaints from that meeting was that only the attendees standing closest to the rostrum could hear the speeches given and resolutions offered. The rest of the attendees had to hear the essence of the matters at hand as they were passed along mouth to mouth from the crowd. At this meeting three separate rostrums were erected in a triangle configuration so that the details and proceedings of the meeting could and would be heard at three different locations.⁶⁷⁰ The speaker at each rostrum would read the same thing, at about the same time, as was

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁹ Sun, October 27, 1795. *Account of the Proceedings of a Meeting of the London Corresponding Society at Copenhagen House, October 26, 1795*, p. 15.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid.

being read at the other rostrums.⁶⁷¹ At the meeting the nominating committee put forth the slate of John Binns as the new LCS chairman, and John Thelwall, John Gale Jones, and Binns as the executive committee of the LCS. This allowed the three of them to be the primary LCS speakers for the remainder of the day.⁶⁷²

The business of the meeting was the public reading of two important LCS communications, entitled an *Address to the Nation* and a *Remonstrance to the King*. The former was an elegant re-articulation of the political goals and objectives of the LCS, its methods for achieving its goals and objectives, and as importantly as anything else, its commitment to persevere. Newly elected chair John Binns had the honor to present the Address, and did so with a flourish:

Once more, dear friends and fellow citizens, in defiance of threats and insults – of base suggestions and unmanly fears – we are met in the open face of day, and call the heavens and earth to witness the purity of our proceedings. Amidst the dreadful storms and hurricanes which at present assail the political hemisphere of our country, with firm and unabated vigour we pursue our avowed and real purpose – the grand and glorious cause of PARLIAMENTARY REFORM! - The rude gales of opposition, and the howling blasts of persecution have served only to assist our career; and where we might have lingered from our choice of indolence, we now steadily advance from the heavy pressure of inevitable necessity!⁶⁷³

The *Address* continued to hit many of the LCS themes. However, Binns went awry of the Society's commitment to stay within constitutional boundaries to achieve their goals when he directly admonished the King: "...his Majesty should consider the sacred obligations he is bound to fulfill, and the duties he ought to discharge: He should recollect, that when he ceases to consult the interest and happiness of his People, he will

⁶⁷¹ Ibid.

⁶⁷² Ibid.

⁶⁷³ Address to the Nation, October 26, 1795, *LCS Correspondence*, BL, Add. MSS. 27808.

cease to be respected.”⁶⁷⁴ While such language rallied some of the more radical elements of the reform movement, they also provided more grist for the government to continue to build its case against the LCS and the rest of the political reform movement.

Binns did strike a chord when he addressed the economic distresses that had befallen the nation, connecting those distresses to both the loss of men and supplies in the war, and to parliamentary corruption: “The bread that should support the industrious Poor has been exported, either to be abandoned on a foreign shore, or consigned to the bottom of a merciless ocean – while the helpless widow and wretched orphan, are consoled for their irreparable loss, by the scanty allowance of an insolent donation, or a charitable bribe!”⁶⁷⁵ Binns concluded the rather short *Address to the Nation* (approx. 2000 words) by using the themes of persistence and perseverance, which may have played well to the crowd, but was a bit over optimistic regarding the current state of the LCS and the reform movement it was leading: “The LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY shall be the powerful organ to usher in the joyful tidings of peace and reform; and universal suffrage and annual parliaments shall crown our successful exertions!”⁶⁷⁶

John Thelwall used his address time at the meeting try to explain to the crowd why he left the LCS after the state trials (his reasons were financial in nature), but had agreed to return to act as a member of the executive committee because he still staunchly supported the reform movement.⁶⁷⁷ There is no evidence to suggest that the topics of each speaker were discussed amongst the LCS leadership group before the meeting, and it might have

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid, and Davis, *LCS Papers*, Vol. 2, pp. 88-92.

⁶⁷⁷ Goodwin, p. 385. Thelwall’s reasons for leaving the LCS were economic in nature, as he found it increasingly difficult to earn a living and provide for his family as a result of his close association with the LCS.

been the case that had they done so they might have muted Thelwall's comment somewhat, so as to not suggest to others in the crowd that their membership status was unimportant to the LCS and the general reform cause. But it was Binn's comments during the *Address to the Nation* recitation that garnered the most negative attention from the government.

Binn's recitation of *The Remonstrance to the King*, while no doubt heartfelt and passionately delivered, was also highly provocative to the many opponents of the political reform movement. Authorship of the *Remonstrance* was credited to Binns but Thelwall probably made a significant contribution to its sharp tone and language. Like the *Address to the People*, it was short at something less than 2000 words, and also like the *Address*, it aroused the attention of the authorities, especially allusions to historical revolutionary precedents: "Sire! When the treacherous duplicity, and intolerable tyranny of the House of STUART had roused the long-enduring patience of the British People, the expulsion of one restored into their hands the primitive right of chusing another, as their Chief of many Magistrates."⁶⁷⁸ Binns continued with a historical re-capsulation of the hard won rights of the people, including those rights "re-confirmed at the Revolution,"⁶⁷⁹ and the ways in which those many rights had been trampled upon in recent years. Binns concluded the *Remonstrance* and his comments with a rather ominous exhortation to the King that would subsequently be used against the LCS and the rest of reform movement:

Listen, then, Sire! To the voice of a wearied and afflicted people, whose grievances are so various that they distract, and so enormous that they terrify. Think of the abyss between supplication and despair! – The means

⁶⁷⁸ The Remonstrance to the King, October 26, 1795, *LCS Correspondence*, BL, Add. MSS. 27808, and Davis, *LCS Papers*, Vol. 2, pp. 93-96.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid.

of national salvation are in your own hands – it is our right to advise, as well as supplicate: and we declare it be our opinion, that a Reform in the Representation of the People, the removal of your present Ministers, and a speedy PEACE, are the only means by which this country can be saved, or the attachment of the People secured.”⁶⁸⁰

The *Remonstrance* was signed by John Binns, Chairman, and John Ashley, Secretary, and was well received by the gathered crowd.

The large outdoor meeting continued until 5:00 at which time it was adjourned and the crowd dispersed peaceably. The London *Sun* printed a full accounting of the proceedings of the meeting the very next day, and characterized the entire affair with the headline “A DAY WELL SPENT.”⁶⁸¹ In addition to the pledges and proclamations read into the minutes of the meeting, the LCS stressed its belief that only through “direct popular action” could the necessary changes come to fruition.⁶⁸² The Society announced that it would canvas the candidates of the 1796 general election as a way to ascertain which candidates were serious about political reform. Implicit in such an action is the belief that the LCS had the political power to assist a candidate in being elected, or rather more to the point, to prevent certain opposition candidates from being elected. To accomplish this, the Society, at some financial cost, dispatched special deputies to the principal and provincial cities and towns in order to gather new members and to convince people (those who could vote and otherwise) to support only the candidates who were serious about parliamentary reform.⁶⁸³

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁸¹ *Sun*, October 27, 1795. *Account of the Proceedings of a Meeting of the London Corresponding Society at Copenhagen House, October 26, 1795*, p. 15.

⁶⁸² Goodwin, p. 386.

⁶⁸³ Ibid.

The Treasonous Practices Bill and the Seditious Meetings Bill

It did not take long for the British government to move once again against the LCS, when a likely opportunity presented itself. Just three days after the Copenhagen House meeting, on October 29, 1795, King George III was making his way in his royal carriage to the opening of the new parliament through a crowd described by the *Sun* as “agitated observers.”⁶⁸⁴ Somebody threw a rock that struck the King’s carriage and some mayhem ensued between the crowd and the constables and military guards gathered along the route. If that were not enough, on his return trip the door to the King’s carriage was allegedly opened as part of an assassination attempt.⁶⁸⁵ To this day there is no tangible proof that the door was ever opened, and in the wake of the next round of government crackdowns on the LCS some inside and outside of the reform movement claimed that the government had staged the whole matter to serve its purposes. Whether that occurred or not is open to debate and conjecture. What is not open to debate is what the British government did next.

On November 4, 1795, a royal proclamation implicated the London Corresponding Society directly in the assault on the King. On November 6 (November 5, Guy Fawkes Day, was and still is a government holiday), William Wyndham Grenville, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, introduced the Treasonable Practices Bill into the House of Lords. Grenville named and blamed the LCS directly, maintaining that the large outdoor meetings of June 29 and October 26, 1795, were conducted in such a way as to “inflame the passions of the multitude industriously collected to hear them.”⁶⁸⁶ Grenville further claimed that the LCS meetings led directly to the alleged agitated state of the crowds

⁶⁸⁴ *Sun*, October 30, 1795.

⁶⁸⁵ *Sun*, October 30, 1795, and Davis, *LCS Papers*, p. 389.

⁶⁸⁶ Davis, *LCS Papers*, p. 389.

gathered around the King's carriage on October 29, and the troubles that followed were also therefore caused, if only through incitement, by the LCS.

As this bill was introduced in the House of Lords, instructions were issued to all constables and magistrates in and around London to “discourage, prevent and suppress all seditious and unlawful assemblies” and to harass and arrest “all persons distributing such seditious and treasonable papers as aforesaid.”⁶⁸⁷ The order was given by the Duke of Portland at the Home Office, and it was just a precursor for what the Duke already knew was coming: the introduction of legislation in the House of Commons to prohibit large meetings of any kind without expressed government approval, and to condemn the public writing or reading of anything considered subversive as an act of treason.⁶⁸⁸ It was called the Seditious Meetings Bill, and it was introduced into the House of Commons of November 10, 1795. Together, the Treasonable Practices Bill and the Seditious Meetings Bill formed the so-called Two Acts, and posed serious challenges for the LCS and the rest of reform movement.

The Treasonable Practices Bill had two main provisions and both were aimed squarely at the LCS and the rest of the political reform movement. The first provision expanded what was treasonable under the law by adding to its scope anyone who “compassed or devised” death, bodily harm, imprisonment, or deposition of the King, who exerted pressure on him to change his measures or counsels (which the LCS had just done in both of their addresses at the Copenhagen House meeting), who plotted with foreign invaders, and who plotted or attempted to intimidate Parliament by overt act, in speech, or in

⁶⁸⁷ *Parliamentary History*, vol. 32, cols. 243-4, and Goodwin, p. 387.

⁶⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

writing.⁶⁸⁹ LCS leaders had already been accused of such intimidation during the state treason trials and had been acquitted based on the legal language of the treason law and the high evidentiary bar of “overt acts,” so this provision was a corrective that made it much easier to get a conviction for treason. The second main provision of the bill increased the seriousness of penalty for inciting contempt against the King through speech or writing, by making the first occurrence a high misdemeanor, and any second occurrence a crime punishable by up to seven years of “transportation.”⁶⁹⁰

The main provision of the Seditious Meetings Bill was the enhanced powers it gave to local law enforcement to prevent gatherings of over fifty persons when and if such meetings were convened for the purposes of expressing grievances, petitions, or remonstrance aimed at an “alteration of matters established in Church or State.”⁶⁹¹ That was a wide net indeed. It further required that a minimum of seven days’ advanced notice of any public meeting on any matter be given to the legal authorities, the press, and the residents of the jurisdiction where the meeting was to be held. If such notification was not given, the meeting could be declared illegal immediately and could be dissolved by any means deemed necessary by the magistrates on the ground.

Additionally, officers of the law were given wide discretion to intervene and dissolve any legally convened meeting if in their judgment the purpose and content of the meeting brought the King, the government, or the constitution into a contemptible light.⁶⁹² Most seriously, and a cause of great concern for the LCS, the provision held that any failure to dissolve a meeting after law officers had ordered those in attendance to disperse was

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid. Excepted from this law were any meetings organized and executed by law enforcement officials of any kind.

⁶⁹² Ibid, and Goodwin, p. 388.

punishable *by death*, and any and all law officers involved were fully indemnified from any injuries or loss of life that occurred thereafter.⁶⁹³ This posed a grave threat to the LCS and the political reform movement as a whole. Yet another provision seemed to be aimed directly at the kinds of public lectures the LCS had become known for, and particularly the kinds that John Thelwall and John Binns had advertised as political education rather than some disparagement of the current state of affairs. The provision made the proprietors of venues where such lectures took place personally liable for what occurred in there facilities, and subjected them to stiff fines and possible prosecution if proper advanced notice was not given to local authorities, and their approval obtained. The proprietors ran the risk of having their facilities deemed “disorderly homes” that could be closed by local law enforcement. The LCS had learned over the years to move their public lectures from venue to venue, and to advertise them in the papers as a discussion of some topic or another with a nominal fee attached (to pay for the facilities), but this provision was aimed at putting an end to such practices.⁶⁹⁴

In all, the proposed Two Acts (the Two Acts would not become law until December 18, 1795) effectively addressed the inconsistencies and lapses in the prior laws that had allowed Hardy and his co-defendants to be acquitted during the state treason trials of 1794. It obviated the need for the “constructive interpretation” approach the prosecution employed during those trials by making the grounds for sedition and treason far broader, no longer requiring an “overt act” for conviction. William Pitt suggested that the proposed legislation might suppress the radical demonstrations that previous laws had

⁶⁹³ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid.

“hitherto so conspicuously failed to suppress.”⁶⁹⁵ Pitt also seemed sensitive to the notion that the Two Acts together represented what in fact the LCS viewed them to be: the utter restriction of two basic British constitutional rights, free speech and free lawful assembly. Pitt was hopeful of walking a fine line with respect to the LCS and the political reform movement, betting that the Two Acts would be suppressive enough to quiet the more publicly active and radical groups without having to shut down the movement completely. He seemed sensitive to the potential political and social fallout that might result if the government pushed that matter of emergency laws and draconian controls too far. He went so far as to insist in Parliament that the Two Acts did nothing to suppress the rights of public meetings and petitioning.⁶⁹⁶

However, political reformists – radical, moderate, and anything in between – saw it quite differently. As it happened the passing of the Two Acts legislation coincided with the Whig celebration of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and with the first public dinner scheduled to commemorate and celebrate the trial and acquittal of Thomas Hardy.⁶⁹⁷ The timing of the legislation and the dinners provided the LCS and the political reform movement with an opportunity to regain some momentum. At the Hardy dinner, besides the usual toasts and political lectures, Thelwall and Binns were able to forge a temporary truce between the radical and moderate elements of the movement in order to put the maximum possible effort behind opposing these “Gagging Acts.” In fact Thelwall temporarily rejoined the LCS to help direct these efforts.⁶⁹⁸ Thelwall drafted a public letter from the LCS repudiating the legislation and calling for Parliament to rescind such

⁶⁹⁵ *Parliamentary History*, vol. 32, col. 273.

⁶⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁷ Goodwin, p. 389.

⁶⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

repressive legislation. Thelwall also recruited Francis Place to the cause and Place used his position inside the General Committee of the LCS to publicly decry the Two Acts. Even the Society for Constitutional Information, essentially defunct after the state treason trials, reemerged temporarily under new leadership to help the fight against the legislation.⁶⁹⁹ E. P. Thompson characterized this period of temporary political reform movement unity as “the last, and greatest, period of popular agitation” in the eighteenth century.⁷⁰⁰ As it turned out, at least as respects the LCS, Thompson was correct.

The Two Acts legislation provided the LCS and the reform movement with the impetus it needed to put their ideological differences aside, at least temporarily, and coalesce around a single issue. From inside Parliament, Charles James Fox attacked the legislation vigorously, characterizing it as nothing less than Pitt’s “Reign of Terror.”⁷⁰¹ Noting the success of the recent LCS sponsored outdoor meetings, Fox led an effort to organize several outdoor meetings as a way to gain support, and signatures on petitions, for the defeat of the Two Acts.⁷⁰² On November 10, 1795, Fox asked for a call of the House of Commons as a way to insure the attendance of all of the independent members of the House for the debate on the Seditious Meetings Bill.⁷⁰³

On November 16 Fox was the featured orator of an outdoor meeting in Palace Yard Westminster where nearly 30,000 people attended. On November 23 Fox presented a large number of petitions in Parliament and asked for a delay in the pending debate so that the House could properly prepare for a serious dialogue regarding legislation that

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁰ Thompson, p. 145.

⁷⁰¹ Loren Reid, *Charles James Fox: A Man for the People* (Columbia, Mo., 1969), p. 318.

⁷⁰² Ibid.

⁷⁰³ Ibid.

effectively repealed the Bill of Rights and undermined the constitution.⁷⁰⁴ Of course, such public meetings and protests would have been punishable under the proposed legislation. Pitt went so far as to accuse Fox of inciting and “openly advising an appeal to the sword.”⁷⁰⁵ In his defense, Fox did not back down, suggesting that the mood of the country was so blackened against these acts, that if “in the general opinion of the country, it is conceived that these bills attack the fundamental principles of our constitution...that the propriety of resistance instead of remaining any longer a question of morality, will become merely a question of prudence.”⁷⁰⁶

Fox was shrewd enough to know that he and his supporters did not have enough votes to defeat the pending Two Acts legislation, even with a large number of signed petitions, so most of Fox’s maneuvering in Parliament was in the form of delay tactics – motions for appeal, calls for attendance, etc. Outside of Parliament, however, the popular support for defeating the introduced but not voted upon legislation was building. In all ninety-four petitions with over 130,000 signatures were presented to Parliament as a result of the efforts of Fox, the LCS, and many of the other political reform groups.⁷⁰⁷ The experience the LCS had gained from its previous petition drives and large public meeting efforts proved invaluable to this undertaking. After some four years of trial, error, and improvements, the LCS had created useful and applicable templates for organizing a popular support campaign. The results of those experiences was the rather efficient organization and execution of some several large outdoor meetings staged by the LCS and other political reform societies in late November and early December of 1795. The

⁷⁰⁴ Parliamentary History, vol. 32, col. 382, and Goodwin, p. 390.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁶ Parliamentary History, vol. 32, col. 385.

⁷⁰⁷ BL, Add. MSS. 27808, fo. 55.

Norwich Patriotic Society and the Sheffield Constitutional Society held separate but simultaneous outdoor meetings on November 17 in response to requests from the LCS.⁷⁰⁸ The Sheffield Constitutional Society also held two additional meetings, on November 12 and December 7 respectively, and the meetings were organized and run in the same manner as the LCS Copenhagen House meeting in October. At the November 12 meeting of the Sheffield Constitutional Society, held near but not at the Copenhagen House, the crowd was estimated at somewhere between 300,000 and 400,000 people.⁷⁰⁹ That estimate was provided by the Sheffield society however, so it is probably much exaggerated. Nevertheless, even if the estimate was inflated by a great deal, it was still an impressive turnout. And just like the LCS meeting the previous month, three separate platforms were erected to accommodate the crowd. Richard Hodgson, John Thelwall, and John Ashley all gave impassioned speeches to the assembled masses, and motions were approved to forward the petitions created at the meeting to Parliament.⁷¹⁰

The *Sun* newspaper reported that at the meeting several LCS resolutions had passed disavowing any connection to the recent attack on the King's coach, and insinuating that any "interested and designing persons" who suggested otherwise were doing it solely to discredit the LCS and the reform movement.⁷¹¹ The *Sun* also reported that a resolution passed indicating that the LCS should and would continue to fight the Two Acts legislation with all peaceable and legal means at its disposal, and that it would "on all occasions...repress all irregularity and excess, and to bring the authors of such

⁷⁰⁸ BL, Add. MSS. 27815, fo. 11.

⁷⁰⁹ *Sun*, November 13, 1795, *Account of the Proceedings of a Meeting of the People in a field near Copenhagen House, Thursday November 12, 1795, on the subject of the Threatened Invasion of their Rights by a Convention Bill*, p. 12.

⁷¹⁰ *Ibid*, and Goodwin, p. 391.

⁷¹¹ *Sun*, November 13, 1795, *Account of the Proceedings of a Meeting of the People in a field near Copenhagen House, Thursday November 12, 1795, on the subject of the Threatened Invasion of their Rights by a Convention Bill*, p. 12.

unjustifiable proceedings to the just responsibility of the law.”⁷¹² Finally, there was a report that John Gale Jones, the immediate past president of the LCS, had made some radical comments about bringing those responsible for the legislation to justice, threatening that they would “answer for it with their heads.”⁷¹³ Such radical comments were offset, however, by the steady comments of Thelwall, and the *Sun* reported that the meeting adjourned “in a manner which shewed that the presence of magistrates was altogether needless.”⁷¹⁴

On November 23 of 1795 the LCS published one of its most influential tracts to date, *To The British Nation. The Reply of the London Corresponding Society, to the calumnies propagated by persons in high authority, for the purpose of furnishing pretences for the Convention Bill*. It was written primarily by Thelwall, with other LCS leaders as minor contributors.⁷¹⁵ The *Reply* was a strong repudiation of the Parliamentary criticism aimed at the LCS over the King’s coach incident, a restatement of the political reform goals the LCS sought, and why the existence of the LCS and the overall political reform movement was so necessary to the constitutional health and well-being of the nation. Thelwall emphasized the fundamental position of the LCS of social equality with respect to the law, natural rights, and electoral representation. He also emphasized and clarified, yet again, that the LCS did not, and never would, support the equalization of property, of which so many conservatives had accused them.⁷¹⁶ Thelwall had a fine line to walk as he attempted to make the LCS case for popular resistance as a natural right, but only in so

⁷¹² Ibid.

⁷¹³ Ibid.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid.

⁷¹⁵ Davis, *LCS*, p. 389.

⁷¹⁶ BL, Add. MSS. 27814, fo. 79. *To The British Nation. The Reply of the London Corresponding Society, to the calumnies propagated by persons in high authority, for the purpose of furnishing pretences for the Convention Bill* (November 1795), and *An Explicit Declaration of the Principles and Views of the London Corresponding Society* (November 1795).

far as that resistance was necessary to prevent greater calamities: "...the detestable and delusive doctrines of Passive Obedience and Non Resistance, a system which none but *hypocrites* will *profess*, and none but *slaves* will *practise*."⁷¹⁷ The justification for such resistance, as was usually the case, was a government that ignored the rights of its people, and further sought to suppress those rights through "arbitrary and tyrannical measures."⁷¹⁸

In this publication the LCS was not only speaking to those conservative MPs who had accused them of inciting the people against the King, but more importantly and directly to the people of Great Britain, in so far as their publication could reach them. The increases in membership over the previous summer, combined with the strong attendance at their outdoor meetings, had given Gales, Binns, Thelwall, and others some hope that the movement might be reenergized with enough popular support to achieve its goals. Thelwall pushed hard in the document to offer a rallying cry: "We remind them [the government], also, that though there is no magic in authority, by which, in the eyes of reflecting men, unsupported assertion can be converted into the semblance of fact; yet that false accusations may, sometimes, be so flagitious, and the views with which they are advanced so obvious and profligate, as to bring the authority that endeavors to support them into absolute discredit with every liberal and candid mind."⁷¹⁹

The address was a short one, no more than two-thousand words, but where it was judicious in words it was effective in tonality and imagery, and by all accounts it was well received by those disposed to support the cause of political reform. Thelwall concluded the address in the most direct terms possible, both with respect to the

⁷¹⁷ Ibid.

⁷¹⁸ Ibid.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid.

accusations levied against the LCS, and in the LCS approach for achieving true and lasting political reform through popular support and constitutional means:

The LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY, in the most solemn and public manner, disavow, disclaim, and reprobate the attack said to have been made on the person of the Chief Magistrate; and they subjoin it, as their constant and yet unshaken maxim, that the only way to promote the cause of Liberty and Human Happiness is, to respect the Laws and Constituted Authorities of the their Country, at the same time that they persevere in the most undaunted resolution of demanding the Restoration of their Rights, and the reform of growing abuses.⁷²⁰

As with all LCS communications, the address was signed by the president and secretary of the LCS, in this case John Binns and John Ashley respectively.

Although the address achieved wide circulation and discussion – almost all of the provincial LCS chapters made copies and distributed it to its members – it was decidedly ineffective at slowing the pace of the legislative march of the Two Acts. It was with some recognition of the political reality that the LCS organized another protest meeting on December 7, 1795.⁷²¹ John Binns recruited Mathew Campbell Brown, a former editor of the Sheffield *Patriot* and sympathetic to the reform movement, as the featured speaker.⁷²² Brown employed the directness of a hardened journalist when he opined that he had been asked to preside “over the last free meeting of the people under the existing constitution.”⁷²³ Such was the gravity of matters for the political reform movement, or for any movement that needed to organize, meet, and publish its principles and opinions under the pending legislation. Brown continued his comments by reminding the audience gathered that under the Two Acts the right of “resistance to oppression” would still remain, although more narrowly defined, and that the reform movement should continue

⁷²⁰ Ibid.

⁷²¹ BL, Add. MSS. 27808, fo. 55., and Goodwin, p. 394.

⁷²² BL, *History of the Two Acts* (1796), p. 644.

⁷²³ Ibid.

“...till every other legal, peaceable, and constitutional means were tried and found ineffectual.”⁷²⁴ Several others spoke at the meeting, including a very sick Thelwall, John Gale Jones, and William Frend, a former member of the faculty at Fellow of Jesus College Cambridge, banished for his fervent support of the political reform movement.⁷²⁵ Several motions were made and supported toward the creation of another LCS address to the people at large, and another Remonstrance to the King, urging His Majesty to refuse to sanction the “onerous” legislation.⁷²⁶

William Frend went so far as moving for a set of resolutions that condemned the proposed bills as a direct violation of the thirteen articles of Declaration of Rights of the British Constitution.⁷²⁷ Another set of resolutions expressed the gratitude of the LCS to the members of the Whig Opposition in the House of Lords and Commons who had fought against the creation and parliamentary promotion of the Legislation. Having taken care of the business at hand, LCS chairman Gales adjourned the meeting in good order and with the peaceable dispersing of those in attendance, and with a final declaration from Gales vowing that the society would not abandon its original principles and objectives, whatever the obstacles.⁷²⁸

On December 18, 1795 the so-called Two Acts became the law of the British land after receiving the royal assent from the King. The legislation had a great deal of popular support at the time, despite the best efforts of the LCS and the overall political reform movement. The atmosphere in London and Britain was incendiary, with many in power believing that a French style revolution could erupt in London at any moment. The war

⁷²⁴ Ibid., p. 645.

⁷²⁵ Ibid.

⁷²⁶ Ibid., pp. 650-651.

⁷²⁷ Ibid., and Goodwin, p. 395.

⁷²⁸ Ibid., pp. 652-653.

with the French revolutionaries, the widespread food shortages in Britain, and the recent Pop-Gun Plot all led to this popular fear that a revolution could happen, and to the view that the LCS and the rest of the reform movement was contributing to such an eventuality. In fact similar legislation to the Two Acts had been proposed and defeated just a couple of years prior, before the state trials of the LCS, but in 1795 much of the nation was in a far different mood, with much less tolerance for anything that might threaten the nation. So while it was not a surprise to LCS leaders that the legislation passed, it was another significant setback to their reform movement. Francis Place conjoined the triumph of the Pitt government and the widespread support the bills engendered with the anarchy of the French Revolution over the past two years: “Infamous as these laws were, they were popular measures. The people, ay, the mass of the shopkeepers and working people, may be said to have approved them without understanding them. Such was their terror of the French regicides and democrats.”⁷²⁹ Place and others were left to acknowledge that Pitt and his supporters had won the day with their legislation through deft political maneuvering and masterly public relations, and having done so it seemed quite futile to continue to “resist,” in ways that could be construed as seditious and treasonous.⁷³⁰

After the passage of the Two Acts legislation, the LCS and the rest of the political reform movement were left to consider their next steps. From the beginning of the LCS, the right of resistance had always been a bedrock organizing principle, but now that seemed to mean something else. At the creation of the LCS, Horne Tooke had taken to describing the way the LCS would operate as “the resistance of the anvil to the

⁷²⁹ Graham Wallas, *The Life of Francis Place* (London, 1898), p. 25.

⁷³⁰ BL, Add. MSS. 27808, fo. 67

hammer.”⁷³¹ The implication was that resistance would take the meaning of the Whig interpretation of protecting the hard-won right of the Glorious Revolution in 1688 and the constitutional settlement that followed, and would not falter in spite of repeated setbacks and attacks. Charles James Fox had gone to great lengths in Parliament during the debates over the legislation to modify his definition of resistance “...as an advice to the governors, not an incitement to the governed.”⁷³² The question was how the LCS and the rest of the movement might continue to resist within the bounds of the new laws. There were no easy answers to that question.

Conclusion

1795 was a difficult year for the LCS and the political reform movement. After a temporary increase in membership as a result of the state trials, the LCS and the movement began to slip. Two of the primary reasons for this slippage was the loss of some of the original LCS leadership, particularly Thomas Hardy, and the deteriorating financial state of the LCS. After Hardy left the LCS struggled to maintain a consistent message to their membership and to the public, and that began to erode their popular support. The LCS did experience an increase in membership and in the number of their divisions in the first part of 1795. However, as new members and division leaders joined the LCS, they were much less willing to adopt the meeting decorum and membership behavioral mores established by Hardy. Some of the new leaders had their own ideas about how to best achieve the Society’s goals, and that led to a continuing splintering of the Society. Some divisions simply left the Society to form their own reform groups, while others just ignored the instructions and guidance they received from the executive

⁷³¹ Hardy, *Memoirs*, and Thelwall, *Tribune*, vol. 3, p. 265.

⁷³² *Parliamentary History*, vol. 32, col. 456, and Goodwin, p. 395.

LCS leadership and did things their own way. The sum of all of this was a deterioration in the effectiveness of the LCS in the public sphere. Their message of reform became muddled in the mix of all of the other current events in the nation.

The implications of this were evident in the dwindling financial support of the LCS. During Hardy's tenure financial support was provided by a steady increase in membership and sympathetic publishers and politicians who were in positions to support the reform movement. That all changed beginning in 1795. The British government cracked down on publishers, printers, and building owners who had helped the LCS such that by the middle of 1795 it was increasingly difficult to hold the Society together. Additionally, the middle class men and business owners who had lent some financial support during Hardy's leadership tenure found it too dangerous to continue doing so in 1795.

By the autumn of 1795 several events led to a hostile political environment for the LCS and the reform movement. The war with the French revolutionaries, the widespread food shortages in Britain, and the Pop-Gun Plot that was blamed on the LCS all led to this popular fear that a revolution could happen in Britain, and something needed to be done. And that something was the introduction of legislation that would make it much more difficult for the LCS to operate as an effective political reform group. Called the Treasonous Practices Bill and the Seditious Meetings Bill respectively, they came to be known collectively as the Twin Acts. These acts received their royal assent on December 18, 1795, despite the best efforts of the LCS, and together they put severe limitations on public meetings of any kind, what constituted seditious language in print or otherwise, and they lowered the evidentiary bar for proving treasonous activities of any kind. The

effect of this legislation was that it made it much more difficult for the LCS and the overall reform movement to operate within the law. That was, of course, very much the point for the British government. The Twin Acts led directly to the eventual demise of the LCS and the political reform movement, although they would continue to operate, albeit less effectively, into 1799.

CHAPTER NINE – The LCS in Decline: Radicalization, Recriminations, and Reputations

Whatever presses men together, therefore, though it may generate some vices, is favourable to the diffusion of knowledge, and ultimately promotive of human liberty. Hence every large workshop and manufactory is a sort of political society, which no act of parliament can silence, and no magistrate disperse.

- J. Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature against the Usurpations of Establishments*, 1796

I flattered myself that if a society were formed on the principles of the representative system, men of talent, who had time to devote for promoting the cause, would step forward and we who were the founders of it who had neither the time to spare from daily employment, nor talent for conducting so important an undertaking, would draw into the background.

- Thomas Hardy, 1799

The LCS and the Impact of the Twin Acts

By the end of 1795 the LCS and the broader movement for political reform through universal male suffrage and annual parliamentary elections had come far, and as it turned out, full circle. From its modest founding in a local tavern in 1791 the LCS had grown into a political organization of considerable size and influence, but also one that had not achieved its goals. Its influence had ebbed and flowed as a result of internal and external factors – political philosophy, finances, war, political persecution, food shortages – but through it all the LCS had retained a leadership position in the fight for political reform primarily because it had refused to give it up, even in the face of the overwhelming resources of the British government. That perseverance was severely challenged as 1796 dawned on the political reform movement.

While Place and some of the others in the Whig party pushed for a muted response to the passing of the Two Acts legislation, the LCS leadership of Gales, Binns, Ashley, and a recovered Thelwall had different ideas. The leaders of the society had recently met with the leaders of the temporarily revived Society for Constitutional Information in London and had discussed several possible responses to the Two Acts.⁷³³ Rather than the conservative approach of curtailing meetings and activities until the mood of the nation had settled, the LCS decided to continue with as many of its activities as the new laws permitted, and where possible, exploit any loopholes or blind spots in the laws that would allow the LCS to press on.⁷³⁴ This was a risky proposition to be sure, in that it meant that the LCS would have to find alternate (and perhaps covert) means to continue their efforts toward parliamentary reform and universal male suffrage, now considered at least a seditious activity. To accomplish this the Society would have to redraft its own constitutional and organizing principles, advise the provincial chapters on how to do the same, and somehow find a way to continue their political education lectures without violating the letter of the new laws.⁷³⁵

Much of the educational load would fall on Thelwall, who was determined to “shew the Public that if we have discrimination and courage at once to obey the law and persevere in unprohibited *duty*, it is impossible for Ministers to frame the restrictions that can effectually impede the progress of truth; and the consequent reform.”⁷³⁶ Thelwall may have been hopeful beyond reason, but his message to the LCS membership was that the reform movement could and would continue, “...if we have but the spirit to exercise

⁷³³ *The Argus or General Observer of the Moral, Political, and Commercial World* (London, 1796), pp. 185 – 193.

⁷³⁴ Goodwin, p. 396.

⁷³⁵ Thelwall, *Tribune*, vol. 3, p. 328 and Goodwin, p. 396.

⁷³⁶ *Ibid.*

with boldness and discretion the privileges that remain.”⁷³⁷ And those privileges were quite limited indeed. In order to conform to the restrictions of the Seditious Meetings Act, the LCS altered its constitution to create a new organizational hierarchy that divided London and its immediate suburbs into four geographic quadrants – East, Middle, Western, and Surrey.⁷³⁸ Each quadrant was limited to forty-five divisions, and each division was limited to forty-five members, keeping each division just under the law’s restriction of no more than fifty persons belonging to, or meeting with, a particular political club. The new LCS General Committee would be comprised of one delegate per every five divisions, thus keeping the number of General Committee members within the new laws for public meetings.⁷³⁹

The object of the whole affair was to create enough of an organizational infrastructure to actively and effectively conduct the affairs of the LCS as a whole, while at the same time complying with the strict legal framework of the new laws. This serves as another example of the creativity and perseverance of the LCS and its leadership throughout its short but influential existence. Many of their brethren organizations had discontinued their efforts in the face of government and conservative harassment, and the difficulties of organizing, managing, and educating large groups of working class men. The LCS soldiered on however, deeming their political and social goals too important to simply give up on. Among many other things, that would become one of the legacies of the LCS – the political will to persevere, and the creativity to do so within the bounds of law in a very challenging legal and political landscape.

⁷³⁷ Ibid.

⁷³⁸ BL, Add. MSS. 27808, fos. 68-69, account of Francis Place on new LCS hierarchy.

⁷³⁹ Ibid.

That said, and despite this new organizational structure, by early 1796 the LCS leadership was hard pressed to keep the Society together. In December of 1795 some of the provincial divisions saw their memberships plummet, as many became fearful that a continued association with the LCS and the larger political reform movement was not worth the potential legal problems it entailed. As one time LCS president Francis Place observed: “No sooner had the bills received the royal assent than the reformers generally conceived it not only dangerous but also useless to continue to exert themselves any longer.”⁷⁴⁰ In response to this the Society published an address designed to reassure its members and keep the movement moving forward. Dated December 31, 1795, the address called upon the membership to disregard the opinions of some calling for the cessation of activities, and to instead redouble their efforts for parliamentary reform.⁷⁴¹ Most probably authored by Thelwall, the address is conciliatory toward those members who think the LCS should retire, but steadfast in finding it “...necessary to combat their Opinions...trusting that farther reflection, and the example of other Members, may induce them to alter their conduct.”⁷⁴² The address was very short, at under a thousand words, and reminded the wavering membership of the reason the LCS was founded in the first place: “We wish only to remind you, that the chief purpose of our Association, was the diffusion of Political Knowledge, not only among ourselves, but among our Countrymen in general.”⁷⁴³ The address concluded with a final plea for steadfastness in the face of adversity: “Reviewing the persecutions we have formerly suffered, and

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid, *To the members of the London Corresponding Society. Committee Room, December 31, 1795. Citizens, after the resolutions of various divisions...it appears to us inexplicable that a few individuals should attempt to dissuade particular divisions from meeting* (December 31, 1795), and Davis, *LCS*, pp. 401 – 402.

⁷⁴² Ibid.

⁷⁴³ Ibid.

comparing them with the present, we cannot but conclude, that in a short time, the Members who have been prevailed upon to neglect their Duty, will see the perseverance of the Society refuting the Opinions of rash and timid Men.”⁷⁴⁴

Nevertheless, and despite temporarily stemming the flow of members from the Society, January and February of 1796 saw a steady decline in LCS membership and activity. By the end of January sixteen LCS divisions had simply ceased to exist, its members either two fearful of the new laws or just too weary to carry on.⁷⁴⁵ Place was elected to chair the General Committee, and by all accounts he worked zealously to reverse the declining membership trend, extolling divisional leaders to encourage their members to invite potential new members to their meetings.⁷⁴⁶ In early February 1796 he and the rest of the LCS leadership concocted a plan to send LCS missionaries to the outlying divisions as a way to rekindle some of the enthusiasm for the society lost in the wake of the Two Acts legislation.⁷⁴⁷

The LCS Missionary Strategy

The goals of the missionaries was twofold. As new divisional chapters were formed, and there was some of that going on in places like Birmingham and Portsmouth to name two examples, they required organizational, political, and financial guidance to get up and running. More importantly however, all of the remaining chapters, new and old, needed guidance with respect to functioning and conducting business under the restrictions of the new laws. In exchange for such help, and in the response to the ever deteriorating financial situation of the LCS, a request was made in each instance that the

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁵ BL, Add. MSS. 27808, fo. 67.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid., fo. 69.

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid.

local chapter help to subsidize the travel and lodging of the London delegates.⁷⁴⁸ Place and the rest of the LCS leadership went to great lengths to keep the arrangements of these trips secret, lest the local magistrates be alerted and somehow intervene. It was not only the LCS and other reform societies who were struggling to understand their limitations and restrictions under a set of rather ambiguous provisions. Those charged with enforcing the new laws were also struggling to understand what was and was not allowed, and what they were legally charged to do about it - a matter of some confusion as 1796 progressed.⁷⁴⁹

Much to the chagrin of Place and the LCS, the missionary tours did not have the desired effect of bolstering membership and solidifying chapters. Many of the delegates were themselves at a loss to explain to chapter leaders and members how to conduct business safely and securely under the new laws. Place himself later admitted that in light of the Two Acts legislation and the discomfort many chapters felt in conducting what might under the law be illicit meetings, the missionary strategy had “lost its purpose.”⁷⁵⁰ In fact the missionary strategy was ill fated from the start. Unbeknownst to the LCS, the star government spy James Powell, now a member of several of the society’s London leadership councils, had been sending intelligence to his government handlers from the inception of the strategy.⁷⁵¹ In more cases than not, government agents followed the LCS delegates to their chapter destinations, and disrupted their efforts in one fashion or another. Some of the delegates referred to themselves by the very Jacobin

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid., fo. 72.

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁰ Ibid., fo. 71.

⁷⁵¹ At various times Powell was a member of both the General and Executive Committee of the LCS.

moniker of ‘*representants en mission*’ which only served to further arouse the attention and suspicions of the government spies and local authorities.⁷⁵²

Another error in judgment concerned those chosen to be the LCS missionaries. Leaders John Binns and John Gale Jones were passionate about the cause and the roles they played, but they were also decidedly indiscrete under normal circumstances, let alone while charged with covertly offering guidance to chapters on how to deal with the Two Acts. Further complicating matters were the LCS instructions to these delegates, including Binns and Jones. The instructions included the necessary approbations about following the new laws to the letter and observing the procedures for conducting public meetings, but they also included a call “...to be ready with us to pursue our common object, if it must be the Scaffold, or rather to the Field at the Hazard of Extermination.”⁷⁵³ Both the delegates delivering the guidance and the chapter members receiving it were perplexed by the ambiguities – do we follow the law, or do we fight?

On February 5, 1796, John Binns left for Portsmouth to deliver the LCS guidance on the new laws to that chapter. The authorities, already aware of his travel plans courtesy of Powell, traced his steps and planted stories in the conservative Portsmouth newspapers warning of his arrival and the troubles that might ensue.⁷⁵⁴ It seemed that agents from the Home Secretary’s office were always one step ahead of Binns and the LCS. When Binns visited and spoke to some of the men at the dockyards the agents planted a story that he was there to set fire to the naval depot.⁷⁵⁵ When he visited with some of the French prisoners of war in the local garrison it was quickly rumored that he was there to incite

⁷⁵² Goodwin, p. 399.

⁷⁵³ *Instructions of the L.C.S. to John Gale Jones, deputed to visit the Societies of Birmingham, etc.*, from *Report of the Secret Committee of the House of Commons* (1799), appendix no. 4, p. 69.

⁷⁵⁴ J. Dugan, *The Great Mutiny* (London, 1966), p. 68.

⁷⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

them to resist and escape.⁷⁵⁶ It seemed Binns could not go anywhere or do anything that the authorities did not know about. When word of this reached London the LCS General Assembly hastily sent secretary John Ashley to retrieve Binns before he was arrested and jailed.⁷⁵⁷

Curiously, the same was not true when John Gale Jones was sent to Chatham and Rochester in early February. Jones spent three weeks in the area and by his own account was never harassed by the authorities.⁷⁵⁸ On the contrary, Jones reported finding receptive audiences who were predominately against the war and the economic hardships it had caused, and who were in favor of political reform.⁷⁵⁹ In fact, he was often recognized by those who had attended one or more of the several large LCS outdoor meetings of 1795. Neither Jones nor the LCS leadership could explain the government's interest in Binns and their indifference to Jones, nor the divergent in receptions they received, other than to say that Chatham and Rochester were more sympathetic to the efforts of the LCS than was Portsmouth.⁷⁶⁰

On March 7, 1796, both Binns and Jones were sent to Birmingham on another missionary trip. They arrived without incident and for several days met with the local chapter membership of various divisions, and with other leaders and members of reform societies. Almost all of the meetings took place in public spaces such as pubs and coffeehouses, and great care was taken to keep the meetings small, well under fifty persons, so as not to violate the provisions of the Seditious Meetings Act. Whether Binns

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁸ John Gale Jones, *Sketch of a Political Tour through Rochester, Chatham, Maidstone, Gravesend, etc.* (London, 1796), p. 1.

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 37.

⁷⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 82.

or Jones were aware of this or not is unclear, but all the while they were being closely shadowed by government operatives collecting evidence on their activities.⁷⁶¹ On March 11 they were both arrested on warrants issued by the Treasury department for undisclosed charges.⁷⁶² The LCS General Committee quickly dispatched Francis Place from London to come to their aid, and Place spent several days attending a lengthy questioning of Binns and Jones by the local authorities, and attempting to raise bail for them.⁷⁶³

The presiding magistrates finally charged Binns and Jones with violating several provisions of the Two Acts, although they remained vague on exactly what the violations were. This was the first test for the LCS under the new laws, and they recognized the high stakes for their continued operations. If the LCS could not have direct personal communications with their provincial chapters for fear of violating the law, their overall effectiveness would be diminished even more. Further, if their written communications with these chapters were deemed seditious, or worse yet treasonous, the LCS and their political reform movement were finished.⁷⁶⁴ For their part, the British government also viewed this as an opportunity to press their case against the LCS once again, and by extension the entire political reform movement, if they could secure the convictions of Binns and Jones under the Two Acts. Of course, mounting a defense for the two men would cost money, so in March and April of 1796 the LCS put out a plea to all of the provincial chapters soliciting support for a defense fund.⁷⁶⁵

⁷⁶¹ Goodwin, p. 401.

⁷⁶² BL, Add. MSS. 35143, fo. 17.

⁷⁶³ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁴ Goodwin, p. 402.

⁷⁶⁵ BL, Francis Place newspaper clippings, vol. 37, fo. 231.

The LCS Continues to Struggle Financially

By the spring of 1796 the society was perilously short of money required to support its activities. The defense of Hardy in the state treason trials in 1794, the large outdoor meetings of 1795, the drop in membership after the passing of the Two Acts, and the strategy of sending delegates to the provincial chapters had all proved to be a serious financial drain. The founding chapter of the LCS in London was essentially broke, a stark reversal in the financial history of the society. From the years 1791 to 1794, it was the urban London chapters that had kept the society and movement afloat with its financial support. That all changed after the state treason trials of 1794 as the urban chapters lost members and saw themselves slowly but surely drained of their financial resources, to the point where the provincial chapters were carrying the financial burden of the LCS. By the spring of 1796 the activities of the LCS were being supported almost entirely by the dues collected from the provincial chapters. That is why it became crucial to the society to successfully defend Binns and Jones and by extension the society's ability to recruit, communicate, with and of course collect revenue from the provincial chapters, upon which, the very survival of the Society depended.

To that end, the LCS settled on a two-pronged approach for raising the necessary funds to defend Binns and Jones. The first part of the strategy was to continue its efforts in the provincial chapters as best it could while remaining in compliance with new laws. This meant asking the newer chapters to foot the bill for not only a portion of the defense fund, but also for the travel and lodging of the delegates sent to meet with them, because the urban chapters lacked the necessary funds themselves to do so. This had been the status quo from the latter part of 1795 into early 1796 so there was not too much

discussion or controversy over this approach.⁷⁶⁶ The second part of the strategy proved more controversial, and as it turned out, financially ruinous to the LCS. After some fevered internal debate the society decided to create and publish a monthly magazine, and to raise its monthly dues to cover the cost of the magazine, with enough money left after covering those costs to make a contribution to the defense fund of Binns and Jones.⁷⁶⁷

Place was against this from the start, noting that the city was already awash in political periodicals, and they were not cheap to produce. He was also against raising the dues from the long-established and very affordable price of one penny, to 4.5d per month. As Place later commented: “A better contrivance to prevent the society paying its debts could hardly be devised.”⁷⁶⁸ The magazine was called the *Moral and Political Magazine of the London Corresponding Society* and volume one of the first issue was published on July 1, 1796, with volume two of the first issue following in December of 1796.⁷⁶⁹ However, internal differences over the editorial approach of the magazine, along with haggling over the kind of paper to be used and the printing and distribution costs quickly eroded any goodwill the urban and provincial chapters had for supporting such an endeavor.⁷⁷⁰

The editorial idea for the magazine was to provide context for the LCS and its political education efforts by improving “the moral taste and understanding of the society,” and by rearticulating “the nature and principles of the society to the world.”⁷⁷¹ A further goal was to provide “...a pure channel of instruction to the peasant, the artificer, and the

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁷ BL, Add. MSS. 27808, fos. 74-5.

⁷⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁷¹ Davis, *LCS*, p. 35.

labourer” as a means to fulfill the LCS mission of popular and grass roots political education.⁷⁷² While it is not quite clear, the first edition of the magazine was likely edited by Robert Thomas Crossfield, a physician, John Fenwick, a gentleman, Richard Hodgson, a hatter, and William Williams, an attorney.⁷⁷³ Hodgson was active in the LCS leadership, and the other three were supporters of the society’s causes, though they were not member nor working class men. The first volume of the first issue achieved a respectable distribution of 3000 copies. The first issue was a lengthy and voluminous affair totaling several hundred pages, and included such topics and titles as: *A Selection of Public Papers, Original Essays on Morals and Politics, Select Parts of the Correspondance of the Society, A History of the Society*, and last but not least, *And Poetry*.⁷⁷⁴ The volume also opened with a quote from, ironically enough, Edmund Burke, no doubt meant to bolster the reader’s intestinal fortitude for the LCS cause: “It is not every conjecture which calls with equal force upon the activity of honest men, and I am mistaken if this be not one of them...”⁷⁷⁵ However, the financial reality of publishing such a large magazine was soon apparent to many inside the LCS, and a plan was put forward to raise the subscription rate yet again, which only caused further friction between the urban and provincial chapters. Two more volumes comprising a second issue of the magazine were produced in early and mid 1797, but only after monies were borrowed from the very fund used to support the defense of Binns and Jones.⁷⁷⁶ However, the trials for Binns and Jones were repeatedly delayed by the government,

⁷⁷² Ibid.

⁷⁷³ Ibid., p. 36.

⁷⁷⁴ BL, *The Moral and Political Magazine of the London Corresponding Society, Volume the First* (July 1, 1796).

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 1.

⁷⁷⁶ BL, Add. MSS. 27808, fo. 74.

costing the LCS funds they did not have, and rendering this potential test case of the new laws an afterthought. Jones was not brought to trial until April of 1797, and was found guilty but received no sentence, while Binns was tried and acquitted in August of 1797.⁷⁷⁷ Thus, the main result of the affair was to further impoverish the LCS.

Thelwall made his own attempts to circumvent the new laws in 1796 as part of his LCS mission to continue the work of public political education. He prepared a series of lectures to be delivered in London whose focus was ostensibly Greece and Rome, but whose subject matter would in fact be the same society focus on contemporary political events and their implications. Acknowledging that government agents would be in attendance, Thelwall commented, tongue firmly in cheek, that those attending would “receive a little insight into the facts and principles of ancient history.”⁷⁷⁸ His initial London lectures were not well attended however, due to the level of government intimidation and dissuasion present in the city, and at the lectures in particular. Thelwall moved venues to Norwich, where he had actually received an invitation to speak.⁷⁷⁹ In June of 1796 he delivered a twenty-two lecture program on behalf of the LCS before an audience he described as “...composed of all the different classes of society, and with a degree of impression, surpassing anything I have ever witnessed before, in any place, or upon any occasion.”⁷⁸⁰ There is no way to know if Thelwall’s audiences were so comprised, but the lectures’ success indicates at least that there were people, perhaps even across socio-economic classes, who were willing, if not to defy the government, at

⁷⁷⁷ Ibid., and Goodwin, p. 403.

⁷⁷⁸ BL, J. Thelwall, *Prospectus of a Course of Lectures, in strict conformity with Mr. Pitt’s Convention Act, 1796*.

⁷⁷⁹ C. Cestre, *John Thelwall: A pioneer of democracy in England* (London, 1906), p. 127-128.

⁷⁸⁰ J. Thelwall, *An Appeal to Popular Opinion against Kidnapping and Murder, including a Narrative of the late atrocious Proceedings at Yardmouth* (London, 1796), p. 13.

least to participate in a political activity toward which the government had expressed a position of disfavor. This further confirms that the LCS, as the banner carrier for the political reform movement at the end of the eighteenth century and even after all of their other trials and tribulations, still had political relevance in the public sphere.

After some success in evading government harassment in Norwich, Thelwall was invited August of 1796 to present a course of six lectures at Yarmouth ostensibly on classical history by one of the more prominent merchants in town. His experience there could not have been more different. In Yarmouth he and those attending the first and second lectures were confronted with a well-organized disruptive presence by no less than the mayor of the town, along with clergymen and local militia disguised as seamen.⁷⁸¹ Many seamen were LCS members and supporters, so disguising militia as seamen may have been a way for the authorities in Yarmouth to demonstrate that working class men were not in favor of Thelwall's presence, and by extension the LCS. While they did manage to be disruptive, Thelwall was nevertheless able to present all of his first two lectures. That changed with his third lecture, however, when a "gang" of roughly ninety sailors, still believed by Thelwall to be militia men in disguise, showed up carrying "bludgeons, cutlasses, and pikestuffs," and proceeded to break up the meeting. Nearly thirty people were injured in the melee, and Thelwall's papers and books were destroyed. Thelwall himself might have become the object of violence, but his supporters rallied around him and Thelwall himself drew a pistol that he had concealed, ending the threat for the moment.⁷⁸² Trooper that he was, Thelwall actually continued and completed his lecture series the following week, without notes, whereupon he left for

⁷⁸¹ Ibid., p. 17-18.

⁷⁸² Ibid., pp. 22 – 27.

Norwich, to visit the “...friendly, the intelligent, the beloved society of Norwich,” a consistently strong LCS chapter.⁷⁸³ Thelwall concluded that the violence in Yarmouth effectively silenced “...what no jury could be expected to condemn, nor crown lawyer could venture to impeach.”⁷⁸⁴ He made one more attempt at a lecture series in September of 1796, at King’s Lynn and Wisbech, but once again was confronted by violence in the form of squads of sailors, this time real ones it seemed, who Thelwall believed disrupted the meetings under some duress from the press gangs.⁷⁸⁵

The provincial chapters and the support of their members had sustained the LCS in 1795 and 1796, but now that seemed to be disappearing thanks to the legal threat posed by the Two Acts and the physical threat of the bludgeon, or what Thelwall described as “the petty tyranny of provincial persecution.”⁷⁸⁶ What seemed a promising rebound of membership and financial and political support outside of London was now collapsing. Things went from bad to worse for Thelwall and the LCS when upon his return to London when he discovered that he had been ejected from the lecture rooms he was using at Beaufort Buildings off the Strand. That was also where the LCS General Committee conducted all of its business.⁷⁸⁷ As a result the LCS General Committee moved in December of 1796 into what would be its final headquarters, an old building named Queen of Bohemia’s Palace at No. 8 Wych St., Drury Lane.⁷⁸⁸

⁷⁸³ Ibid,

⁷⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

⁷⁸⁷ Davis, *LCS, Report of the General Committee of the LCS, December 8, 1796.*

⁷⁸⁸ Ibid.

A Public Meeting to Revive the Cause

The early part of 1797 was a dreary time for the LCS. Financially strapped from the ill-fated monthly magazine venture, reeling from the Two Acts legislation and its impact on meetings, memberships, and fundraising, and ignobly kicked out of its long-standing headquarters, its leaders were left to once again ponder next steps. To make matters worse, the Society was continually implicated by its enemies as instigators of any civil unrest that occurred in late 1796 and early 1797.

Despite all of this, in the spring of 1797 the Society began discussing a plan for another series of large outdoor meetings as a way to rally support for what seemed a fading cause. More specifically, the LCS leadership thought that a large public display of support for political reform might also provide impetus for ending the war and the domestic misery it was causing, particularly in light of the announcement in March of 1797 that the Bank of England had temporarily suspended cash payments of any sort⁷⁸⁹. The idea of another series of meetings - meetings that would be in violation of the Seditious Meetings Act if not properly authorized - was intensely debated by the leadership of the LCS. Francis Place and John Ashley were very much against it, fearing it would bring an end to the whole endeavor that was the LCS:

Many of the influential members were of opinion that if a public meeting was held, it would act as a stimulus, induce great numbers of persons to join the society, and others to assist it with money, and they had no doubt at all, that by this means the society would soon be in a flourishing condition. We on the contrary were certain that a public meeting would ruin it. The matter was frequently discussed and it was at length resolved...to call a public meeting.”⁷⁹⁰

⁷⁸⁹ BL, Francis Place newspaper clippings, vol. 38, fo. 33.

⁷⁹⁰ Place, *Autobiography*, pp. 153-154.

On March 23, 1797, the executive committee issued a letter calling to all of the divisions and chapters, and to all other reform societies, calling for “...a public meeting of the friends of freedom, in the open air...to draw up a remonstrance to the king, in favour of peace; and request him to discharge his Ministers, they have lost the confidence of the nation.”⁷⁹¹ The letter continued by advising that as soon as a date and a location could be procured a notification would go to all of the newspapers so that the details could be publicly broadcast to as many people as possible. The society also hoped that “...similar meetings will be held, in every town in Great Britain, on the same day.”⁷⁹² The letter concluded by urging the LCS divisions, chapters, and the other reform societies to discuss the proposal with their members and to provide feedback to the LCS on how they planned to proceed. The final matter addressed in the letter was the legality of the meeting under the provisions of the Two Acts legislation, and the recipients were reminded that so long as the heads of seven households signed a notification advertisement in the local paper regarding the time and place of the meeting, it would be in legal compliance.⁷⁹³ The letter was signed by the newly elected president of the LCS, William Williams, and by secretary John Bone.⁷⁹⁴

The proposed meeting was not without its detractors among the Society’s provincial chapters, and such debate serves as another example of the deteriorating continuity in the overall affairs of the LCS. In particular, the Sheffield reform society, a former LCS division now calling itself the Friends of Reform in Sheffield, were opposed to the meeting for a number of reasons – reasons that are illustrative of the kinds of debates

⁷⁹¹ BL, Add. MSS. 27808, fo. 74.

⁷⁹² Ibid.

⁷⁹³ BL, Francis Place newspaper clippings, vol. 38, fo. 33.

⁷⁹⁴ BL, Add. MSS. 27808, fo. 74.

occurring over the future of the LCS and the political reform movement more broadly. In a letter published in the newspapers in Sheffield before printed copies reached the LCS general committee, the Sheffield society, in concert with their brethren Norwich society, publicly disagreed with the LCS's call for a series of large outdoor meetings.⁷⁹⁵ Their reasons for disagreeing included the lack of attention the King and parliament had paid to previous petitions; an unwillingness to provide the opponents of the movement yet another reason to move against them; the fruitlessness of calling for a change of ministers in parliament; a belief that the country was growing weary of "palliative remedies" and that an "awful crisis" was near; and finally a fervent hope that those who brought the country to such a point of crisis should remain in office "...until the hour of retribution, that they may sustain the responsibility."⁷⁹⁶

The LCS retorted three weeks later, on April 24, in a printed letter that was once again distributed to as many reform societies as possible. In it they attempted to refute the arguments made by the Sheffield society nearly point by point.⁷⁹⁷ Such public squabbling only reinforced the larger public perception that the reform movement was fragmented and in its death throes. In their rebuttal, the LCS indicated that they did not intend to create another a petition, but rather a remonstrance that reemphasized the need for parliamentary reform and a fair representation of the people. The letter also restated the Society's long standing belief that political parties were ineffective and not to be trusted, suggesting that "...history and experience do not show that bad rulers make way

⁷⁹⁵ Thale, *LCS Correspondence*, p. 395.

⁷⁹⁶ *Answer of the Friends of Reform in Sheffield, summoned to take into Consideration the Letter of the London Corresponding Society, on the Subject of a Proposed Meeting, to petition the King to dismiss his Ministers, &c.*, signed T. Needham, chairman, and W. Camage, secretary, April 4, 1797. Subsequently published in the *LCS Moral and Political Magazine*, vol. 2, (April 1797), pp. 157-160.

⁷⁹⁷ Thale, *LCS Correspondence*, p. 395.

for the emancipation of the people.”⁷⁹⁸ The letter went on to make the case for the urgent necessity of such meetings, given the critical state of affairs in the nation, and the world: “We have nothing to do with futurity, the present is only within our grasp...Will you wait till you are dragooned like Ireland – massacred like the Poles?...The system of delay...is passive obedience in a modern dress.”⁷⁹⁹ The rebuttal letter concluded with a response to one of the King’s advisors who had suggested that some LCS members should be “hanged and quartered” as an example to the entire political reform movement.⁸⁰⁰ In all it was a familiar recitation of the political rationale for conducting mass meetings and engaging the public at large in them.

On May 15 the Sheffield reformers rebutted the LCS rebuttal, publicly once again through a printed letter in the local newspapers. In it they reemphasized their belief that the proposed meetings would not serve their intended purpose of advancing the goals of the reform movement. In fact, they argued, such meetings might have the opposite effect in light of the Two Acts legislation, effectively dissuading their core constituency from participating for fear of reprisals, and encouraging less desirable elements with their own agendas into the fray – “...by pushing the INS out, and the OUTS in.”⁸⁰¹ They also believed that the case for parliamentary reform and universal suffrage had been sufficiently made, and rather than belaboring those points the movement should focus on “the civil war of taxation” and the “Borough mongering and Funding System.”⁸⁰² It was

⁷⁹⁸ *Answer of the London Corresponding Society, Respecting a General Meeting to the Friends of Reform in Sheffield*, signed W. J. Early, president, J. Bone, secretary, April 24, 1797, BL, Place Collection, vol. 38, fo. 59.

⁷⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, and Thale, p. 395.

⁸⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰¹ *Reply of the Friends of Liberty in Sheffield, summoned to take into Consideration the Answer of the London Corresponding Society respecting a General Meeting*, signed William Dewsnap, president, and William Camage, secretary; *LCS Moral and Political Magazine*, vol. 2 (May, 1797), pp. 228-232.

⁸⁰² *Ibid.*, and Thale, p. 395.

only in this way, so surmised the Sheffield reformers, that matters might be brought to a head. Moreover, the Sheffield society argued that the present state of government corruption was the best friend the reform movement had, and they need only have the patience and perseverance to allow the system to collapse on itself. They concluded with the rather utopian view that when this inevitable collapse occurred, the political parties in power would be supplanted by men much like them, and that things might progress from that point when the new ministers "...feel that they are part of the people, and nothing more."⁸⁰³ Despite the public opposition of the Sheffield reformers, and the doubts of many even inside the LCS leadership group, plans for the meeting moved forward.

In early June of 1797 the last issue of the *Moral and Political Magazine of the London Corresponding Society* was published and the Society announced that the magazine would be discontinued. The LCS was in financial distress, and as they continued with their plans for an outdoor meeting they appealed to their membership for additional financial support. This was a difficult request to be sure, in light of the hardships that the war and poor crop years had inflicted on their membership. On July 17 the LCS issued a general letter to the "United Corresponding Societies of Great Britain" asking for monies from societies who had not paid their subscriptions for the magazines they had been sent.⁸⁰⁴ The letter detailed the financial difficulties the protracted trials of Binns and Jones had placed on the Society, and that as a result "...further expenses....must necessarily be incurred."⁸⁰⁵ The LCS also took the unusual step of appealing to wealthy non-members, indicating how difficult it was to get any further financial support from

⁸⁰³ *Reply of the Friends of Liberty in Sheffield, summoned to take into Consideration the Answer of the London Corresponding Society respecting a General Meeting*, signed William Dewsnap, president, and William Camage, secretary; *LCS Moral and Political Magazine*, vol. 2 (May, 1797), pp. 228-232.

⁸⁰⁴ BL, Place Collection, vol. 43.

⁸⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

their working class membership: “If there be any true patriots amongst the wealthy of your neighborhood, a few such contributions as they might make would be far more desirable than drawing from a number of the poorer class, even the smallest portion of their too small pittance.”⁸⁰⁶ Despite this appeal, the LCS did not receive any financial contributions from this solicitation.⁸⁰⁷

Nevertheless the LCS used the months of May and June to prepare for the outdoor meeting. On June 23 the Society issued a public letter responding to a proposal in Parliament that called for some redistricting, more uniform representation, and a fixed voting day each year. Known as Grey’s Plan, the LCS attacked the proposal for its shortcomings, the most notable of which was extending the voting franchise only as far as leaseholders and householders.⁸⁰⁸ Such a franchise proposal excluded the very constituency the LCS mostly represented, the working class and poor, the “...most useful class of society, from their industry and labour come all other comforts, nay, necessities of life; they fight all battles, they pay all taxes, in short they are the only men of consequence any country possesses.”⁸⁰⁹

On June 29 the LCS executive committee released a circular letter announcing that the outdoor meeting would take place on July 31, a meeting whose purpose was producing a remonstrance to the king on the war, and on the rights of his people to universal suffrage and equitable political representation through parliamentary reform.⁸¹⁰ The letter requested that other reform societies hold outdoor meetings on the same day and

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁷ Thale, p. 399.

⁸⁰⁸ *Thoughts on Mr. Grey’s Plan of Reform; in a Circular Letter to the Popular Societies of Great Britain and Ireland*, BL, Place Collection, vol. 38, fo. 108.

⁸⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁸¹⁰ Thale, p. 400.

reminded all of the steps necessary to operate within the provisions of the Two Acts. To comply, at least seven housekeepers (owners) or at least two magistrates must sign a requisition indicating the “immediate purport” of the meeting, the signed requisition must be advertised in one or more local papers at least five days in advance of the meeting, and during the meeting “no object must be introduced which has not been expressed in the advertisement.”⁸¹¹ On July 14 the LCS issued another public letter emphasizing their peaceful and orderly intent, and announcing the time and location of the meeting – a field near Veterinary College in St. Pancras.⁸¹² In order to comply with the Sedition and Treason Acts, the society advertised the meeting in the *Courier* on July 22 and in the *Sunday Review* on July 23.⁸¹³

An Outdoor Meeting at Veterinary College in St. Pancras

Two days before the meeting Francis Place and John Ashley resigned from the LCS in protest over conducting the meeting.⁸¹⁴ On that same day, July 29, the Duke of Portland ordered all local magistrates on alert in any community where there might be a meeting, and he ordered that the military stand by to put down any possible disorder or violence.⁸¹⁵ The magistrates in the St. Pancras area, where the main LCS meeting was to be held, released an advertisement stating that the proposed meeting was illegal, and it ordered all of its magistrates to be in attendance. The LCS executive committee reacted by sending a contingent to discuss the matter with the magistrates, including one of the seven householders who had signed the petition requesting the meeting in compliance with the

⁸¹¹ BL, Add. MSS. 27815, fos. 159 – 160.

⁸¹² BL, Add. MSS. 27817, fo. 50.

⁸¹³ Ibid., *A Narrative of the Proceedings at the General Meeting of the London Corresponding Society, Held on Monday, July 31, 1797, in a Field near the Veterinary College, St. Pancras, in the County of Middlesex, Citizen Thomas Stuckey, President, 1797.*

⁸¹⁴ BL, Place Collection, vol. 38, fo. 108

⁸¹⁵ Ibid., and Thale, p. 401.

new legislation. The magistrates met with the LCS contingent, but when pressed as to the specific illegalities in the matter, responded that they "...did not feel themselves at all bound to explain particularly" why they deemed the meeting illegal.⁸¹⁶ This left the LCS in a quandary on the very eve of their meeting. After some discussion the executive committee decided to post their own handbills around town as a way to respond publicly to the local magistrates. The handbills were signed by Alexander Galloway, yet another new LCS president, and Thomas Evans, the new secretary, and declared that the meeting: "IS STRICTLY CONFORMABLE TO LAW, AND TO ALL THE PROVISIONS of the ACT 36 GEORGE III."⁸¹⁷

The executive committee met early on the morning of July 31 to make the final preparations for the meeting. While they convened, police magistrates and soldiers began to gather at the meeting field, along with those interested in attending. By the meeting time, two o'clock, some several thousand attendees had gathered on the field near the college at St. Pancras, along with an "immense multitude of spectators."⁸¹⁸ Along with those attendees and spectators, some 2000 police and 2000 soldiers gathered around the field, and by most reports some 6000 – 8000 additional soldiers were stationed nearby in reserve, all to ensure order and see that the meeting laws were not broken.⁸¹⁹ As with past outdoor meetings, three platforms were constructed equidistant from each other so that the proceedings could be heard by as many attendees as possible. The executive committee split themselves among the three platforms, with Galloway, Webb, Stuckey,

⁸¹⁶ Ibid.

⁸¹⁷ BL. Add. MSS. 27817, fo. 50, *A Narrative of the Proceedings at the General Meeting of the London Corresponding Society, Held on Monday, July 31, 1797, in a Field near the Veterinary College, St. Pancras, in the County of Middlesex, Citizen Thomas Stuckey, President, 1797.*

⁸¹⁸ Ibid.

⁸¹⁹ Ibid.

and Ferguson on the first, Misters Maxwell, Baxter, Barrow, and Evans on the second, and Misters Hodgson, Binns, and Rhynd on the third.⁸²⁰ At two o'clock the meeting commenced and a speaker on each platform dutifully explained the proceedings to the magistrates in attendance and displayed the notices and advertisements of the meeting, all in compliance with the new laws. As a first order of business Thomas Stuckey was nominated and elected as the new chairman of the LCS executive committee.⁸²¹

The designated speakers on all three platforms addressed the crowd letting them know that the LCS *Address to the Nation* would not be read aloud due to its length; it went unsaid, but was certainly recognized by most in attendance, that not reading the *Address* would skirt one of the provisions of the Seditious Meetings Act concerning inflammatory rhetoric.⁸²² All of the LCS leaders present were expecting the magistrates to stop the proceeding immediately, but in fact they let the business of the meeting continue for about twenty minutes. At twenty minutes after two, just as the speakers at all three platforms were preparing to read the LCS's *Remonstrance to the King*, the magistrates handed each of them a proclamation to disperse, to be read aloud to the attendees.⁸²³ Once this had been read, six of the LCS executive committee members present were arrested - Stuckey, Ferguson, Galloway, Barrow, Hodgson, and Binns.⁸²⁴ Before departing the platform, Hodgson told the crowd that they had anticipated this action, even though the meeting was in compliance of the new provisions in the law, and he reminded

⁸²⁰ Ibid.

⁸²¹ Ibid.

⁸²² Ibid., and Thale, p. 402.

⁸²³ Ibid.

⁸²⁴ BL. Add. MSS. 27817, fo. 50, *A Narrative of the Proceedings at the General Meeting of the London Corresponding Society, Held on Monday, July 31, 1797, in a Field near the Veterinary College, St. Pancras, in the County of Middlesex, Citizen Thomas Stuckey, President, 1797.*

the crowd that under the law they had one hour to disperse in an orderly fashion. The crowd did so without incident.

The six men arrested were held and questioned for some hours before being released and celebrated in the streets by supporters. On that same day the LCS issued a handbill declaring the legality of the meeting, and that “...it is our determination still to persevere in the same peaceable manner, while there remains any law to which we can look for protection.”⁸²⁵ In both cases, the LCS public documents and addresses planned for the meeting repeated familiar themes, with just a couple of alterations. The *Remonstrance* document leaves out the long standing LCS demand that the King remove ministers responsible for subjugating his people, and instead almost wholly focuses on the core LCS political objectives for the very beginning – universal suffrage and annual parliaments, both of which would result in more equitable representation.⁸²⁶ In the *Address to the Nation*, the LCS repeats its plea to the public at large to educate themselves about the ruinous effects of parliamentary corruption and thus the need to unite as a popular political front for parliamentary reform. The three-legged stool of political enfranchisement, representation, and elections is repeated as sacrosanct, and the key to revitalizing the nation.⁸²⁷

As steadfast as the notions in the documents were, however, it was becoming increasingly clear that the cornerstone of the LCS approach to change – perseverance – was a diminishing commodity in the political reform movement. After all of the

⁸²⁵ Ibid.

⁸²⁶ Ibid., and Thale, p. 403.

⁸²⁷ BL. Add. MSS. 27817, fo. 50, *A Narrative of the Proceedings at the General Meeting of the London Corresponding Society, Held on Monday, July 31, 1797, in a Field near the Veterinary College, St. Pancras, in the County of Middlesex, Citizen Thomas Stuckey, President, 1797.*

organizational and financial resources spent on the meeting at St. Pancras, little had been achieved and the meeting was essentially a non-meeting. The Seditious Meetings Act had made it very difficult to organize any kind of political reform activity, save for small local gatherings of fewer than fifty persons. That kind of effort was insufficient for building the kind of mass popular political education and support required for real change, and even small meetings drew unwelcome attention from the government and conservative opponents. The Two Acts combined put the LCS and the political reform movement on political death watch. In his book *The Genesis of Parliamentary Reform* from 1965, George Veitch had suggested that the abortive nature of this last large outdoor meeting of the Society was “...the death-blow of the real London Corresponding Society.”⁸²⁸ While it may have been a mortal wound, the LCS would continue to limp onward although in an attenuated form for another two years.

The End of the LCS

After the July meeting Thelwall continued to lecture and argue for persistence and perseverance in the wake of the Two Acts legislation. However it was becoming increasingly clear to supporters of the reform movement that the laws had put a serious damper on the whole affair. The dire straits of the reform movement also provided momentum for patriotic and conservative political groups. The provincial chapters, divisions, and reform societies, were particularly susceptible to harassment given their distance from the metropole where there had always been a larger base of support for political reform. Groups like the Reeve associations, the “Church and King” clubs, and the volunteer magistrate companies seized the political opportunity to discredit, and

⁸²⁸ George Stead Veitch, *The Genesis of Parliamentary Reform* (Hamden, CT., 1965), p. 335.

intimidate, the provincial societies.⁸²⁹ In all, by the end of 1797, only the LCS chapters and divisions in Manchester, Sheffield, and Norwich were able to stay organized enough to keep in regular contact with the LCS executive committee in London. Just before the July outdoor meeting, the Norwich Patriotic Society, an off shoot of the LCS division in Norwich, redoubled its commitment: “We continue firm at our Post, prepared for the worst of events, determined rather to make a Public exit than to abandon the object of our association.”⁸³⁰ In August of 1797 the same society published their own address to the people of Norwich as a way to keep the political reform fire burning, supporting the views of Thomas Paine on the tenets of government, and supporting a recent lecture series in Norwich by Thelwall.⁸³¹ But they were very much the exception to the larger trend.

Throughout the remainder of 1797 and most of 1798, the more moderate members of the Society – Place, Ashley, and certainly Hardy and Margarot before them – gradually disassociated themselves from the Society.⁸³² Hardy and Ashley had both retired from public political life and had gone back to their respective trades. Ashley emigrated to Paris, and almost persuaded Place to go with him, but Place took the counsel of his wife and remained in London. Many of the more active political reformers, inside and outside of the LCS, decided that England was no longer a healthy environment for political reform and emigrated either to France or America.⁸³³ Thelwall ended his lecture tour after July of 1797 and in August moved out of London to north Somerset, where he reacquainted himself via correspondence with the Romantic poets Samuel Taylor

⁸²⁹ Goodwin, p. 413.

⁸³⁰ BL, Add. MSS. 27815, fo. 159.

⁸³¹ Ibid.

⁸³² Ibid.

⁸³³ Ibid.

Coleridge and William Wordsworth, both of whom were in the midst of planning their Romanticism manifesto, *Lyrical Ballads*.⁸³⁴ The political reform movement and the budding Romantic Movement had become philosophical cousins of a kind, each in their own way pining for a more egalitarian and classical view of the modern world. Thelwall was drawn to Romanticism, as he, like many of the other LCS leaders, had to find his own path away from the heat of the political reform movement. Others, like John Binns, followed a different path into even more radical activism. As the leadership fragmented, the rest of 1797 saw the continued splintering of the LCS, and with it much of rest of the reformist movement.

In January of 1798 the London Corresponding Society produced its penultimate document to the public. It was entitled *Address of the London Corresponding Society to the Irish Nation* and was authored primarily by John Binns, with minor contributions from a few others on the executive committee. Binns, who had by then become a member of the United Irishmen, a more radical equivalent of the LCS based in Dublin, was responding to the growing popular clamor for an independent Ireland. The *Address* was signed by LCS executive committee members Robert Thomas Crossfield and Thomas Evans, both of whom were Irish.⁸³⁵ In tone and content it was a much more radical form of rhetoric than had been seen before from the LCS. Francis Place, who had resigned from the society the previous year in opposition to the abortive outdoor meeting, thought the Society had been co-opted by Crossfield and Evans, commenting that “The address is quite characteristic of the men who signed it, but a disgrace to those who passed it, it is a rodomontade from the beginning to the end...What now remained of the

⁸³⁴ Goodwin, p. 414.

⁸³⁵ BL, Add. MSS., fos. 105-106.

Society was its refuse, with the exception of Galloway, Hodgson, Lemaitre and a few other who from what they considered conscientious motives, still adhered to it.”⁸³⁶

The last LCS *Address* accused the British government of a number of nefarious actions, in clear violation of the Two Acts, including the “Fire, Torture, and Death [that] ravage the peaceful Plains of Ireland.”⁸³⁷ And if that was not enough, the *Address* advocated a conspiratorial and traitorous union: “If to wish for the happy UNION of Mankind, when their *religious* Opinions shall be no obstacle to the Performance of their *moral Duties*, be criminal, We are also guilty; and if to UNITE in the *Cause of Reform* upon the *broadest Basis* be treason, WE with YOU are *Traitors*...”⁸³⁸ This was far from the original tone of the LCS under Thomas Hardy, who advocated working within the political and legal frameworks as much as possible to both effect change and to ultimately be taken seriously as a political force. In the final portion of the *Address* the political rhetoric was toned down somewhat, as the LCS urged all parties in Ireland to avoid cruelty and barbarity, reminding British soldiers in particular that “...if you massacre the Irish, will not the Irish in some Measure be justified retaliating upon the British?”⁸³⁹

Differences over political philosophy and tactics, the splintering of divisions and chapters, and the rise of more radical voices inside the LCS all contributed to a tumultuous year for the LCS in 1798. In February John Binns, LCS secretary, was arrested for his participation in the United Irishmen group. Binns, along with Arthur O’Connor, James Coigly, John Allen, and Jeremiah Leary, were accused of conspiring to

⁸³⁶ Ibid.

⁸³⁷ Ibid.

⁸³⁸ Ibid.

⁸³⁹ Ibid., and Davis, *LCS*, p. 419.

encourage France to wage war against Britain.⁸⁴⁰ In May of 1798 Coigly was convicted and executed, while Binns and the other three defendants were acquitted. As it happens, Binns was peripheral to the group and became involved only due to his desire to see Ireland emancipated from Britain, and the fact that he had contacts that could arrange the five men's unauthorized passage to France.⁸⁴¹ Government spies had uncovered the men's plans early on and arrested the group on account of Binns's association with the LCS. The government was hoping for a guilty verdict against Binns, even offering Coigly his freedom if he would turn evidence against Binns, but to no avail.⁸⁴² Binns remained free for the next ten months, but in April of 1799 he was arrested again and held without being charged for two years. Upon his release in 1801 he quickly emigrated to the United States.⁸⁴³

This whole episode serves as an example of the operations of the LCS in the last year of their existence. There is no evidence that Binns communicated his intentions to assist the United Irishmen with any of his executive committee brethren in the LCS. Nevertheless, due to the political prominence given to the LCS by the British government it was assumed that the LCS was behind this plot. The affair was indicative of how the LCS was splintering in 1798, and how the organization that Thomas Hardy and others had so painstakingly crafted began to come apart. Binns later commented that he should have considered his actions in light of his LCS executive position, and that while he meant no undue harm to the LCS, he now understood how the actions of individuals could put the LCS in difficult positions. And in fact that is just what occurred throughout

⁸⁴⁰ Ibid., and Thale, *LCS Selections*, p. 421.

⁸⁴¹ Ibid.

⁸⁴² Ibid.

⁸⁴³ Ibid.

1798, as the LCS would combat several similar episodes, leading one to conclude that the central structure of the LCS was not the unifying force it once was.⁸⁴⁴ Central coordination and working within the legal and constitutional framework of the nation to effect change was everything to the LCS, and in 1798 that was all coming apart.

On April 18, 1798, the British government conducted a mass arrest of LCS members, along with known radicals from many other political reform groups as part of their crackdown on those who might support a planned Irish rebellion by establishing United Irishmen chapters in and around London. The legal justification was based upon the actions of Thomas Evans and Benjamin Binns (the brother of John Binns), two LCS members who were accused of attempting to establish a United Englishmen group as a mirror image to the United Irishmen. In all there were fifteen men who attended the meeting in question and thirteen were arrested (Binns and one other eluded the authorities), though in subsequent depositions many of the men claimed that they thought they were attending nothing more than an LCS business meeting.⁸⁴⁵

Whether that was true or not is another matter, though it does contribute to the impression that by 1798 the LCS was a considerably less organized and structured entity than it had been. Francis Place, who after resigning from the LCS nonetheless remained active in the reform community, later described his contacts with those arrested: “These two [Evans and B. Binns] found some ten or twelve others to join them and having in consequence of their conversations...learned the details of the United Irishmen...The object of this association was to promote a revolution, a more ridiculous project was

⁸⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁵ Thale, *LCS Selections*, pp. 428-429.

never entered by the imaginations of men out of Bedlam.”⁸⁴⁶ According to Place, he attempted to dissuade them from their efforts, and to point out to them the potential for further implicating the LCS in the kinds of things they did not want to be associated with: “I attended two or three meetings when some half dozen others were present, and pointed out to them the extreme folly of their proceedings. They did not however desist, and I am fully persuaded that this was owing to emissaries [government spies] who were sent among them.”⁸⁴⁷ At one of the meetings Place threatened to expose the group and their intentions to the authorities, such was his concern for the reputation of the LCS, but he never did so, and stopped attending any subsequent meetings: “I was for doing this [stopping the plot to establish the United Englishmen] by sending for Evans, B Binns, and a foolish fellow their coadjutor named James Powell [in fact a government spy], and frankly telling them we would take means to stop their proceedings, by communicating to Mr Ford the Magistrate at the Treasury who and what they were and what they intended, so unless they at once desisted, they should be prevented from involving others in mischief and disgrace and bringing punishment upon them.”⁸⁴⁸

On the following day, April 19, Benjamin Binns was arrested at his home. That evening the LCS general committee met as part of their regularly scheduled weekly meetings in Wych Street, and no sooner was the meeting called to order than the local authorities entered and arrested fifteen men, with one escaping. Among those arrested were several LCS leaders, including Richard Hodgson, Paul Thomas Lemaitre, and John Barnes.⁸⁴⁹ Later that same evening, LCS leader John Bone was arrested at his house in

⁸⁴⁶ BL, Add. MSS. 27808, fos. 91-92.

⁸⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁸ BL, Add. MSS. 27816, fos. 543-548.

⁸⁴⁹ Ibid.

Holborn. The next day, on April 20, Thomas Spence was arrested at his home and Alexander Galloway surrendered himself to the authorities after he learned that there was a warrant issued in his name.⁸⁵⁰ There were more arrests as April came to an end. In all, several dozen LCS members were arrested in an effort by the government to squelch the group once and for all.

From his prison cell Thomas Hodgson wrote a letter defending the LCS from more radical usurpers who claimed the Society as their own. Hodgson sent the letter to the *Morning Chronicle* but the editors decided not to print the letter due to the pending trial. Hodgson was attempting to counter the accusations of Henry Dundas in Parliament, that the LCS was simply changing its identity to avoid discovery and prosecution: “Considerable societies and bodies of men, disaffected to the Constitution of the country, have formed themselves into assemblies, under the mask of Parliamentary Reform. They first appeared under the name of Corresponding Societies, but they have since assumed the appellation of United Englishmen, imitating the example held out to them by their colleagues in the work of anarchy and innovation in a sister country.”⁸⁵¹ In Hodgson’s unpublished letter, he denied any such connection and defended the LCS: “Of the falsehood of this insinuation I am well convinced. Its absurdity must be evident from the constitution of the society. Every division has a weekly opportunity of sending to the General Committee new men, strangers to those with whom they are to deliberate... Is a society so constituted capable of adopting a system of secrecy and duplicity?”⁸⁵² Despite Hodgson’s eloquent defense, that in fact is exactly what the British government believed.

⁸⁵⁰ Ibid., and Thale, p. 429.

⁸⁵¹ *The Times*, May 9, 1798, quoting Henry Dundas, p. 2.

⁸⁵² BL, Add. MSS. 27816, fos. 543–548.

On April 20, the day after the arrest of the LCS general committee, the King added fuel to the fire against the LCS and the reformists more generally, when he advised the House of Commons that French preparations for an invasion “...are now carried on with considerable and increasing activity...and that in this design the enemy is encouraged by the communications and correspondence of traitorous and disaffected persons and societies in this kingdom.”⁸⁵³ The King proceeded to put his own death stamp on the LCS by encouraging the House of Commons to take “...such farther measures as may enable his majesty to defeat the wicked machinations of disaffected persons within these realms, and to guard against the designs of the enemies, either abroad or at home.”⁸⁵⁴ The House of Commons responded to the King’s requests by immediately extending the suspension of *habeas corpus* until February 1, 1799.

In June 14, 1798, the LCS published its last widely distributed document entitled *Address of the London Corresponding Society to the British Nation*.⁸⁵⁵ More than anything, the document was a defense of the historical reputation of the LCS. It was as if those still involved in the LCS recognized that its reputation was on the line, and were determined to have the Society’s history written by its members and not by the government. The *Address* was signed by the current president and secretary respectively, John Simpson and George Picard.⁸⁵⁶ In the *Address* the LCS reminded the public the recently convicted and executed Coigly had never been a member of the LCS, that they had repeatedly invited members of Parliament to their meetings throughout their history

⁸⁵³ BL, *Annual Register*, 1798, pp. 211-212., and Thale, p. 435.

⁸⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁵ Portions of this document can be found in: BL, Add. MSS. 27816, fos. 543–548 and are quoted above. The full *Address of the London Corresponding Society to the British Nation* can be found in the Nuffield Library, Nuffield College, Oxford.

⁸⁵⁶ Ibid.

as a sign of their openness and lack of secrecy, and that they had convened a public meeting in 1797 (St. Pancras) in compliance with the Two Acts legislation but were nonetheless “...dispersed by an Armed Force, contrary to Law.”⁸⁵⁷ The document went on to defend the LCS from the recent accusations by Dundas, and perhaps for the historical record reiterated the lawfulness of the Society: “We declare that the principles we have ever maintained are the genuine principles of the British Constitution...For the proof of our Declaration, we might refer to all our former Addresses, but on the present occasion, we think it necessary again to lay before the public, both our own principles and those of the British Constitution, that they may judge between us and our accusers.”⁸⁵⁸ The *Address* continues by restating the need for a people to be equally franchised and represented in Parliament, and the need for “...restoring the ancient Right of *Universal Suffrage and Annual Parliaments*,” which can be achieved by adhering to restored constitution in “its original perfection.”⁸⁵⁹ The *Address* concluded with a reiteration of the Society’s core principle of achieving all of this change through peaceable and legal means. Despite the defense, the remainder of 1798 went no better for the LCS, as the outbreak of the Irish Rebellion in the summer of 1798 and the French invasion of Ireland in August only reinforced the idea amongst its enemies that the Society was an agent of ill will.

In January of 1799 Parliament extended the suspension of *habeas corpus* until May (it would be further extended until May of 1800), and that led to the arrests of more LCS members who were held without charge. Additionally, anybody remotely associated with the political reform movement – moderate, radical, or somewhere in between – came

⁸⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁸ Ibid., and Thale, p. 437.

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid.

under great scrutiny and were threatened with arrest and deportation if they did not cease and desist.⁸⁶⁰ In March nineteen United Irishmen were arrested at their meeting at the Royal Oak in London, and in April thirteen members of the United Englishmen were arrested at Nag's Head in London.⁸⁶¹ The LCS was inactive during the first part of 1799, as most of its members who had not been arrested tried their best to keep out of the eyes of the law.

The *coup de grace* for the LCS and for what remained of the political reform movement of the 1790s was delivered by the British government that summer.

On July 12, 1799, the London Corresponding Society was legally prohibited from existing when Parliament passed '*An Act for the more effectual suppression of societies established for seditious and treasonable purposes; and for better preventing treasonous and seditious practices.*'⁸⁶² Along with the LCS, the United Britons, United Englishmen, United Irishmen, and United Scotsmen were all legislated out of existence. Henceforth it would be illegal to participate in these organizations. If caught doing so and convicted by a minimum of two justices of the peace the punishment was a fine of 20 pounds or three months in prison, and if indicted and convicted on more conspiratorial charges, the fine was seven years of transportation.⁸⁶³ These were stiff penalties indeed and certainly enough to keep most working-class men from risking such punishments. While some LCS members probably met informally to discuss the politics of the day, they could not meet under the formal banner of an LCS division or chapter meeting, and in fact after the new law was passed there is no historical record of another formal LCS meeting.

⁸⁶⁰ Thale, *LCS Selections*, p. 445.

⁸⁶¹ Ibid.

⁸⁶² 39 Geo III, c. 79.

⁸⁶³ Thale, *LCS Selections*, p. 451.

As alluded to earlier, many former LCS members emigrated to either France or the United States, where they might continue their political reform efforts. This was the case for men like John Ashley, John Binns, and Richard Hodgson, in whom the fire of popular politics and reform continued to burn hot. Most LCS members, however, remained in their working class lives and occupations in England and in their own quiet ways continued to think about and discuss the need for equal representation, annual parliaments, and universal male suffrage. Some continued to be active in politics, and in the first decade of the nineteenth century several were members of election committees who worked to get political reform minded candidates elected.⁸⁶⁴

Others, like Francis Place, whose meticulous record keeping and correspondence provides priceless insights into the workings of the LCS, became quite prosperous as the Industrial Revolution presented increased opportunities to such self made men. From 1795 to 1842 there was an annual dinner for former LCS members to celebrate Thomas Hardy's acquittal in the state treason trial of 1794.⁸⁶⁵ Place attended the dinner many times, and in 1822 wrote of his conversations with dozens of former LCS members who were all "flourishing men" as a result of their LCS experiences.⁸⁶⁶ Place subsequently related the ways he thought his LCS association had improved his life when he wrote his life's memoirs, including his exposure to "better men" who helped educate him politically and socially.⁸⁶⁷

For Place, though, and for Thomas Hardy and countless others as well, the LCS and groups like it were a forum, and the only forum in the last decade of the eighteenth

⁸⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁵ Hardy, *Memoirs*.

⁸⁶⁶ Place, *Autobiography*, pp. 187-199.

⁸⁶⁷ Ibid.

century, where working class men could go to improve their political lives, as Place suggests in his autobiography. Participating in the LCS "...induced men to read books...to respect themselves, and to desire to educate their children...The discussions in the divisions, in the Sunday evenings readings, and in the small debating meetings, opened to them views which they had never before taken. They were compelled by these discussions to find reasons for their opinions, and to tolerate others...It is more than probable that a circumstance like this never occurred before."⁸⁶⁸ Thomas Hardy would have no doubt concurred.

⁸⁶⁸ Ibid.

**CONCLUSION - The LCS in History: Lessons Learned, Lasting Legacies, and the
Ascension of Popular Politics**

To the late London Corresponding Society, that great and eminently useful society [that] was instituted with the laudable design of effecting a thorough parliamentary reform by copiously distributing gratis, political tracts, among the people thereby diffusing useful knowledge among them respecting that great measure. The motto of the society was Unite, Persevere, and be Free.

- Thomas Hardy, 1799

The LCS - A Product of Their Time

The central purpose of this dissertation has been to highlight the ways in which the London Corresponding Society impacted popular politics in the late eighteenth century, and to answer the question of why they were historically important to that effort. To do so, it was necessary first to establish the political, economic, social, and cultural contexts for such a group to organize, exist, and persist at a time when Britain was experiencing fundamental changes in all the aforementioned categories, and moreover, while a new kind of revolution was raging just across the English Channel in France. How and why did thousands of working class men develop a political consciousness that became so important to them that they were willing to risk everything – liberty, family, financial ruin – for such a notion? Why, in the face of all of these challenges, did they decide to persist when faced with so much adversity?

One way to start to think about the answers to these questions and many of the others posed in the introduction to this dissertation, is to think about the LCS as representative of a working class political idea whose seeds were planted after the American Revolution, and that had a political growth spurt during and after the last decade of the

eighteenth century. Importantly, it was during this decade that the principal political idea of the LCS and the mostly working class men they represented was sustained long enough to generate an explicit and quantifiable political consciousness in the public sphere. That political idea was that all men of a certain age and good legal standing ought to have a voice in how *their* interests were represented in a government, and if that representation became unsatisfactory, a means by which it might be corrected. That was the central theme around which the LCS organized – parliamentary reform through universal male suffrage and annual parliamentary elections. While the struggle to achieve those goals is the story of the LCS and many of the other political reform groups in this period, as interesting a question is why working class men who formed the LCS believed they were entitled to such things in the first place.

The LCS came into being at the end of the eighteenth century in Europe, and like so many other movements of the period, was a product of the revolutionary and tumultuous events of the era. Thomas Hardy and the other founders, unlike perhaps their grandparents or even their parents, were literate and were exposed to the literary explosion in publishing and print distribution that flourished throughout Europe. As such these men were familiar with classical and contemporary writers, from Hobbes to Locke, Montesquieu to Voltaire, and Paine to Burke, and therefore had a working knowledge of political philosophy that allowed them to understand, interpret, and discuss their place within their own political world. Such notions as natural rights, representation, and historic British constitutionalism became important topics for working class men in the eighteenth century.

As early industrialization progressed in Europe, and particularly in Britain, working class men were brought together in urban environments as never before. Coffee houses, public houses, and boarding houses became hotbeds for political discussions about what was and was not working, and how that impacted one's own life, now more directly than perhaps ever before. Rather than remaining within individual and self-sustaining economic cells, working class men became more interconnected and interdependent economically and politically than ever before, both with each other and with the industries, apprenticeships, and small businesses within which they cast their lots. This had implications for the rise of popular politics in the public sphere, by allowing for the development of a steady and coherent voice that spoke for the disenfranchised. The argument this dissertation attempts to make is that the LCS was the embodiment of that voice in the 1790s, and that its essentially proletarian voice persisted after their organizational demise, certainly until the Reform Act of 1832, and beyond.

The voice of the LCS was shaped by many things, but beyond the ubiquitous availability of political literature, it was certainly shaped by a century's worth of British history, from the Glorious Revolution to the American Revolution. These events were fundamental to the political ideas of Thomas Hardy, Maurice Margarot, John Thelwall, Francis Place, and many other LCS leaders. That turned out to be one of the political dichotomies the LCS struggled mightily with – while they believed they represented the historic and constitutional traditions of a democratic British past that was being compromised by political corruption and cronyism, their conservative opponents, Burke included, framed them as Britain's version of the French revolutionaries. Such was not the case. Certainly, in a movement as expansive and inclusive as the political reform

movement of the 1790s, there were bound to be radicals who favored the French model, both inside and outside of the LCS. For Hardy and his LCS cofounders however, it was the hard won constitutional settlement of the Glorious Revolution that became the model for a working class political reform movement. That settlement implied that Parliament represented the people, and that the law, justly and equally administered, ruled over all. One of the political points that the LCS tried to make in the 1790s was that those notions had somehow been lost in a rapidly evolving socio-economic environment that had become disconnected from the political principles of the past, or more cynically, was ignoring those principles for political convenience as a way to keep the rights of franchise with those who already held the political power.

Additionally, Hardy and the other LCS founders believed that the American Revolution was fought over many of the same political principles that they were fighting for - particularly the right of equal and fair representation in a governing body. They sympathized with American colonists who argued for the same franchise rights that many other British citizens demanded in the 1770s, and who were desirous of some greater control over their economic wellbeing. This notion of economic self-determination was an important one. In the two decades after the American Revolution, traditional agrarian economic self-sufficiency had been increasingly challenged by the early stages of industrialization, urbanization, and economic specialization. Part of the broader agenda of the LCS was an attempt to regain some modicum of control over working class economic interests in this new economic reality. The way this might be accomplished, so their reasoning went, was through the political education of the working class, which would enlighten them as to their traditional and historic rights to the political vehicles of

voting and representation. While perhaps naïve in hindsight, in the context of the last decade of the tumultuous and revolutionary eighteenth century it seemed reasonable to expect that the establishment of franchise rights for working class men, along with ending the corruption in Parliament, would restore some control for the working class over their economic self interests. The leaders of the LCS believed this to be true, and their faith in that idea would be justified as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries progressed.

They may have been more successful in their own time, had not the events in France, and later in the decade in Ireland, cast the same sinister shadow over the entirety of the political reform movement spectrum in Great Britain. One could argue that in the 1780s momentum was building for political reform, and as a result of the social and economic displacement of urbanization, a more working-class ethos developed that included seeing to the needs of the working class and the urban poor. This movement was a part of a reenergized and reorganized reformist front that was inspired by the success of the American colonists in obtaining their own political objectives. When the French Revolution began in 1789, it was a widely popular event amongst the working class in Great Britain, and especially with those men who had been advocating for political reform. The Revolution was seen as long overdue in France, and was an expression and validation of the kinds of changes that Hardy and other LCS leaders aspired to in Britain. The LCS initially argued that the French revolutionaries were fighting for many of the same rights that the British already had, but had somehow been lost in an effort by the political and economic elites to control the franchise rights of the nation for fear of what might happen should working-class men be given the right to vote. That position evolved as the French Revolution quickly radicalized, and Hardy and Margarot came to believe

that their best opportunity for effecting the change they desired was from within the political and legal framework that existed, a distinctly non-revolutionary approach as compared to events in France. What that political and legal framework was constituted from, and how those rights should be extended in a society, became the essential ingredients for the fight between the LCS and the British government and political conservatives in the 1790s.

When it became clear to Hardy that the approach for political reform should be intra-legal as opposed to extra-legal, it necessitated a particular organizational and behavioral approach for the LCS, one that sought political legitimacy through perseverance, good order, and compliance with the law. This is where the LCS hit its stride, and where it ultimately made its biggest impact on the future of popular political enfranchisement in Great Britain. Hardy believed that it was incumbent on the LCS to demonstrate to the nation that it was serious in intent and approach, and the best way to do that was to ensure that LCS members behaved contrary to what conservative perceptions might have been. That is, to demonstrate that working class men were capable of civility, rational thought, informed debate, and peaceable assembly - political characteristics that had not often been applied to working class men. The mission of the LCS, therefore, was to create such men where they did not already exist, and the way to do that, at least in the main, was through political education. Chapter meetings, informed debate, private and public lectures, published articles and speeches, petitions to parliament and the occasional remonstrance to the King, these were the hallmarks of the LCS and its legacy because they all led to creating a more politically informed and politically active working class.

Working Class Politics

Those seeds had been planted during the 1770s and '80s when such reformers as Wilkes, Price, and others began to envision a movement of working class people who had the right to express their political interests and control their own destinies.⁸⁶⁹ Their writings and speeches struck a chord with working class people but organizing around such ideas proved difficult in an industrializing society where time and financial resources were limited. That was the brilliance of the London Corresponding Society. The LCS devised an organization that at its core had a political purpose and organizing structure, but was both open and affordable to its working class members. The problem with political education in the late eighteenth century was that, despite the availability of a plethora of political literature, it cost money to purchase it and time to consume it – time out of one's work-day responsibilities. The LCS solved this by making participation as affordable as possible to its members – a mere one penny per week. This allowed, slowly but surely, working class men to join and participate in a new political dialogue that spoke to their wants and desires.

And for that one penny they received a political dividend of immeasurable value – access to political ideas, literature, discussions, and debates. The forum in which this was accomplished was another aspect of the brilliance of the LCS. For working class men to be exposed to such things, the LCS would have to make it easy enough for them to gather and participate after a long day's work. Affordability was one aspect of that, and location was another. By organizing and sorting into committees, within chapters, within divisions, within urban areas where working class men lived and worked, and by following a disciplined schedule of meetings on the same day(s) each week, the LCS

⁸⁶⁹ Cone, p. 223.

enabled working men to attend their meetings. Hardy and many of other leaders of the LCS surmised that once men were educated regarding their own political rights and the current abuse of them, they would, in the short run, work for the political goals and objectives of the LCS; - and, in the long run, become better citizens and better men.

And what were better men, at least according to the LCS? They were men that believed that political participation was a citizen's right and duty, irrespective of property ownership, hereditary status, or political connections. This was a radical idea in the context of several centuries' worth of the social and economic composition of British society, and a clear break from the way things had traditionally been. That was precisely why, despite their best efforts to the contrary, the LCS was deemed a radical and threatening organization by political conservatives and the British government. They were deemed so not because of how they organized and operated – all of their activities were lawful up until the passage of the Two Acts – but because the idea of giving working class men the right to vote was an inherently radical, and to many, a dangerous idea. The entire arc of the LCS, from 1792 to 1799, was spent trying to educate their members as to why it was important for them to vote, and attempting to make that notion seem more politically palatable and less threatening to the political status quo.

And why should those in power fear the extension of political rights, including giving the vote to non-landed men? Many volumes have been written on such things by esteemed historians, but the bottom line might have been that they did not know what would happen if such rights were given, and fear of the unknown has always been a compelling argument against change. The LCS inflamed those fears, though they explicitly attempted not to do so, by being such an effectively organized entity whose

ability to provide political ideas and education to the lower and middling classes greatly alarmed conservative political elites. Through the LCS and several of the other political reform groups of the end of the eighteenth century, a momentum began to build as the movements organized and communicated and coordinated with each other. The very idea of the London Corresponding Society *was* correspondence, and they managed to create and distribute more than their fair share of it over a short period of time. This only increased the alarm within the conservative political ranks, as they viewed such organization and coordination toward political reform, and particularly the ability of the movement to organize and coordinate its activities across the nation, as readying the working class for “...any attempt that might be made to overturn the government of the country.”⁸⁷⁰ This was the nut of the problem then. Granting the right to vote to the working class would potentially light the fuse to much larger and more profound political, economic, and societal reform, and there was no telling what this new order might look like except that it would most certainly favor the lower classes, whose sheer numbers would compel such an outcome. That was why the works of Paine and Burke were so polarizing in this period, as each side rallied behind the political ideas of its intellectual spokesman, and as historian Carl Cone has suggested, “...Burke and Paine symbolized all of this, for it was fought out between spokesmen for the patricians and the plebs.”⁸⁷¹

The LCS attempted to counter this with several published addresses to the nation at large, emphasizing again and again its commitment to achieving change through legal and constitutional means. Such a strategy might have proved successful over time, but

⁸⁷⁰ Hardy, *Memoir*, BL, Add'l MS 65153B, and *History of the Two Acts* (London, 1796), pp. 92 – 102

⁸⁷¹ Cone, p. 223.

the violent radicalization of the French Revolution changed all of that for the British political reform movement. It became politically expedient for the opponents of the reform movement to lump the LCS in with the dangerous French revolutionaries. The LCS had little defense for this, particularly during the first two years of their existence when they maintained an active dialogue with French Jacobins, other than to repeat themselves over and over in defense of their objectives and approaches. For a while, there were even a few in parliament who recognized the differing political births of the LCS and their French counterparts, and understood that the roots of the British political reform movement were in the 1770s, not the 1790s. In 1792, Lord Lansdowne, a Whig member of the House of Lords, argued that the British political reform movement, and the LCS specifically, were not dangerous because they were politically “indigenous,” created from the nation’s own experiences since the American Revolution, rather than from the French revolutionaries of the 1790s.⁸⁷² His analysis, while essentially correct, fell mostly on deaf ears, and the LCS and its brethren in the political reform movement became the targets of persecution.

As it became apparent that the French Revolution would escape beyond its own borders, threatening peace and status quo on the continent, it changed the nature and the context of political discourse in Britain. For the LCS, that meant that they had to spend as much time and energy, if not more, on disassociating themselves with the French as they did to pursue their own political goals. This proved to be a great drain on the LCS and the larger political reform movement in 1794 and 1795, culminating with the state treason trials against Hardy and several of the other leaders of the LCS and SCI. The trials were a double-edged sword for the LCS. On the one hand, popular support for the

⁸⁷² *Parliamentary History*, vol. 32, col. 456, and Cone, p. 223.

LCS and its political goals and objectives briefly peaked as a result of the publicity from the trials. On the other hand, their opponents, having failed to get convictions against Hardy and the others, redoubled their efforts against the LCS signaling the beginning of their eventual demise as a functioning political organization. Nevertheless, the LCS state trials for treason were a significant watershed in the ascension and codification of popular politics in Britain; not popular politics as a short-term imperative, or a political expediency or convenience as concerns a particular issue, but popular politics as a permanent, resident, and material part of British political culture. Thousands and thousands of lower, working, middle, and even a few upper class supporters rallied each and every day of the trial to demonstrate their support not just for the LCS, but for the political ideas the LCS represented. And why did they do so? They did so, at least in part, because the LCS and other such organizations had been providing the kind of political education that helped such men understand their current place in British politics, and compared that to what their place ought to be according to their own political and constitutional traditions, histories, and laws. That comparison left many working class men wanting much more than they already had.

And that want is what drove the LCS, particularly before the state trials, and as best as they could manage afterwards. Serving that perceived need – the education and enlightenment of working class men regarding their political rights – is one of the keys to understanding the longevity and persistence of the LCS. Many of its leaders, and this was particularly true of Hardy, had a decidedly missionary attitude about what they were doing. Many of these men, were after all, religious in spirit and nature and saw no difference in evangelizing for religious beliefs or political rights. It was often the case

that one led to the other. In her edited publication of select LCS papers in 1983, Mary Thale observed the Society's "missionary attitude" as part of their zealous pursuit of new members, chapters, and divisions: "...they sought out reform groups in other cities, wrote when there was only a hint of a new society, wrote again if a society lapsed into silence. They sent missionaries to other cities to stir up zeal for reform. They were convinced that they were needed, that they must act as the centre of the popular reform societies."⁸⁷³

The LCS was the center of the political reform movement in the 1790s, and as this dissertation has suggested, their work laid the foundation for political reform in the nineteenth century. Theirs was an idea borne of the Glorious Revolution's constitutional settlement certainly, but also of the traditions of the Saxons and the natural rights that all men were entitled to, along with the constitutional and parliamentary crises of the previous centuries, and it must be said, of the French Enlightenment. The LCS founders were avid readers of the French *philosophes* and their appeal for a society based upon natural rights, rationality, and above all, merit, as opposed to a British society that was still based upon a mostly feudal system. The Enlightenment seemed to satisfactorily answer a lot of questions about the role of government and its relationship to the governed, and that is why the British political reform movement was so enamored with the French revolutionaries at the outset of the French Revolution.

The LCS and the British Romantics

However, an Enlightenment that led to the Terror of the French Revolution posed another daunting political problem for the LCS and its leaders. The LCS had combined the political principles from the Glorious Revolution, the American Revolution, and the Enlightenment - and by extension the French Revolution - into a political reform agenda

⁸⁷³ Thale, *LCS Selections*, p. xxviii.

around which they built a public image. This worked well enough, and was gaining political and popular traction, until the radical French revolutionaries co-opted the Enlightenment in unanticipated political, social, and economic ways. Thus it was that the LCS found itself by 1793 and 1794 in a place it did not want to be – smack in the middle of the British political debate over the nature and meaning of a radical, violent French Revolution that was launching the Terror and declaring war on the rest of Europe. For the LCS, this new situation required a shift to a different kind of political vision that they could communicate to their membership and the public sphere. The political principles of Britain's past revolutions remained fundamental, but the LCS could no longer tie those principles to a political present and future that looked like the French Revolution, as they initially believed they could. Instead, they found something else that seemed a political expediency at first, but as the decade progressed, manifested itself as an altogether different movement:

Forgive me Freedom! O forgive those dreams!
 I hear thy voice, I hear thy loud lament,
 From bleak Helvetia's icy caverns sent –
 I hear thy groans upon her blood-stained streams!
 Heroes, that for your peaceful country perished,
 And ye that, fleeing, spot your mountain-snows
 With bleeding wounds; forgive me, that I cherished
 One thought that ever blessed your cruel foes!⁸⁷⁴

As the debate over the French Revolution intensified in Britain it reached across the socio-economic strata of British society, and for the LCS that meant they had to attenuate their political connections to it with something deemed less radical and dangerous, both politically and culturally. One part of doing that for the LCS was by connecting with some of the poets and intellectuals during the rise of the British Romantic movement in

⁸⁷⁴ Samuel Coleridge. *Poetical Works*, p. 246, from: Nicholas V. Riasanovsky. *The Emergence of Romanticism* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1992), pp. 36-37.

the 1790s. The early Romanticism movement's relevance to the political debate in Britain over the French Revolution is important – for it was the rhetoric and imagery of Romanticism, combined with the political victory of the conservatives over the radical and reformist groups by the end of the 1790s, including the LCS, that not only contributed to the growth of British influence around the world during the nineteenth century, but kept the flame burning for the kinds of political changes the LCS sought. The Romantics disconnected the Enlightenment from French sensibilities, and connected it to British sensibilities, allowing for a political, social, and cultural reexamination of what it meant to be British in the context of the French Revolution. Stated another way, British Romantics turned the debate over the French Revolution in Britain into a debate about what Britain would become. In 1793, LCS leaders were reading the early works of Coleridge and Wordsworth at chapter meetings as part of the political education of working-class men. Passages from Wordsworth's *Descriptive Sketches* about the revolution in France was applied by the LCS to the current state of political rights in Britain:

Oh give, great God, to Freedom's waves to ride
 Sublime o'er Conquest, Avarice, and Pride,
 To break, the vales were Death and Famine scow'rs,
 And dark oppression builds her thick, ribb'd tow'rs⁸⁷⁵

Wordsworth and some of his Romantic contemporaries were as excited as the LCS leaders were about the early stages of the French revolution. However, once the Revolution radicalized both Romanticism and the political reform movement needed a different way to express their social and political goals.⁸⁷⁶

⁸⁷⁵ William Wordsworth. *Descriptive Sketches*, from: Theresa M. Kelley, *Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1988), p. 3.

⁸⁷⁶ Ibid.

In the midst of the disillusionment and fallout from the French Revolution in Britain, an emerging British Romantic movement was seen by the LCS and many others in the reform movement more as an argument about *how* to transform a society to an Enlightenment model, albeit a decidedly British one. Rather than wholly and simplistically eschewing Enlightenment ideals en masse, British Romantics in fact hung on to many of them as tightly as they could, but advocated a fundamentally different path towards their integration into British society. Romantics did not reject Enlightenment ideals as much as they rejected how those ideals had been interpreted and applied to date in European society, and of course most especially in Britain. The Romantics then, sought a fundamental reinterpretation of an Enlightenment model they feared was sailing dangerously off course, and if those beliefs were not completely codified before the French Revolution, they most certainly were afterward:

When France began its reformation and limited its monarch and stipended its clergy, I thought I saw philosophy at last in its proper station on the globe by providing its wisdom and goodness for the happiness of mankind. But alas – our philosophers only open'd the gates of the police to let in a band of ruffians to cut their throats, and now in the levity and the savageness of the French character, in their rigour and folly, my judgment is quite bewilderd.⁸⁷⁷
George Dempster, Whig, 1794

By 1795, the LCS and others fighting for political reform saw a vital need to reclaim the Enlightenment and its notion of natural rights from the violent radicals who had co-opted it. Events in France had taken an alarming turn and at home in Britain the William Pitt-led government had its hands full responding to a number of perceived internal threats during a time of war. In 1795 the Two Acts legislation banned all meetings of more than fifty people, and made it treason to try to coerce the King, or to incite

⁸⁷⁷ W. L. Renwick, *The Rise of the Romantics: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Jane Austen* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1963), p. 2.

contempt of the English constitution.⁸⁷⁸ This led to a further crackdown against all corresponding societies and political associations, particularly those in contact with the revolutionaries in France. Government spies were, or at least were presumed to be, in every pub and tobacco shop, listening for comments against the government and waiting to turn in anyone who uttered them. The government felt it had good reason to take such precautions. When Edmund Burke railed against “80,000 incorrigible Jacobins” he was not referring to the events in France but instead to the growing legion of young British radicals who were increasingly becoming enlightened as to their own political rights through the educational efforts of the LCS.⁸⁷⁹ These were working class men to be sure, but also students, merchants, sons, of a rising middle class who believed in an Enlightenment promise of a society on which advancement was based on merit, rather than birth into a powerful or well-connected family.

For the LCS and the larger political reform movement, this presented a challenge. It was clear by 1794 that the promise of a European and largely French Enlightenment had gone seriously awry. More urgently, it was also clear that it was now dangerous to one’s personal liberty to even espouse the ideals that just a few short years before seemed the best hope for British citizens, and for all mankind. The events in France necessitated a new political approach for the LCS, and one source of that approach was provided through an exchange of ideas with some of the young Romantic poets. Poetry reading was often part of an LCS meeting, and Romantic poetry was included in one of the

⁸⁷⁸ Clayton Roberts, *A History of England*, (Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, 2002), p. 533.

⁸⁷⁹ E. P. Thompson, *The Romantics – England in a Revolutionary Age*; (The New Press: New York, 1997), p. 85.

editions of the LCS-produced magazines.⁸⁸⁰ In fact, John Thelwall was well acquainted with William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge, both of whom interacted with the LCS, but by all accounts never became members. In 1794, a donation from ‘Citizen Wordsworth’ for the families of arrested LCS members may have been from the poet, though the existing records are not clear on this matter. However the records do indicate that the poet Lord Byron contributed to the LCS fund for the arrested Maurice Margarot.⁸⁸¹

It would be a stretch to suggest that the LCS leaders and the Romantic poets were working together to effect political, economic, and social change. It is less of a stretch, however, to suggest that they were aware of each other, and in some cases knew each other and participated in each other’s events from time to time. This should not be surprising given the similarities of their respective social, cultural, and political goals and their shared belief in the importance of the natural rights of men as being sacrosanct. In many respects, the LCS and the Romantics faced the same dilemma over how to effectively communicate their ideas for change to the general public. The LCS published addresses, drafted petitions, and conducted large outdoor meetings, appealing directly to the public they were trying to influence. The Romantics created poetry and paintings intended to convey their ideas for change, a less direct approach that required some imagination on the part of their intended audience.

The British Romantics were concerned that men were losing a sense of themselves and their historical and spiritual connectedness to the natural world as a result of, among

⁸⁸⁰ BL, *The Moral and Political Magazine of the London Corresponding Society, Volume the First* (July 1, 1796).

⁸⁸¹ Thale, *Selections*, p. xv.

other things, industrialization and urbanization. They envisioned a society where intellect and imagination combined in men to complete a natural whole: their view of an enlightened man. In this sense the British Romantics were inwardly focused on what made the man, and how then that man related to nature and society as a result. The LCS was similarly concerned with the inner man, but only in as much as what made up the man contributed to his success as a politically enfranchised actor in the public sphere and the nation. In this sense the LCS was outwardly focused on what made the man, recognizing the importance of appearances and behavior in British political society. That is one of the reasons that the LCS spent so much time on constitutions, rules of member behavior, political education, and the like; Hardy and others understood that a working class political association could only succeed if it overcame the societal perceptions that working class men were intellectually and behaviorally ill-suited to participate in the political arena.

In this context the British Romantics and the LCS might be seen as kin of a sort, not directly related as brothers per se, but rather more like cousins from the same family tree of political and social change. Like many cousins, they can appear quite different in outward appearance or even demeanor, but they nevertheless share the same core personality traits, often just to different degrees. Had British Romantics and the LCS co-existed in their respective fullest forms in the same time period, they might have become more aware of their common birthrights and heritage, and connected the Romantics inwardly focused natural man with the LCS's outwardly focused political man; but such was not the case, as they missed each other by a few years. In their own ways, both movements were trying to change the entrenched political, economic, and social systems,

yet both were mindful of Edmund Burke's warning about the dangers of wholly discarding an entrenched system, an action neither the LCS nor the British Romantics had ever advocated. Both groups struggled with how to remake British society from within, and what started as a source of inspiration for both – the French Revolution – eventually became a heavy load to bear, requiring each group to distance themselves from events and ideas with which their opponents gleefully continued to link them. As Richard Bourke so succinctly states in his book, *Romantic Discourse and Political Modernity*, “[the events in] France effectively circumscribed the question of modernity – which is to say, it circumscribes the problem of Revolution. It outlines the difficulties involved in inaugurating an era which disowns the historical inheritance that defines it.”⁸⁸²

The approach that the British Romantics and the LCS each took to overcome this connection to the French Revolution took different paths however. Prior to the Revolution, French Enlightenment *philosophes* aimed directly at European society's institutional ills, and the LCS and other reformists used that same approach, particularly after the state trials. The LCS expanded political discourse in Britain and increasingly advocated for the next phase in political organization by appealing directly to the court of public opinion – sometimes successfully but more often not. The British Romantics, while in their own way attempting to do the same thing, chose a different approach and a brief examination of their approach is illustrative in the context of the larger political reform movement of the 1790s. Their approach is important because in many respects they became the bridge between the demise of the LCS at the end of eighteenth century,

⁸⁸² Richard Bourke, *Romantic Discourse and Political Modernity*; (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1993), p. 199.

and a resurgence of reform efforts in the first part of the nineteenth century leading to the Reform Act of 1832, as imperfect as that was for the working class.

As the French Revolution continued to radicalize, it was necessary for British Romantics to find some other path to an enlightened society based on the power and perfection of Nature, and by extension the natural rights afforded to all men. By the late 1790s the crackdown on nearly every political reform group in Britain proved to British Romantics that a direct approach aimed at societal change was not feasible. Instead the Romantics began to personalize the discourse. If the model of the French Revolution and the experiences of the LCS proved that the sought-after changes could not happen politically, throughout an entire society all at once, then it would have to happen one person at a time. This was obviously not a conscious and calculated decision made by a united bloc of British Romantic writers and artists. Rather, it was more a matter of a diverse and loosely affiliated group of young, reform-minded intelligentsia finding their own path of least resistance. In the middle part of the 1790s this sort of approach was something that the LCS attempted to leverage in pursuing their political agenda: readings and lecture by Romantic poets and orators were a part of many LCS meetings in 1795 and 1796.⁸⁸³

Romanticism Political Philosophies and the LCS

One of the more visceral expressions of the British Romantic movement was in the art that emerged in the early part of the nineteenth century. While it was not useful to the LCS before its demise, this artistic movement did become identifiable with a continuing political reform movement and the general political awakening of the British working class in the early nineteenth century. This new British Romantic artistic aesthetic

⁸⁸³ Hardy, *Memoirs*, Add'l MS 65153B.

emerged from the rubble of the Neoclassicism that was so closely identified with the French Revolution and the Napoleonic period that followed, and by way of contrast could not have been more different. Artists such as John Constable (1776-1837) exemplified and typified this new aesthetic by producing art that was genre and nature-based. Gone were the highly stylized and realistically portrayed morality plays of Neoclassicism, replaced with the new British Romantic relationship between man and Nature – organic, nurturing, rational in its organization, and imaginative in its possibilities. These traits were elegantly portrayed by Constable in such works as his *Flatford Lock and Mill* from 1812, and *The White Horse* from 1819. And as with their literary brethren, British Romantic artists were attempting to discover and illustrate the metaphorical “missing link” of the Enlightenment, namely its soul.

This metaphor linking the individual to nature is a consistent characteristic of British Romantic art in the early nineteenth century, along with another keystone characteristic, the link to an individual’s imagination. For British Romantics, a truly enlightened individual, and thus the root of a truly enlightened society, could only be a person or social body that effectively integrated all the faculties of the human nature, that combined scientific rationality with an awe of nature, and employed reason and logic in combination with imagination. This philosophical approach also integrated well with the political reform movement that endured after the demise of the LCS. The political education work of the LCS helped to give many working class men agency and voice as political actors, and provided the foundation for the political reform movement leading up to the Reform Act of 1832. As Ernest Bernbaum succinctly states in his *Guide Through the Romantic Movement*, Romantics believed that: “Man was gifted with a

higher reason, called the imagination, which enabled him to see that the good, the true, the beautiful, were not removed to a sphere unattainable to him in this life, but were interwoven with his human existence and earthly environment. It was the highest function of literature and art to portray man and his world in such a way that the presence of the infinite within the finite, of the ideal within the actual, would be revealed in all its beauty.⁸⁸⁴

This was the British Romantic approach for reshaping the Enlightenment in their own image, eschewing their perceived link to the French Revolution, and for reshaping British society during late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As it happens, their approach was also useful for those political reformists who followed the LCS. And while their approach may have placed the British Romantics on the existential fringes of the Enlightenment, it does not constitute a rejection of the Enlightenment, either on the part of the British Romantics or the political reformists. Romantics believed a better individual and society were possible, they just chose a different path for getting there – “Different as these means of seeking happiness were, all rested on the assumption that our universe is rich in ideal blessings and therefore habitable to the better nature of man.”⁸⁸⁵

The British Romantic contribution to the larger British debate over the French Revolution, and their contribution to the British political reform movement in the 1790s and beyond, can only be understood in the context of their contribution to a more British Enlightenment, as in the end they are one and the same. British Romanticists can be seen as positing two important social and political ideas that connect with the LCS and the

⁸⁸⁴ Ernest Bernbaum, *A Guide Through the Romantic Movement* (The Ronald Press Co: New York, 1949), p. 304.

⁸⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

political reform movement in two important ways. First, British Romantic artists believed that development of an individual's imagination was the highest state of intellectual and spiritual attainment, and as such represented the pinnacle of what was possible for an individual's nature. Put into a political context, this dovetailed well with the goals and objectives of the LCS as political educators who sought to raise the political consciousness of the working class, and thereby make them better men.

Extrapolated to the British Romantic's view of an enlightened society, this notion represents the conjoining of the empirical essence of the Enlightenment with the spiritual essence of Romanticism. British Romanticism can be seen as the faith, or system of beliefs, that completes the European Enlightenment. The British Romantic system of beliefs was expressed primarily through their symbolic and emotional literature and their art. Its essential faith (as any religion must have) appeals to and resides in an individual's imagination, and its beliefs can neither be proved nor disproved by anybody other than the individual.⁸⁸⁶ As such, it cannot be scientifically analyzed or verified. This mix of rationality and spirituality became an important message for the political reform movement by suggesting that an individual's natural political rights were bestowed by a higher authority than a government, but that it was through the ongoing mechanism of a government that these rights could flourish or be diminished. One of the LCS's core arguments throughout the 1790s was that these inherent rights were being diminished by the British government at the expense of the working class.

Secondly, this British Romantic belief system might be seen as not wholly incongruous with the core principles of the French Enlightenment primarily because of its appeal to the nature of man. To British Romantics, it was unacceptable to think that the

⁸⁸⁶ Bernbaum, p. 308

apex of the Enlightenment was the French Revolution and the violent chaos that followed. Rather, those who had not reached this ultimate state of the individual corrupted the Enlightenment, and the result was the French Revolution. The British Romantic belief system was thus the missing ingredient of the Enlightenment. Coleridge always maintained that this belief system did not contradict reason, but was simply another avenue to higher truths.⁸⁸⁷ British Romantics believed in the “the evidence of things not seen”⁸⁸⁸ and this became an idea that modern scientists did not deny, as suggested by Albert Einstein:

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom the emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed. The insight into the mystery of life, coupled though it be with fear has also given rise to religion. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms, this feeling is at the center of true religiousness...It is enough for me to contemplate the mystery of conscious life perpetuating itself throughout all eternity, to reflect upon the marvelous structure of the universe we can dimly perceive, and to try humbly to comprehend even an infinitesimal part of the intelligence manifested in Nature.⁸⁸⁹

In the context of the political debate over the French Revolution, and more specifically to the political purposes of the LCS, the British Romantic approach was a counterweight aesthetic belief system to help make sense of the lost promises of the French Revolution, and an emerging industrialism that was turning a centuries-old class structure asunder. Like the French Enlightenment, British Romanticism placed great value on the power of the individual and individual achievement, freedom of thought and

⁸⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 308.

⁸⁸⁸ *Romans*, 1: 20; “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead.”

⁸⁸⁹ Bernbaum, p. 309.

choice, and a strong idealistic sense about what was possible for the future. And it was just this future-centered approach to the questions raised by the debate over the French Revolution that provided a new and necessary perspective to the formation of a new political culture in Britain.

The LCS in Context

There would, however, be more growing pains before the process was completed, and it was just those growing pains that the LCS believed were necessary in order to achieve a future that recognized the political rights of the working class. Unfortunately for the LCS, those growing pains proved formidable and politically challenging to say the least. For at stake was nothing less than the political struggle between an older rural, but well entrenched, landed political order and the rise of a newer urban, industrializing order that was quickly and fundamentally challenging long-held assumptions and beliefs about what sort of men ought to have political agency and who should be allowed to conduct themselves as political actors.⁸⁹⁰

The debate in Britain over the French Revolution, a central element of the way in which the LCS conducted its affairs in the 1790s, and its larger implications for the political reform movement in the context of an expanding British Empire over both the short and long term is, in many respects, as complex and fluid as the French Revolution itself. Historians continue to struggle when attempting to categorize and homogenize this period in Britain as much as they do when attempting to ascertain definitively the causal criteria of the French Revolution. One might argue that, by extension, the French Revolution was instrumental in creating the expansion of British political and economic power in the nineteenth century. In this context, the LCS contributed to the evolution of,

⁸⁹⁰ Cone, p. 224.

as historian George Woodcock suggests, "...a more articulate and more sharply focused kind of radicalism than that which had existed before by changing in British minds the meaning of the word 'revolution', which was already such a familiar term – and concept – in eighteenth century England."⁸⁹¹ And that reorientation of the political culture in Britain was among the most lasting impacts of the London Corresponding Society.

With respect to political participation, the French Revolution debate, combined with the activities of the LCS and many other reformist groups, revived a waning reformist movement that had been losing steam in the wake of the American Revolution and the political, social, and economic stability that followed it in Britain. The reform movement had been exiled to the outskirts of political relevance, and many would-be activists longed for the glory days of 1688. In the summer of 1789 that all changed and the reform movement once again found itself invested with political and human capital. And while that capital was temporarily stunted at the end of the eighteenth century by the political ascension of British conservatism, it nonetheless sunk its roots deep enough into British political consciousness to alter the geography of British political participation, thanks in part to the educational outreach of the LCS. The LCS also contributed to the changing rhetoric of politics in Britain, and how that change informed British political culture henceforth, by providing some political agency to social and economic classes who previously had little. The language and rhetoric of the French Revolution, and especially the ways in which the LCS translated them to suit British political sensibilities, can be seen as an important part of the establishment of an enduring British political reform movement, the principal legacy of the LCS.

⁸⁹¹ George Woodcock, *The Meaning of Revolution in Britain 1770 – 1800*; from: Ceri Crossley & Ian Small, ed., *The French Revolution and British Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 1.

Nevertheless, the LCS was left picking up the pieces of the reform movement as best they could in the wake of the war with France, the Twin Acts legislation, and the subsequent difficulty of continuing the movement when working class men were fearful of participating in the years 1796 and 1797. As a consequence the leadership and the actions of the LCS grew more radical, particularly relative to the mood of the nation, and that did not bode well for any sort of widespread revival of the LCS or the political reform movement as the 1790s waned. The prospects waned for the LCS to affect some material political reform before the decade ended, and they did not reach their goals and objectives before being legislated out of existence, along with every other political reform group, in 1799. However what they failed to achieve in the short term during the eighteenth century, others would accomplish in the long term as the nineteenth century progressed, even if those accomplishments were not under the banner of the London Corresponding Society.

In thought and aspiration, the accomplishments of the LCS were perhaps more consequential than Thomas Hardy, or Maurice Margarot, or John Thelwall, or Francis Place, or the many other LCS leaders and members could have hoped for. Things that were only imagined in the eighteenth century were broadly accepted as part of the political fabric in the nineteenth century. Issues such as "...the deep-seated concern for social justice, civic and legal equality, full religious toleration, the continuing insistence on human rights, the right of association, public meeting and free speech, national self-determination, the freedom of trade unions from state regulation or legal repression, the solidarity of the working class in industrial disputes and across national frontiers, the right to protest and participate, female emancipation and the right to strike" were all a

legacy of the LCS and the wider political reform movement of the 1790s as John Thelwall had noted in 1812.⁸⁹²

Thomas Hardy, the shoemaker, and son of a shoemaker, who founded the LCS in 1792, began writing his memoirs in 1815 upon his retirement and finished them just before he died in 1832. The first printing of his memoir was completed just days before he died, so Hardy had the satisfaction of knowing that, however received, his life's passion and work would become a permanent part of the political history of Britain. The memoir sold well, if not spectacularly, but it sold especially well amongst the working class men that Hardy had long sought to educate and awaken of their political rights. Men who in 1792 had some scant sense of their political rights as citizens of Britain, but whose sons and grandsons would live to see those rights come to fruition as the nineteenth century progressed. This would have undoubtedly satisfied Hardy, who in the end just wanted working class men to be politically educated. He and the LCS accomplished that much, at least, and the rise and codification of British popular politics as a lasting and permanent part of British politics from Hardy's time forward stands as a testament to their efforts:

“...Therefore our honest aim was to have a well regulated and orderly society formed, for the purposes of dispelling the ignorance, and prejudice, as far as possible, and to instill into their minds by means of the printing press, in a legal and constitutional way, a sense of their rights as freemen, and of their duty to themselves, and their posterity as good

⁸⁹² BL, Add. MSS. 27818, fo. 12.

citizens, and hereditary guardians of the liberties transmitted to them by their forefathers.”⁸⁹³

⁸⁹³ Hardy, *Memoirs*, Add'l MS 65153B.

EPILOGUE

THE LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY

A Short Story by Kevin Murphy

It rains like a final sadness, a bereavement. That is apt. It is late. All is quiet. The rain slaps and cracks in the yard below. I sit by the window with the candle, the room discovered and lost as the flame struggles. I watch the rain fill the darkness outside, and in the glass my reflection is a grey shadow where it rains hardest and clearest. Next to my shape, the candle glows in the glass and dissolves the night.

She shifts in her sleep. I look around at the room. Tonight is Thursday night. That is the night when the General Committee meets, and when Ivan, the delegate from our division, goes up to Charing Cross to the house where they rent a room for the purpose. Those meetings last well into the night, as they have so much to discuss. At our divisional meeting last night, we asked him to take a motion from our division to the General Committee to alter the Constitution of the Society. That is how we are organized. To remain within the law, we are gathered in divisions, supposedly of no more than thirty men (though ours has nearly forty) and each division sends a delegate to the Committee. Ivan attends to his Committee duties assiduously.

These are difficult times for us. We have survived these five years, but now, I fear, our Society is waning. The government moves against us with great determination, and since they broke up our public meeting at St. Pancras, we have seen many leave us in fear. That, and the debts... we are at a low ebb. Worse is to come.

Somewhere a clock chimes the quarter. I can scarcely remember how it felt at first, so much has happened. When we were new, the London Corresponding Society was like a

pod bursting, scattering new ideas and thoughts in our minds. We are ordinary men, mostly, and what Mr. Hardy started may be but the latest of these societies for freedom and liberty, but it was the first where we, those common men to be granted the basic liberty we seek, have had the means to learn about our rights and express our desire for them. It was the revolution in France, I suppose, that helped bring it about, and the centenary of 1688, and the American war a few years before. All these things have put new thoughts in the heads of men, who have wondered at the evil and infamy that rots this country. We demanded a simple thing: the right of every man of twenty one years or more to elect representatives to an annual parliament.

I sit here in the lemon light of the candle and try to see my former self. I am a clock maker, though these days my work is infrequent because of my involvement with the Society, and I live off my wits. My father was also a clock maker, and I was apprenticed to him at thirteen, before which I had received a small education. I learned to read, and write, and had memorized passages from the Bible. My parents died one after the other when I was about sixteen, and I had to find myself a place with another clock maker with a shop in the Borough. I lodged in the house of Mr. Challis, a cabinet maker and a friend of my father, a successful man with a library of books that he encouraged me to read. Later, he was an early member of the Society, and it was by his nomination that I also became a member. The hours I spent in his library! It was there that I read Mr. Paine's 'Right of Man', slowly and painfully, and where Mr. Challis talked to me of things that were like hidden stars to me: ideas and principles glowing in their beauty, but of which I had been entirely ignorant. Together, we read pamphlets and

books, he explaining things to me as we went along. I read of ancient Greece and Rome, the essays of Hume, Adam Smith and Locke, of algebra and geometry. He had been acquainted with a gentleman who was a member of the Society for Constitutional Information, an ally and model for the Corresponding Society, but made up of those already enfranchised.

We are called a Corresponding Society after the American Committees of Correspondence, established in rejection of British government in the colonies, but we do indeed correspond with other societies throughout this country who are joined with us in our quest for justice and liberty. We must style ourselves as ‘corresponders’, for to form ourselves in one body with our brothers would be treason in the eyes of the government. The Society was formed when Thomas Hardy, a successful shoemaker and our founder, met with eight other men in January of 1792. By the middle of the year, they were so many that they had to organize in divisions. When I joined, in September, there were hundreds of us. I had never guessed that so many might be taken by such passion for an idea. I attended the meetings, and the Sunday readings and debates, and week by week my mind seemed to snap yet another chain holding it to the things I had known and believed to be the only truths. I breathed the London air as if for the first time. I saw the city as a new place, and mine to fathom. I wandered that winter, in the brilliant icy days of December and January, deep in thought, with an almost unbearable feeling of excitement at our potential — my potential! — in a world where all might have a say in how we are governed and by whom. When at my work, I could barely still my fingers as they held the tiny mechanisms that made the clocks work, my mind racing with ideas. I was transformed.

The government, always trying to squash opposition to its tyranny, attempted to punish us. At a public meeting in October of 1793, Mr. Maurice Margarot and Mr. Joseph Gerrald had been appointed as our representatives to a convention of those seeking reform in Edinburgh. When they arrived, they were arrested, and subsequently transported to New South Wales. We were not daunted, but worse was to come. We met outside again, at Chalk Farm, in April of 1794, to propose another convention of representatives from all of the reform societies in Great Britain. But the government were poised to strike. After the meeting, Hardy and twelve other men were arrested and accused of high treason. It was a terrible blow, but we were victorious: all were acquitted later that year.

By now, I had become engrossed in the life and work of the Society. As our membership began to grow again after the setbacks of 1794, I became a tithing man, responsible for keeping my ten men in attendance at meetings, and informing them of things they needed to know and do. I then became the secretary for our division here in Southwark, responsible for collecting dues, paying the rent for the meeting room in the Hogshead, writing out the motions and so on. I thrived. I was a new man, and to be honest, I almost felt that the journey to emancipation was too good to end in arrival. I was elected sub-delegate, to stand in for the delegate when he could not attend the general committee. I had wanted to be the delegate, but Ivan had beaten me in the election.

We are all together in this, our struggle for our natural rights. But some struggle more or less, and some more for the cause and less for themselves, and vice versa. I was good at persuading people, I found. I have always been good at talking to my fellow man, and

making them see my point of view. Others say little to us all together, but much in private, leaning to their brother's ear, or across the table as others speak. Ivan is also a persuasive man. But there are some things that he doesn't know. Or perhaps just one thing.

Did I mention that I was married? No. Well, I was married not long after my parents died, and what with my father's debts and a child already on its way (yes, I have children, too — five, now, but there will be no more) — well, it's no wonder that Mr. Challis took pity on us and gave us lodgings. My poor, dumb wife. She doesn't see me, the changed, liberated man that I am now. She sees nothing but the walls that surround her, and her children, and gossip with the other women. She is best where she is. It's little wonder, then, that I strayed.

The other woman was — and is, of course — married, and I would not have thought of doing such a thing before then. I am, after all, from simple, God-fearing stock; I am a respecter of rules. But now I would think of such a thing, because I have learned the habit of thought, and of weighing my wellbeing against that of the world and the way things are. More than that — I can see myself in the world. I can see myself as an individual, a single human creature amongst millions, but within this single human being is a world of emotion, appetite, desire and a yearning for a story of my own, not that of every other artisan clockmaker in London, in England, in the world. I want to be of my fellows and utterly different from every last one of them. I yearn for what I cannot have and hope that I might have some of it. I yearn for wonder and difference, and astonishment at what I can do, and never knowing what might happen.

She said it to me, I think, breathed in my ear in a moment of passion, perhaps — what is all this liberty for, if not to do as one wished, to be happy? Yes, I thought at that moment, that has been the thing hovering at the edge of my consciousness on those long solitary walks in my newly acquired city, shadowing my solitary, self-observing joy. What was it for? Oh, the very understanding of what was my natural right was in itself a kind of liberty. But how are we all to be happy? And how are we to be happy, all at the same time?

I have found a way to be happy. It was a lush, delicious awakening, a flood of sensations and feelings I never knew existed. I looked out for her, followed her, gazed upon her in the gardens, bribed servants to tell me where she might be going. Slowly, in stages, with looks and smiles, accidental meetings, polite conversations taut with mutual longing, distracted dreamy days at the work bench, rapt waiting near her house, missing Society meetings... We made our acquaintance into a friendship, though secret. Then... well, a way was found, and things took their course.

At the same time, I was busy with the Society, plagued as we were with spies and saboteurs by then. These individuals found their way into our midst, and sent back their reports to their masters in the government. They knew all about us and our leaders. They continued their efforts to disrupt and destroy us. During 1795, we held large public meetings in St. George's Fields and in St Pancras. On both occasions, the police and the military were present in force. Then, a few days after the St Pancras meeting, the window of the King's carriage was broken on the way to Parliament, and they blamed us. Immediately, two acts of Parliament were passed despite our protests. The Treason and the Sedition acts constrained our ability to hold meetings and to organize ourselves. Our

brothers in the other societies were suffering as well. In February of 1796, we sent John Binns and John Gale Jones to other cities in England to try and keep alive the spirit of reform, but they were arrested in Birmingham.

My private world grew richer and more exciting every day. She is amazing, my secret woman. Outwardly modest and mild, she is deeply passionate, possessed of a towering spirit, beneath which I am like a child. I cannot but obey her. She holds me, a willing prisoner of her charm. When she bids me come to her, I do so, desperately, willingly. I can only think about how we might live, were she free of her husband. I would serve her for eternity. She knows this. But that is an idle, flimsy dream. That I might be able to give her what she deserves... With my pitiful income, it is as unlikely as the notion that I could ever purchase enough houses and tenements to win me the franchise that my brothers and I yearn for.

The past year has been the start of the end, I fear. Our 'Moral and Political Magazine' has simply lost us more money. Moreover, many members, myself included, felt that the Society's zeal had diminished. We argued with our brothers about becoming more forthright and active in pursuit of the reform we sought. We eventually persuaded the cautious ones to hold a meeting in the summer of 1797, but the magistrates read the Riot Act, and all left in fear of their lives — the punishment for failing to disperse.

I and others were tired of improvement. We reasoned that we could improve forever, but it would not be worth it were we forever to be without the power to determine our future. It was time to take what we demanded, rather than wait for it to be given. In Ireland, in 1797, the United Irishmen bravely fought for their rights. The United

Englishmen were to do the same, and many of us secretly joined them while remaining in the London Corresponding Society, for better or worse.

These past weeks... arrests and more arrests. We can do nothing. I am weary of all of this. I have talked and debated and argued. Endless talk, endless meetings, endless compromise, because there is always another opinion, another point of view and another way of looking at things. As many as there are brothers. Messy debate, botched consensus. But we are still without what we set out to get. We — the great body of the people — cannot vote, and it seems as though we never shall. I am free in my head, only. And if we did achieve what we want? How should we know that it was worth it? What time would this great mechanism tell, that which we wish to create? And would it always tell the same time, truly?

The candle is nearly spent. The room is full of shadows and phantoms. The storm continues. Ivan will be leaving the meeting, trudging through the wet, windy streets, crossing over the river as the rain speckles the frothing current below, and along through the alleys and passages to his house. He will come wearily into his hall, where the one candle left for him is guttering. He will extinguish it, and he will slowly, blindly climb the stairs and enter the darkened room where his wife sleeps. As he stands there, exhausted, he will see, by the grey lightness from the window, the bottle that rests where I've left it, nearly empty.

©Kevin Murphy 2003

FIRST PUBLISHED ONLINE BY PULP.NET at
<http://www.pulp.net/fiction/stories/07/the-londoncorresponding-society.html>

This file is for personal reading only. No element of this story may be reproduced, resold or retransmitted in any way without the permission of the author.

APPENDIX A

1. London Corresponding Society Chronology

1792

January	Formation of the LCS
February 16	Publication of Part 2 of the <i>Rights of Man</i> by Thomas Paine
April 2	First Address of the LCS
April 11	Formation of the Society of the Friends of the People
April 20	France declares war on Austria
May 21	Royal Proclamation against seditious writings
May 24	LCS publishes <i>Address to the Nation at Large</i>
June 24	Prussia declares war on France
August 10	Louis XVI imprisoned; French monarchy suspended
September 2-3	September Massacres in France
September 20	Formation of the French National Convention
September 21	French Republic declared
November 1	LCS Address to the French National Convention delivered
November 20	Formation of the Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers, founded by John Reeves
November 29	Publication and distribution of <i>Address of the London Corresponding Society, to the other Societies of Great Britain, United for the Obtaining of a Reform in Parliament</i>
December 1	Rumors in London of insurrectionary plans
December 4	LCS composes and publishes <i>Letter to the Right Hon. Henry Dundas</i>
December 5	Arrest of William Carter, a bill-sticker for LCS documents
December 11-13	Reform convention of the Scottish Friends of the People in Edinburgh

1793

January 7	William Carter convicted of sedition
January 21	Louis XVI executed
February 1	France declares war on Britain
March 13	LCS Division 12 secedes to form the Society of British Citizens
April 30	Opening of the second Scottish Convention
May 2-6	Reform petitions from LCS presented to Parliament
June 2	Girondins overthrown in France
July	Committee of Public Safety established in France and Reign of Terror commences
July 8	LCS general meeting at the Crown and Anchor Tavern, Strand. At the meeting, their next major address – <i>Address to the</i>

- Nation, from the London Corresponding Society, On the Subject of a thorough Parliamentary Reform* – is composed.
- August 30-31 Thomas Muir convicted of sedition in Edinburgh; sentenced to fourteen years transportation to Botany Bay
- September 2 LCS General Meeting results in *Address to the King*
- Sept 12-13 Thomas Palmer convicted of sedition in Edinburgh; sentenced to seven years transportation to Botany Bay
- October 16 Marie Antoinette executed
- October 24 LCS outdoor meeting held to elect delegates to the reform convention in Edinburgh; Several LCS members are arrested
- October 29 The Edinburgh reform convention begins
- November 7 Maurice Margarot and Joseph Gerrald, arrive at the convention as LCS delegates
- November 19 After suspending the convention to allow more delegates to arrive, the Edinburgh reform convention reconvenes
- December 5 Maurice Margarot, Joseph Gerrald, and William Skirving, all LCS members, are arrested in Edinburgh
- December 6 Edinburgh reform convention disbanded by the authorities

1794

- January 6-7 LCS member William Skirving convicted of sedition in Edinburgh for his role in the reform convention; sentenced to fourteen years' transportation to Botany Bay
- January 13-14 LCS member Maurice Margarot suffers same fate as Skirving.
- January 20 LCS general meeting at the Globe Tavern – *Address to the People* composed
- January 21 Parliament opens
- January 27 Rumors swirl of the landing of Hessian troops.
- January 30 LCS Secret Committee established as contingency against government intervention
- February LCS begins month-long letter campaign to other reform societies proposing a second reform convention
- February 24 Daniel Isaac Eaton, author and publisher, acquitted of sedition for publishing a speech by John Thelwall
- March 13 LCS member Joseph Gerrald convicted of sedition in Edinburgh for his role in the reform convention; sentenced to fourteen years' transportation to Botany Bay
- April 2 Manchester LCS chapter members acquitted of alleged attempt to subvert the constitution and collaborate with the French on an invasion plan
- April 4 The LCS and the Society for Constitutional Information (SCI) hold a conference
- April 7 Several reform meetings held in Sheffield
- April 9 LCS and SCI agree to call a convention of reformers

- May 2 Margarot, Fyshe, Muir, and Skirving transported to Botany Bay
 May 12 Thomas Hardy and Daniel Adams arrested. George III distributes address warning against sedition
 May 13 John Thelwall arrested
 May 14-23 Widespread arrests of reformers in an effort to curtail movement; those arrested included John Horne Tooke, John Lovett, Thomas Spence, and John Ashley
 May 15-16 Insurrectionary plans of Robert Watt discovered in Scotland
 May 16 Report of the House of Commons Committee of Secrecy presented to parliament
 May 17 Suspension of habeas corpus passed by the House of Commons
 May 22 Suspension of habeas corpus passed by the House of Lords
 May 22 LCS composes and distributes *Account of the Seizure of Citizen Thomas Hardy*
 May 23 Suspension of habeas corpus extended until February 1, 1795
 June 11 Thomas Hardy's house attacked by crowd of unemployed dock workers hired by the government
 July 11 Duke of Portland Whigs join the Pitt government
 July 27-28 Robespierre arrested and executed in France
 August 15-22 Riots in London over hardships caused by war with France
 August 27 Lydia Hardy dies in wake Hardy house attack
 September 3-6 Reformists Robert Watt and David Downie convicted of treason in Scotland and are sentenced to death
 Sep 27-28 Arrests of suspects in Pop-Gun Plot
 October 6-21 Indictments prepared against Hardy and others for Treason Trials
 October 15 Robert Watt executed for treason in Scotland
 October 25 Treason trial of Thomas Hardy commences
 November 4 John Ashley released due to insufficient evidence of treason
 November 5 Thomas Hardy acquitted of treason
 November 16 Treason trial of John Horne Tooke commences
 November 25 John Horne Tooke acquitted of treason
 December 1 Treason trial of John Thelwall commences
 December 5 John Thelwall acquitted of treason
 December 13 First issue of LCS publication *Politician* distributed

1795

- January 3 *Politician* ceases publication.
 January 5 Suspension of habeas corpus extended to July 1, 1795
 March LCS creates and adopts new governing constitution
 March 30 LCS Division 12 secedes and forms London Reforming Society
 April 6 LCS Division 16 secedes and forms Friends of Liberty
 June-July Widespread food rioting in Britain
 June 29 LCS general meeting convened at St. George's Fields; *Addresses to the Nation* and petitions to George III announced

- July 6-14 Crimping (press-gang) riots in London
 July 15 LCS Address to George III delivered to the Duke of Portland
 September 24 LCS Division 27 secedes over issue of religion in LCS constitution
 October 15 Former members of LCS Division 27 form Friends of Religious and Civil Liberty
 October 26 Largest LCS meeting to date held at Copenhagen House
 October 29 Alleged attack on George III on route to opening of parliament
 November 4 Proclamation against seditious activities issued
 November 6 Treasonable Practices Bill introduced to House of Lords
 November 10 Seditious Meetings Bill introduced to House of Commons
 November 12 LCS general meeting at Copenhagen House; Petitions to George III, Lords, and Commons composed
 December 7 LCS general meeting at Marleybone Field
 December 12 LCS adopts new procedures to comply/circumvent the restrictions in the Treasonable Practices and Seditious Meetings Bills
 December 18 Treasonable Practices Bill and the Seditious Meetings Bill – the so called Twin Acts – become law

1796

- January 14 Suspects in the Pop-Gun Plot indicted
 Feb 5-15 John Binns tours Portsmouth as an LCS missionary
 Feb 6 –
 March 2 John Gale Jones tours Rochester, Gravesend, and Maidstone as an LCS missionary
 March 4 Binns and Jones sent to Birmingham to represent LCS
 March 16 Binns and Jones arrested in Birmingham
 March 16 Gerrald dies at Botany Bay
 March 24 Binns and Jones post bail in Birmingham
 May 11-19 Pop-Gun Plot suspects tried and acquitted
 July 1 First issue of the *Moral and Political Magazine* published by the LCS
 August 19 John Thelwall assaulted during a lecture tour in Yarmouth
 December 22 French fleet at Bantry Bay

1797

- February Bank crisis in Britain includes temporary suspension of cash payments by the Bank of England
 February 22 French raid at Wales
 March 30 John Gale Jones tried and convicted of sedition but never sentenced
 April –May Several naval mutinies linked to alleged influence of LCS and other reform societies
 June 1 Final issue of *Moral and Political Magazine* published by LCS
 June 6 Bill preventing the subversion of the military passed
 July 19 Bill preventing the taking of secret oaths passed

- July 22-23 LCS general meeting at St. Pancras announced
- July 29 LCS general meeting declared illegal by government
- July 31 LCS general meeting peaceably dispersed and reformers arrested
- August 2 LCS Division 10 secedes from LCS
- August 15 John Binns tried and acquitted of treason

1798

- January 30 LCS publishes *An Address to the Irish Nation*
- February 28 John Binns and four other Irishmen arrested at Margate and charged with high treason
- April 18-22 Mass arrests of LCS and United Englishmen members
- April 20 Royal denouncement of sedition in parliament
- April 21 Suspension of habeas corpus
- May 21-22 Binns and all others save one tried for high treason and acquitted; Irishman James O'Coigley convicted and sentenced to death
- May 23-26 Irish Rebellion begins
- June 7 James O'Coigley executed
- June 14 LCS publishes *Address to the British Nation*. It will be their last publication
- August 22 French invasion of Ireland
- September 8 French surrender

1799

- January 9 Habeas corpus suspended to May 21
- March 10 Mass arrests of United Irishmen
- March 16 John Binns arrested and detained until 1801
- April 9 Mass arrests of United Englishmen
- May 20 Suspension of habeas corpus extended to March 1800
- July 12 LCS, United Englishmen, United Britons, United Irishmen, and United Scotsmen outlawed by parliament

1800

- November LCS meeting on Kennington Common

Historiography and Research Comments

The story of the London Corresponding Society has gained interest over the past several years. The larger story of the fight for parliamentary reform and the political awakening of the working class in Britain gained historical interest in the decade or so before World War I, as popular political movements spread and the influence of organized labor groups started to gain some political legitimacy. Most historians saw the French Revolution as the triggering mechanism for the political reform movement that the LCS led in Britain in the 1790s. In 1906 Charles Cestre wrote a useful biography of John Thelwall, and followed that with an analysis of the French Revolution's influence on British Romanticism entitled *La Revolution Francaise et Les Poetes Anglais*. In 1909 the British historian W.T. Laprade published his *England and the French Revolution* that placed the LCS and the larger political reform movement as the offspring of the French Revolution. These were followed in quick order by H.W. Meikle's *Scotland and the French Revolution* in 1912, W.P. Hall's *British Radicalism 1791-1797* also in 1912, and G.S. Veitch's *The Genesis of Parliamentary Reform* in 1913. All are useful primers on the period and the political context for British reformist movement as part of the ideological pull of the French Revolution.

In 1918 Philip Anthony Brown's *The French Revolution in English History* was seen as a cogent synthesis of much of the work done on British political reform in the late eighteenth century. As part of some of this renewed interest in the period, Graham Wallace's biography of Francis Place was republished in 1919. And that is where much of the historiography stayed until the late 1950s and 1960s, when a rash of historians started thinking again about the political consciousness of British working class men, led

most famously by E.P Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* first published in 1963. There were others as well, including Lucy Sutherland's *The City and the Opposition to Government 1768-1774* in 1959, George Rude's *Wilkes and Liberty* in 1962, and Eugene Black's *The Association 1769-1793* in 1963. Charles Cone's *The English Jacobins* from 1968 is another good example of the scholarship done in this era in the 1960s. All are serviceable examples of a renewed interest in the drive for political reform in the late eighteenth century, and at least a few of them start to make the case for a much earlier recognizable reform movement prior to the French Revolution.

In the 1970s and 1980s there were a number of books published on the struggle for working class political rights in the era of the LCS, suggesting that historians were renewing their interests in how the working class organized and acted politically. Especially helpful to my research were such books as Albert Goodwin's *The Friends of Liberty*, Peter Clarks' *British Clubs and Societies*, David Worrall's *Radical Culture*, Lucy Werkmeister's *A Newspaper History of England, 1792-1793*, and Gregory Claeys's *The Politics of English Jacobinism – The Writings of John Thelwall*. This is certainly not an exhaustive list by any means of some of the more recent scholarship in this area, but it is nonetheless a good place to start for those wishing to learn more about the LCS and the political reform movement of the 1790s.

In 1983 Mary Thale provided an invaluable service to those interested in not just the era, but in the London Corresponding Society specifically when she published her *Selections From the Papers of the London Corresponding Society 1792-1799*. Up until the publication of her book the LCS had been little written about it, although most who had studied this topic and era knew that there was something important about them. In

the newspapers of the decade, the handbills, various governmental archives, and the like, this little group called the London Corresponding Society always seemed to be mentioned. Thale opened up the archives for those interested in the LCS by aggregating many of their papers, letters, reports, etc., from such sources as the British Library, the Home Office Papers, the Privy Council Papers, the Public Record Office, and the Treasury Solicitor's Papers. The results were illuminating indeed – here, in their own words, were the political ideas, aspirations, and objectives of working class men in the last decade of the eighteenth century. And they were sophisticated ideas, well articulated, and with a nod to historical precedents and constitutional traditions. These were men, mostly, of some political substance, at least in thought, and Thale's aggregation of much of their correspondence allowed historians to engage in a dialogue with them, and to better understand the men who made up the LCS in their own time. Regrettably, Thale's book did not spur a surge of scholarship interested in the LCS, but it did pull the covers back on the nature and character of the men in the LCS and how they navigated the tumultuous times in which they lived.

The next real effort at telling the story of the LCS was admirably made by Michael T. Davis, who in 2002 edited a six volume series entitled *London Corresponding Society 1792 – 1799*. As did Thale, Davis provided a great service to those interested in the LCS by aggregating much of their correspondence. Davis arrayed the volumes in chronological order, providing some order and sense of pace and action to the story of the LCS. Davis aggregated the correspondence from those archive holding the preponderance of LCS materials, most notably the Public Record Office (National Archives), the British Library, Royal Irish Academy, National Library of Ireland,

Nuffield College Oxford, University of London Library, Trinity College Library Dublin, Bodleian Library, Cambridge University Library, and The Johns Hopkins University, many of which I visited during my own research for this dissertation.

To his credit, Davis allows the LCS to tell its own story through the correspondence it left behind, and what a story it is. The collection also provides a valuable narrative of the last decade of the 1790s, providing a unique sense of the political, social, and economic tumult that occurred as the macro historical forces of industrialization, urbanization, and revolutions progressed. While the LCS is at the center of this narrative, scholars and researchers will also benefit from the context in which the LCS correspondence was created, and will glean insights into this period by studying the ways in which the LCS responded to the rapidly changing tenors of the times. Finally, nearly all of the documents in Davis's collection were culled from manuscript sources and reproduced in facsimile, making this an invaluable repository of primary source materials.

In my own research I leaned heavily on the work of Thale and Davis as a way to familiarize myself with the history and proceedings of the LCS, and as a guide from which to construct a research plan that included visits to the historical archives that contained the materials from which Thale and Davis created their edited works. For my purposes, those archives were primarily located at the British Library and the National Archives, along with a couple of provincial archives in Sheffield, Norwich, and Manchester, visited either in person or accessed online.

The bulk of my research was done at the British Library, and specifically in the Francis Place Collection, who thankfully saved and meticulously catalogued many of the documents created by the LCS and its members during his long association with the

Society. Place amassed several volumes (now in folders and folios) of LCS correspondence in its original forms and in some cases added minor but helpful editorial notes as to the context of a particular document. In addition to the Place Collection there are several other manuscript collections of a more miscellaneous nature from the estates of Hardy, Margarot, and several others that provided great value. Additionally, the National Archives/Public Record Office proved a good source for parliamentary proceedings, state trial minutes, and various reports on the activities of the LCS to and from the Home Office.

Finally, my work on the London Corresponding Society has led to the realization that there is much more work for historians to do in this area of the dynamics of British political participation, rhetoric, and culture at the end of the eighteenth century. The last decade of that century is rich with the macro historical trends of the industrialization, urbanization, the French Revolution, European wars and geo-political dynamics, nascent nationalism, the Romantic movement, etc., and the micro trends of working class political consciousness, the plight of the un-enfranchised, literacy and organization amongst the working class, and the, for my own purposes, the fate of many of the British political reformers and radicals who left Britain for America and beyond. What became of them and what did they do when they reached their new homes? There is much to be done indeed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Manuscripts

Archives Nationales, Paris

The Correspondence of the Revolution Society in London with the National Assembly and with various Societies of the Friends of Liberty in France and England, 1792.

Stanhope, Lord. *Letter to Monsieur Treilhard, President, National Assembly.* Paris, 1792.

The British Library, London

Abstract of the History and Proceedings of the Revolution Society in London.

London, 1789.

Answer of the Friends of Reform in Sheffield, summoned to take into Consideration the Letter of the London Corresponding Society, on the Subject of a Proposed Meeting, to petition the King to dismiss his Ministers, &c., signed T. Needham, chairman, and W. Camage, secretary. April 4, 1797

Anti-Jacobin Review. 1810.

Duncombe, Thomas. Chartist Petition. May 2, 1842.

Gerrald, Joseph. Address of the British Convention Assembled at Edinburg November 19, 1793 to the People of Great Britain.

Hardy, Thomas. Memoir of Thomas Hardy, Founder of, and Secretary to, The London Corresponding Society, for Diffusing Useful Political Knowledge Among the People of Great Britain & Ireland, and for Promoting Parliamentary Reform,

From its Establishment, in Jan. 1792, Until His Arrest, on a False Charge of High Treason, on the 12th of May, 1794. 1832.

Hardy, Thomas. Memoir of Thomas Hardy (Draft). Additional Manuscript 65153B.

Place, Francis. Papers. *The British Library*, Additional Manuscripts.

27808: Notes on the London Corresponding Society (LCS).

27809: On Political Societies, 1792-1832.

27811: Letter Book of the LCS, October 27, 1791 to March 23, 1793.

27812: Minute and Letter Book of the LCS, April 2, 1792 to January 2, 1794.

27813: Minute and Letter Book of the LCS, April 23, 1795 to September 10, 1795.

27814: Sketch of the History of the LCS, Thomas Hardy.

27815: Correspondence of the LCS, July 2, 1795 to November 30, 1797.

27816: Public Prosecutions of the LCS, 1794, 1794, and 1798.

27817: A Narrative of the Proceedings at the General Meeting of the London Corresponding Society, Held on Monday, July 31, 1797, in a Field near the Veterinary College, St. Pancras, in the County of Middlesex, Citizen Thomas Stuckey, President. 1797.

27818: Draft Letters of Thomas Hardy, 1791 to 1795.

35142: Draft Autobiography of Francis Place.

35143: Draft Autobiography of Francis Place.

35154: Draft Autobiography of Francis Place.

Newberry Library, Chicago, IL.

Thelwall, John. The Natural and Constitutional Right of Britons to Annual Parliaments, Universal Suffrage and the Freedom of Popular Association. London, 1795.

Millennium Library, Norwich UK.

The Declaration and Constitution of the Norwich Patriotic Society established the twentieth of April 1795 to obtain a reform in the House of Commons of Parliament.

Millennium Library, Norwich, Heritage Center Special Collections, Colman Collection, 25E.

Public Record Office/National Archives, Kew, UK.

Treasury Solicitor's Papers.

TS11/631/3507.

TS11/952/3496(ii): Society for Constitutional Information Papers. Norwich. Thelwall.

TS/11/955/3499: Spy Reports on Thelwall's Lectures, January to May, 1794.

TS11/955/3500: Summons of Radical Convention, 1794.

TS11/957/3502: Examination of Radicals Before the Privy Council, 1794.

TS11/961/3507: Minute Book of the Society for Constitutional Information, March 14 1783 to October 7, 1791.

TS11/962/3508: Minute Bok of the Society for Constitutional Information, December 1791 to May 1794.

TS11/1965/3510A: 1794.

Home Office Papers.

HO 42/41: June, 1797.

HO 102: Scotland, January 1792 to December 1794.

Privy Council Papers

PC 1/23/A38: Powell's Reports on the LCS and Executive and General Committees,
July 1795 – December 1796.

Sheffield Central Library, Sheffield, UK.

Proceedings of the Public Meeting held at Sheffield in the open air, on 7 April, 1794.

April 7, 1794.

William Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Mi.

Shelbourne, Lord William Petty. The Shelbourne Papers, 1783.

Printed Sources

Adams, Samuel. *Samuel Adams to Arthur Lee*. The Writings of Samuel Adams, 1771.

Annual Register, 1798.

Belsham, W. Examination of an Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs. London, 1792.

Burke, Edmund. Reflections on the Revolution in France. 1790.

The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke. Boston, 1889.

The Correspondence of Edmund Burke. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge,
1958 – 1970.

Cobbett, William (ed). Parliamentary History of England. 1812.

First Report from the Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons on Seditious
Practices. May 16, 1794.

Second Report from the Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons on
Seditious Practices. June 6, 1794.

Duke of Buckingham and Chandos. Memoirs of the Court and Cabinets of George III.
London, 1853.

Duke of Richmond. A Letter From His Grace the Duke of Richmond to Lieutenant
Colonel Sharman. London, 1783.

Edinburgh Gazetteer. December 3, 1793.

Gorman, Frank O. *Pitt and the Tory Reaction to the French Revolution 1789 – 1815
(Problems in Focus).* Macmillan Education Ltd. London, 1989.

Hardy, Thomas. Memoir of Thomas Hardy. London, 1832.

Hillsborough, Earl of. A Speech by the Earl of Hillsborough to the House of Commons.
May 18, 1770.

History of the Two Acts. London, 1796.

Holcroft, Thomas. A Narrative of Facts relating to a Prosecution for High Treason, etc.
London, 1795.

Letter to the Rt. Honourable William Windham on the Intemperance and Dangerous
Tendency of his Public Conduct. London, 1795.

House of Commons. January 4, 1649.

Howell, T. B. and T. J. A Complete Collection of State Trials. London, 1813-1820.

Instructions of the L.C.S. to John Gale Jones, deputed to visit the Societies of
Birmingham, etc., from Report of the Secret Committee of the House of Commons.

London, 1799.

Jones, John Gale. Sketch of a Political Tour through Rochester, Chatham, Maidstone,
Gravesend, etc. London, 1796.

Keith, Sir William. A Collection of Papers and Other Tracts Written Occasionally on

Various Subjects, To Which is Prefixed, by Way of a Preface, an Essay on the Nature of Publick Spirit. London, 1740.

London Corresponding Society Moral and Political Magazine. April and May, 1797

Mallet, J. Du Pan. Considerations sur la nature de la Revolution de France, et sur causes qui en prolongent la duree. London, 1793.

Manchester Herald. April 28, 1792.

Morning Chronicle. November 5, 1793, October 20, 1794.

Morning Post. November 4, 1793; December 17, 1793.

Oracle. December 16, 1793.

Sun. October 12, 1795, November 13; 1795.

Paine, Thomas. Letter of Thomas Paine, to the People of France. London, 1792.

Place, Francis. The Autobiography of Francis Place. 1832.

Price, Richard. Discourse on the Love of Our Country. London, 1789.

Priestly, Joseph. The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestly. 1791.

Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity, 1777.

The Argus or General Observer of the Moral, Political, and Commercial World.

London, 1796

The Moral and Political Magazine of the London Corresponding Society, Volume the

First. London, July 1, 1796.

The Times of London. January 8, 1785 and May 9, 1798.

Rochefoucauld, Francois. *A Frenchman's Year in Suffolk.* 1785.

Stuart, Charles. Letter to Lord Dundas. October 27, 1793.

Letter to Home Office. October 28, 1793.

Thelwall, John. An Appeal to Popular Opinion against Kidnapping and Murder, including a Narrative of the late atrocious Proceedings at Yardmouth. London, 1796.
Prospectus of a Course of Lectures, in strict conformity with Mr. Pitt's Convention Act. London, 1796.

Tooke, John Horne. Diversions of Purley. W. Tegg and Company. 1857.

Walker, T. A Review of some of the political events which have occurred in Manchester during the last five years. London, 1794.

Wyvill, Christopher. *Letter to John Cartwright.* Political Papers. York, 1804.

Secondary Sources

Aberdeen Magazine. King's College, University of Aberdeen. Aberdeen, UK, 1976.

Ben-Israel, Hedva. English Historians on the French Revolution. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, 1968.

Bernbaum, Ernest. A Guide Through the Romantic Movement. The Ronald Press Co., New York, 1949.

Bonwick, Colin. English Radicals and the American Revolution. University of North Carolina Press. Chapel Hill, NC., 1977.

Bourke, Richard. Romantic Discourse and Political Modernity. St. Martin's Press. New York, 1993.

Brewster, Glen. From Albion to Frankenstein's Creature: The Disintegration of the Social Body in Blake and Shelley. From: Romantic Generations.: edited by: Ghislaine McDayter, Guinn Batten, and Barry Milligan. Bucknell University

- Press. Lewisburg, 2001.
- Brown, Richard D. Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts – The Boston Committee of Correspondence and the Towns, 1772-1774. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Ma., 1970.
- Cestre, Charles. John Thelwall: A pioneer of democracy in England. C. Scribner's Sons. London, 1906.
- Clark, Peter. British Clubs and Societies 1500-1800: The Origins of an Associational World. Oxford University Press. Oxford, 2001.
- Cone, Carl B. The English Jacobins – Reformers in Late Eighteenth Century England. Charles Scribner's Sons. New York, 1968.
- Davis, Michael T. (ed). London Corresponding Society 1792-1799. Pickering & Chatto. London, 2002.
- Unrespectable Radicals: Popular Politics in the Age of Reform. Ashgate Publishing. Aldershot, England, 2008.
- Derry, John W. English Politics and the American Revolution. St. Martin's Press. New York, 1976.
- Dickinson, H. T. Britain and the French Revolution 1789-1815. Macmillan Education Ltd. London, 1989.
- Donoghue, Bernard. British Politics and the American Revolution – The Path to War, 1773 – 1775. Macmillan & Co. Ltd. London, 1964.
- Dozier, Robert E. For King, Constitution, and Country – The English Loyalists and the French Revolution. University Press of Kentucky. Lexington, 1983.
- Fruchtman, Jack Jr. *Two Doubting Thomases: The British Progressive Enlightenment*

- After the French Revolution.* Macmillan Press Ltd. London, 2000.
- Eagleton, Terry. The Function of Criticism. Verso. London, 1984.
- Emden, C.S. The People and the Constitution. Oxford University Press. Oxford, 1962.
- Gilbert. A.D. Religion and Society in Industrial England 1770 – 1970. Longman Publishing. London, 1976.
- Gill, Conrad. The Naval Mutinies of 1797. Manchester University Press. Manchester, 1913.
- Goodwin, Albert. The Friends of Liberty – The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, 1979.
- Habermas, Jurgen. The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society. MIT Press. Cambridge, 1991.
- Hoagwood, Terrence Allan. Politics, Philosophy, and the Production of Romantic Texts. Northern Illinois University Press. Dekalb, IL., 1996.
- Iagomarsino, David and Wood, Charles T. (eds). The Trial of Charles I. University Press of New England. Hanover, NH, 1989.
- Ihde, Horst. The Heirs of Paine's Democratic Tradition. Berlin, 2005.
- Kaplan, Lawrence S. The American Revolution and a Candid World. Kent State University Press. Kent, OH, 1977.
- Kegan, Paul C. William Godwin: His Friends and Contemporaries. Henry S. King & Co. London, 1876.
- Kelley, Theresa M. Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988.
- Lefebvre, Georges. The French Revolution. Columbia University Press. London, 1962

– 1964.

Lincoln, A. J. L. and McEwen R. L. (eds.). Lord Eldon's Anecdote Book. Stevens and Sons. London, 1960.

Liddle, Willam D. *A Patriot King or None: Lord Bolingbroke and the American Renunciation of George III*. Organization of American Historians. Chicago, 1979.

Murphy, Kevin. *The London Corresponding Society*. First published online by Pulp.Net at: <http://www.pulp.net/fiction/stories/07/the-londoncorresponding-society.html>. 2003.

O'Brien, Conor Cruise. *Nationalism and the French Revolution*. The Permanent Revolution: The French Revolution and its Legacy, 1789-1989. Fontana Press. London, 1988.

O'Gorman, F. The Whig Party and the French Revolution. MacMillan. London, 1967.

Philp, Mark. The French Revolution and British Popular Politics. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, 1991.

Prickett, Stephen. England and the French Revolution. MacMillan Education, Ltd. London, 1989.

Quinalt, R. and Stevenson, J. (eds.). Popular Protest and Public Order. Palgrave MacMillan. London, 1975.

Reich, Jerome R. Friends of the American Revolution. M. E. Sharpe, Inc. Armonk, NY, 1998.

Reid, Loren. Charles James Fox: A Man For the People. University of Missouri Press. Columbia, MO., 1969.

Renouvin, Pierre. Histoire des Relations Internationales. Ediciones AKAL s.a. Paris,

- 1996.
- Renwick, W. L. The Rise of the Romantics: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Jane Austen. Oxford University Press. New York, 1963.
- Riasanovsky, Nicholas V. The Emergence of Romanticism. Oxford University Press. Oxford, 1992.
- Roberts, Clayton. A History of England. Prentice Hall. Upper Saddle River, NJ., 2002.
- Robertson, William Spence. Life of Miranda. The University of North Carolina Press. Chapel Hill, 1929.
- Rose, R. B. *The Priestly Riots of 1791.* Past and Present no. 18. Oxford University Press. Oxford, 1960.
- Rude, George. Wilkes and Liberty: A Social Study. Lawrence and Wishart. London, 1962.
- The Crowd in the French Revolution. Oxford University Press. Oxford, 1959.
- Stanhope, Earl. The Life of Pitt. London, 1861.
- Thale, Mary (ed). Selections From the Papers of the London Corresponding Society. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, 1983.
- The Autobiography of Francis Place. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, 1972.
- Thompson, E. P. The Making of the English Working Class. Vintage Publishing. New York, 1966.
- The Romantics: England in a Revolutionary Age. The New Press. New York, 1997.
- Veitch, George Stead. The Genesis of Parliamentary Reform. Constable & Co., Ltd. Hamden, CT., 1913.
- Wallas, Graham. The Life of Francis Place. Kessinger Publishing, LLC. London, 1898.

Werkmeister, Lucyle. A Newspaper History of England. University of Nebraska Press.
Lincoln, NE., 1967.

Woodcock, George. The Meaning of Revolution in Britain 1770 – 1800. Oxford
University Press. Oxford, 1989.

ABSTRACT**LONDON CALLING: THE LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY AND THE
ASCENSION OF POPULAR POLITICS**

by

FRANK L. PETERSMARK III**May 2015****Advisor:** Dr. Eric H. Ash**Major:** History**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

This proposed dissertation will focus on the short but historically important life of the London Corresponding Society (LCS) in Britain in the last decade of the eighteenth century, from 1792-1799. The intent of such a focus should serve as a way to better understand the spread of political participation in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century and the key role that the London Corresponding Society played in that phenomenon. This dissertation will also suggest and argue that the London Corresponding Society effectively leveraged and even accelerated an existing trend toward widening political participation through the use of a growing mass media, a more politically astute public sphere, and a language of political engagement that was carefully constructed to represent a reconciliation with British constitutional traditions and ideals, rather than any radical break from the past as was the case in France during this period. To that end, this dissertation will attempt to answer the following historical questions:

1. What role did the London Corresponding Society play in the widening of political participation in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century?
2. What approaches, methods, and tactics were utilized by the London Corresponding Society in their quest to achieve their objectives of parliamentary reform and universal manhood suffrage?
3. To what extent did the London Corresponding Society and other such political associations contribute to a widening public sphere in late eighteenth century Europe?
4. To what extent was the London Corresponding Society influenced by the events in America and France in the late eighteenth century, and how did that impact the methods the London Corresponding Society used to achieve their goals and objectives?
5. What is the historical legacy of the London Corresponding Society?

The rise and fall of the LCS, while short in duration, marks another important mile marker in the evolution of British politics, and can and should be used as a prism with which to view the changing nature of political culture in Britain and its empire during this period. Founded primarily by Thomas Hardy, a shoemaker, the LCS began as a group committed to political education, but the LCS quickly evolved into something that was much more politically and publically aggressive, leading to the arrests and deportations of many of its members. The fact the LCS and other such groups were established as the French Revolution radicalized was not lost on British conservatives and authorities, and connections were drawn between what had happened in America beginning in 1776, and

what was happening in France beginning in 1789, and the threat that posed to political, social and economic stability in the British Empire.

The British government watched the development of these “radical” groups closely, including the use of local police officials and spies, and had access to most of the correspondence of the LCS, as we now do. One need not read too far into the correspondence of the LCS without divining their political goals in the Society’s support of the ideas of Thomas Paine, its congratulatory letters to the new Jacobin leaders of France, and its attempts to organize groups in Scotland in preparation for a British convention of radical reformers. All of this resulted in harsh crackdowns by the British government, including the suspension of Habeas Corpus in 1794, and part of the story of the LCS is its ability to persist and survive, at least temporarily, in this politically charged environment. The LCS managed to hold huge rallies in London in 1794 and 1795, and there are some estimates that a rally led by LCS co-founder John Thelwall was attended by 100,000 people. LCS founders Hardy, Thelwall, and others, were arrested and tried for treason and sedition in 1794 and 1795, and the LCS was ultimately put to an untimely death in the 1799 with the passage of the Corresponding Societies Act.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

My first two careers were accidental, although one lasted longer than the other. My first accidental career was related to music, and my second accidental career was in insurance information technology. After struggling financially to afford college my first time around, I dropped out after a high school friend asked me to join him as a roadie for a few bands he had fallen in with. I happily did that until I had saved enough money to return to school. However that led to my second accidental career. After returning to school I took a summer job working for an insurance company in something called a computer room in 1980. In 1981 I married the girl of my dreams and decided I had better stick with the more income generating pursuit, and a thirty plus year marriage and information technology career ensued.

It wasn't until two children and many promotions later that I decided to return to school, this time on purpose. I completed my bachelors, at Madonna University, my Masters at Wayne State University, and now the PhD, also at Wayne State. I did all of this with intent and purpose, in the most non-accidental manner possible. Although I never thought it would be easy, it took longer than I imagined it would, and there were several times along the way that I had some doubts about my ability to complete the process. But complete the process I did, and as a result I'm breaking new personal ground. Where it will lead me remains to be seen, although I'm sure it will involve more history research, writing, and teaching. I look forward to the next chapter – as it turns out it's a good feeling to finish what you've started.