

The radical associations and 'the general will'

'The general will is always good, and can never deceive. By what sign shall we know it?' This question was asked in an essay published by Citizen Lee in 1797, exiled in Philadelphia.¹ The answer given was: 'By the open call of the general and common interest.' Despite the confidence of this answer, Lee and his former associates in London had been searching for political and cultural forms commensurate with the sovereignty of the people since the foundation of the LCS in 1792. Not just a body focused on the extension of the franchise, the LCS participated in a more general enquiry into how best to collect and represent the opinions of the people. The issue was often 'moral' as well as 'political', to use the terms of the magazine the LCS began to publish in 1796. 'Painite democrats', writes Seth Cotlar,

devoted so much time and energy to the production and dissemination of print because they regarded it as the best way to create a world where political ideas and decisions would emerge out of conversations among ordinary citizens and not just filter down from their leaders.²

Paine's *Rights of Man* had celebrated revolutions as 'the subjects of universal conversation'.³ How best to sustain this universal conversation, what forms it should take, were questions asked by the radical societies from the very beginning, when Thomas Hardy set out the terms he thought the LCS should proceed upon.

Mr Hardy's correspondents

Thomas Hardy is now routinely acknowledged as the founder of the LCS and most often mentioned as one of the defendants at the treason trials of 1794, with the 'gentleman radical' Horne Tooke and Thelwall. Of late, Thelwall has started to generate a rich secondary literature, focused

especially on his poetry, the relationship with Coleridge and Wordsworth, and most recently his novel *The Daughter of Adoption*.⁴ These developments followed on from the interest in Thelwall's political ideas and his role as the 'organic' intellectual of the LCS stimulated by E. P. Thompson's essay 'Hunting the Jacobin Fox'.⁵ My final chapter engages with the recent academic work on Thelwall, but Hardy has scarcely ever been thought about as a political agent in the same terms. Instead his place has been as a solid figure with 'a demure cast of character', as his friend Francis Place put it.⁶ Historians of radicalism usually present him as the representative artisan radical, *the political cobbler*. Thompson excepted him from what he called 'the characteristic vice of the English Jacobins – self-dramatization', but in the process only confirmed the idea of Hardy set out in John Binns's picture of him as a man who 'dressed plainly, talked frankly, never at any time assuming airs or making pretensions'.⁷ Binns may be providing an accurate enough description of Hardy, but dressing plainly and talking frankly were themselves forms of self-fashioning that carried with them certain social meanings.

Examining Hardy's role in giving the LCS its early character reveals a more complex figure than accounts of him as a stolid constitutionalist with eyes fixed on the Duke of Richmond's plan allow. Although this is not the place to talk about his later career in any detail, in it he fulfilled a role as the historian and archivist of the LCS; continued to be active in support of the radical MP Sir Francis Burdett; played a key role in setting up a society for London Scots; facilitated the return of several political exiles via the Literary Fund; and wrote regularly to newspapers and magazines under the pseudonym 'Crispin'.⁸ Just after his death, *Memoir of Thomas Hardy, Founder of and Secretary to, the London Corresponding Society* (1832) was published.⁹ Hardy's *Memoir* originated as an institutional history of the LCS begun no later than 1799, the year the society was outlawed. Only after several failed attempts to get it published, offering it at least twice to the journalist John Dyer Collier, in 1802 and 1807, did he transmute it into the posthumous autobiography.¹⁰ Hardy's *Memoir* stands at the end of a sustained effort on his behalf to keep the possibilities of a democratic politics alive. The bundle of pamphlets he donated to the Mitcham Book Society was part of the same attempt: 'I sincerely wish that it may prosper – societies of that kind are calculated to diffuse much knowledge and information to the members who compose it when judiciously conducted.'¹¹ Hardy's later accounts of the earliest weeks of the LCS present it as emerging from precisely the kind of popular discussion and debate he imagined the Mitcham society perpetuating.

The LCS fashioned a place within the 'public conversation' that had been emerging out of the uneasy relationships between newspapers, debating societies, and politics throughout the eighteenth century.¹² By 1790 there was 'a cacophony of open debating societies discussing a medley of topics'.¹³ John Thelwall found his way into the political arena via the Society for Free Debate at Coachmakers' Hall in the 1780s. The occasion for Thelwall's involvement was probably the surge of public interest surrounding the fall of the Fox–North coalition and the fate of the Pitt ministry over 1783–4.¹⁴ An earlier satirical poem on the Society there, dating from 1780, described it as a place where 'our introductory sixpences, like death and stage-coaches, had levelled all distinctions, and jostled wits, lawyers, politicians, and mechanics, into the confusion of the last day'. The last phrase alludes to the millenarian confusion of the Gordon Riots of 1780, occasioned by Lord George Gordon presenting the petition of the Protestant Association to Parliament. Gordon had announced his plans at a meeting at Coachmakers' Hall attended by two thousand people at the end of May 1780. The ferment surrounding Gordon was an important part of the surge in activity in the debating societies. By 1792, its effects were far from dissipated. A mob was rumoured to have been gathering to break Gordon out of Newgate on the evening of the 14 July dinner of 1791. His influence was a palpable if often unwelcome presence in the early years of the LCS until his death.¹⁵

Thomas Hardy arrived in London in 1777. At some unknown point, he became an associate of Lord Gordon's and very likely a member of the Protestant Association. Gordon is an important figure in the early pages of Hardy's *Memoir*, although they distance the shoemaker from the nobleman's 'wild schemes'.¹⁶ In its early months, the LCS blocked attempts by Gordon and his associates to gain influence in the society, although his spectre haunted the LCS even after his death in 1793.¹⁷ Hardy's role in these decisions is not clear from the surviving minutes, but in the *Memoir*, where they are not mentioned, he defended Gordon as 'a much injured man'. This opaquely sympathetic passage implies an establishment conspiracy against Gordon, presenting him as a victim to 'the malice of his persecutors', but declines 'to state who they were'.¹⁸ An earlier draft 'History' of the LCS mentions no trace of any connection between Hardy and Gordon; presumably the memory of 1780 was still too close to risk even mentioning the name in a document designed to justify the LCS as a public body. In both the 'History' and the published *Memoir*, Hardy presents the origins of the society as arising from a culture of informal engagement in public affairs by working men in their leisure hours: 'After

the business of the day was ended they retired as was customary for tradesmen to do to a public house after supper. . . conversation followed condoling with each other on the miserable and wretched state the people were reduced to.¹⁹

Evidence from Hardy's letter book of the period both corroborates and complicates this picture. Written on the back of the first letter in Hardy's surviving correspondence is a draft of LCS rules and resolutions. They register his characteristic sense of the people's ability to shape their own destiny:

Providence has kindly furnished men in every situation with faculties necessary for judging of what concerns them it is somewhat strange that the multitude should suffer a few with no better natural intellects than their own to usurp the important power of governing them without controul.²⁰

Addressed to a cousin back in Scotland, the next letter was written only a few days after the LCS started meeting. Beginning with family matters, including Lydia Hardy's ill health, it uses an everyday metaphor to introduce the politics of the day:

A dish of Chat about politicks Foreign or domestick I relish very well when I have leisure hour or two & will give you my opinions in few words without being asked of the revolution of France [which] at this present moment engrosses conversation.²¹

The French Revolution Hardy describes as 'one of the greatest events that has taken place in the history of the world' and goes on to explain that there is 'a good deal of talk here of society's forming in different parts of the Nation for a reform of parliament'. Some sense of Hardy standing on the edge of a new way of thinking about and doing politics is hinted at by the fact that 'nation' here was originally written as 'kingdom'. Hardy is beginning to conceive of those linked across the hundreds of miles between England and Scotland as 'the people' of a nation and less as the 'subjects' of a kingdom. More specifically, Hardy seems to be edging towards the sense of 'an emerging nation of reader-citizens' that Seth Cotlar sees as central to Paine's legacy.²²

The idea of nation scouted in Hardy's letter may also suggest a people inhabiting something like the homogenous empty time of Benedict Anderson's imagined communities. Anderson's communities are synchronised across distance in space by print, including acts of reading the daily newspaper.²³ Whether literally present to each other to discuss the news of the day in London public houses, as were Hardy and his friends, or

dispersed members of a familial network linked by correspondence, as Hardy was with his cousin, these networks develop a national imaginary facilitated by emergent systems of public communication. Nevertheless, further examination of Hardy's correspondence reveals his idea of time to have been neither homogenous nor empty in the Andersonian sense. Ultimately, Anderson's thesis assumes the steady onward march of nation predicated on a secular modernity, but a messianic religious perspective, not surprising in an associate of Lord Gordon's, fired Hardy's private worldview. At Hardy's trial in 1794, the prosecution – without much explanation – made a great deal of the 'enthusiasm' of his belief that the rights of man would herald universal peace. At one point, he is even linked with the millenarian 'Fifth Monarchy Men' of the previous century. 'In their case', the judge commented in his summing up, 'their treason grew out of their religion.'²⁴ Little obvious in the published documents of the LCS or even those seized by the government seems to warrant such a digression. The spy George Lynam had testified to the exclusion of Gordon's associates, seemingly ignorant of Hardy's association with the nobleman.²⁵ Possibly the link between Hardy and enthusiasm was based on the general assumption that popular opinion operated as a kind of virus, whether religious or not, but the court may also have drawn its own conclusions from the religious complexion of those who testified to Hardy's piety. Most of them were Scots Presbyterians, including the minister James Steven (sometimes Stevens), of the Crown Court chapel, which Hardy attended.²⁶ No doubt an English judge ready to bring up the Fifth Monarchy men in his summing up already had his own negative view of Scots Presbyterians and the 'auld licht'.

From his arrival in London in the 1770s, Hardy had worshipped at Crown Court, near Covent Garden, initially presided over by Rev. William Cruden, the predecessor of Steven.²⁷ Something of the flavour of Cruden's own scriptural politics can be gleaned from the volume of sermons he published after his death:

THERE are no slaves in the house of God. *His yoke is easy; his burden light; and his work truly honourable and glorious.* Much of the allegiance rendered to earthly Sovereigns, is the effect of dread or compulsion, and dictated by the fears of the subjects; and as extorted from them, in many cases, by the tyrannical engines of arbitrary power, they long for an opportunity of breaking off the yoke.²⁸

Brad Jones has recently suggested that this kind of religious questioning of the legitimacy of government formed a trail of gunpowder from the

Protestant Association to the radicalism of the 1790s.²⁹ The Baptist minister William Winterbotham followed this trail to Newgate in 1793.³⁰ Hardy may have started in much the same place to end up in the same prison in 1794. The Protestant petition that sparked the riots of 1780 lists 'Thomas Hardy' next to 'William McMaster', the name of another member of the congregation at Crown Court.³¹

Later in the 1780s, Hardy was involved in controversy about the rights of the congregation at Crown Court chapel. Debates over the right of the congregation to select its minister were just the kind of thing that made English judges suspicious of Scots Presbyterians. Hardy seems to have been a ringleader in the resistance to an attempt to impose a minister on Crown Court after Cruden's death. His draft *Memoir* makes the connection between kirk politics and his later radicalism explicit:

This circumstance is mentioned to show what hand Thomas Hardy had in this, and what a great fire a little spark may kindle: He afterwards was the founder of the London Corresponding Society which threatened destruction to the old & deep rooted corruptions of the Government of the country by a radical reformation of the gross abuses in the government – both these things were begun by him with the purest motives, to do good to his fellow men.³²

In the version published in 1832, instead of this rapid assertion of the connection between religious politics and the LCS, Hardy inserted an anecdote about an unfortunate visit of Lord Gordon to Crown Court at the shoemaker's invitation. The effect within the text is to break the more direct causal relationship between kirk politics and radicalism that the draft proposes, although Gordon's behaviour as described in the anecdote – he stood up and execrated the minister for giving a pre-prepared sermon – scarcely meliorates Anglican stereotypes of Scots Presbyterians.³³

One of those involved in the early tavern discussions about founding the LCS was George Walne, Hardy's brother-in-law, who later discovered *The Englishman's Right* in a cheese shop. In 1791, Walne's name appeared at the end of a pamphlet called *Divine Warrants, Ends, Advantages, and Rules, of the Fellowship Society*. Based at Crown Court, this 'Fellowship Society' aimed at promoting 'prayer, spiritual conversation, &c.', with rules about meeting for discussion very like those of the LCS:

That we shall keep a correspondence with other Christian Societies of the same nature in *England* or *Scotland*, &c. in order that brotherly love may be promoted, and that all may be edified. That we shall endeavor, in our several stations, to have a conversation becoming the *Gospel*; and to use

every mean in our power, to raise up a seed to serve OUR Glorious Lord JESUS CHRIST, THE HEAD AND KING OF HIS CHURCH.³⁴

Within months, Walne was putting this experience of print publicity at the service of the LCS. *Divine Warrants* also anticipates the LCS's desire to make its resolutions and rules open to public inspection, using print to advertise its mission and reassure readers of its credentials. Walne and his associates were drawing on a long history of print organisation within Dissent. In the campaign against restrictions on Dissenting ministers in 1772, for instance, a Baptist minister Daniel Turner wrote to Josiah Thompson to call for 'a perpetual standing committee for correspondence or something of that nature'. His correspondent Thompson proposed a permanent standing committee of twelve ministers in London 'under the Style and Title of ye Corresponding Society'.³⁵

Perhaps the most obvious ways that Protestant Dissent had organised through print in the years immediately prior to the formation of the LCS was in the various campaigns against the Test and Corporation Acts.³⁶ Hardy seems to have been immersed in this literature. In an 1803 letter to John Evans of Islington, author of *A Sketch of all the Denominations of the Christian World* (1808), he recommended a tract written by David Bogue, but published anonymously.³⁷ Scholars now best know Bogue as an evangelical Independent minister, who set up an academy in Gosport, near Portsmouth, in 1777. He played an important part in the formation of the *Evangelical Magazine* in 1793 and the London Missionary Society soon afterwards.³⁸ James Steven, Hardy's minister at Crown Court, was closely involved with Bogue's ventures.³⁹ Hardy took another opportunity to remind a historian of Dissent of Bogue's radical past when in 1809 he wrote to Walter Wilson, author of *The History and Antiquities of the Dissenting Churches* (1808–14).⁴⁰ Hardy claimed that Wilson had omitted an 'unanswerable' pamphlet published with Charles Dilly from a list of Bogue's publications. Hardy also suspected there was one other, perhaps two, published by Joseph Johnson. He thinks it was called something like 'The French Revolution foreseen in 1639', but then, perhaps rather archly commenting on Bogue's more recent respectability, added, 'that being rather of a political nature perhaps he would not like to own it'.⁴¹

Hardy was not an obscure reader of Bogue's pamphlets, unknown to their author, but corresponded and met with him in the early 1790s. The two men had even gone on board the transport ship *The Surprise* together in 1794 to convey funds to Maurice Margarot, about to be transported to Botany Bay.⁴² According to Hardy's *Memoir*, Bogue was later one of the

‘particular friends’ – along with James Steven – with whom he spent the evening after his acquittal.⁴³ The government had been suspicious enough of the relationship with Bogue to raise it at the trial.⁴⁴ Although the prosecution do not seem to have had access to their letters, Hardy and Bogue had corresponded in the first few months of the LCS’s existence, showing a shared interest in the millenarian understanding of contemporary political history. In a letter from June 1792, Hardy first raised the question of their views on ‘civil’ government. He sent Bogue a copy of the LCS’s resolutions and asked for his opinion.⁴⁵ Evidently the response was not hostile. A few weeks later, Hardy wrote to another clergyman in the Portsmouth area and asked him to pass on his regards to Bogue, ‘you will find him a true friend in the cause of freedom’.⁴⁶ In these letters, Hardy was patching into a network of Dissenting opinion experienced in the ways of organising opinion in print.

He also had his own experience from the campaign for the abolition of the slave trade to draw upon. The Treasury Solicitor’s Papers include a moving letter from Lydia Hardy to her husband, written in April 1792, when she was convalescing in the country with her family, which throws some light on their joint commitment to abolition. After mentioning her ill health and the pleasure she takes in reading the Bible, she switches topic to ask: ‘What has been donn in the palement house consurning the slave trade[?]’⁴⁷ On 8 April, Wilberforce had introduced his latest abolition bill to Parliament. Its fate takes up much more of the letter than the LCS. She asks after ‘Vassa’ (Gustavus Vassa or Olaudah Equiano, as he is more often known now) and hopes he will be successful on his tour to Scotland. The tour was to promote a new edition of his *The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano*. On 8 March 1792, Hardy had written to Rev. Thomas Bryant of Sheffield on Equiano’s recommendation as ‘a zealous friend for the Abolition of that accurs’d traffick denominated the Slave Trade’. Hardy explained to Bryant that he assumed ‘that you was a friend to freedom on the broad basis of the Rights of Man for I am fully persuaded that no man who is an advocate from principle for liberty for a Black Man but will strenuously promote and support the rights of a White Man’.⁴⁸ In the *Memoir*, Hardy recalls reading Bryant’s reply to the assembled LCS members, who adopted the correspondence as a ‘transaction . . . of the whole body’.

Hardy claimed that its effect ‘tended very much to animate the Corresponding Society in the great cause of *Parliamentary* Reform’. Connecting the importance of publicity to both causes, Hardy had given Bryant a statement of the principles of the LCS: ‘the views and intentions of this

Society are to collect opinions and know the determination (as far as possible) of the unrepresented!' Hardy's association with Equiano would have brought practical knowledge of the role of 'opinion' in an increasingly complex communications system.⁴⁹ Equiano wrote to Hardy in May asking him to acquire copies of those newspapers spreading damaging reports that he had not been born in Africa. Switching to wish Hardy success with the LCS, he informs him that he has not come across any reform societies in Scotland. More generally, as several scholars have noted, Equiano provided a bridge between the emergent radical societies and the abolitionist movement.⁵⁰ His letter to Hardy ends with an expression of religious faith common in Hardy's own correspondence: 'I am resolved ever to look to Jesus Christ – & submit to his Preordinations.'⁵¹ This faith was underpinned by a sophisticated awareness of the role of print networks in spreading the twinned message of political reform and abolitionism that the two men shared.

This twinned message looked beyond any narrowly constitutionalist concern for the reform of Parliament.⁵² Hardy's ardour was powerfully informed by his religious zeal, as Richard Citizen Lee recognised. Another staunch abolitionist, Lee wrote 'Tribute of Civic Gratitude' to commemorate Hardy's acquittal of the charge of treason. Lee provided a note insisting that Hardy was a 'CHRISTIAN HERO':

Let the infidel candidly investigate (if Infidelity can possibly be candid) let him candidly investigate this illustrious Character, and then lift his audacious Front to the Heavens and tell the ALLMIGHTY, that pure Christianity is inimical to the Cause of Freedom – Rather let him yield to the Power of Conviction, and own with Admiration the Rationality of that sublime System which, while it gives GLORY TO GOD, inculcates PEACE ON EARTH, and GOOD-WILL TOWARDS MEN.⁵³

As the defensive tone of his note suggests, Lee's poem appeared at a point when religious differences were causing problems within the LCS, discussed more fully later in this chapter. Suffice to note for now that Lee's collection *Songs from the rock* (1795) was devoted to the idea of the French Revolution as the fulfilment of biblical prophecy, full of the rhetoric that had once been identified with Gordon's Protestant Association. Hardy had his own millenarian perspective on contemporary events. In a letter he wrote to Bogue in 1793, Hardy provided a vision of the resistless spread of political change through the media of print and political discussion:

Of course the subject of a reform in parliament will be repeatedly agitated in the House of Commons the debates will be published in the newspapers

then circulated in different parts of the Country. Thousands of people will make it the subject of conversation and enquiry who never thought of it before.⁵⁴

The origins of this kind of thinking in the marrow of Protestant Dissent are revealed when Hardy asks Bogue if he thinks Ezekiel 21: 25–7 refers to France:

I think there have been two overturns in that country already and a third must take place before the pure gospel of Jesus Christ can prevail in that Nation, although there is a door open for propagating it and I hope it will never be shut till the end of time.

No wonder both men were interested in *The French Revolution foreseen, in 1639!* Hardy's letter to Bogue suggests he understood each wave of the Revolution as part of an unfolding history of Protestant enlightenment. What is equally striking, however, is the *absence* of this aspect of his thinking from his public work for the LCS.

In this regard, Hardy's millenarianism never takes on the public role it does in Citizen Lee's poetry, where it explicitly justifies his politics. Hardy never allowed his own religiosity to play any part in the LCS's attempts to represent the voice of the people. Michael Warner's discussion of the eighteenth-century republic of letters identifies a secularising shift whereby the Protestant idea of print as a medium for the unfolding of God's word gave way to the idea of 'the public' as a more secular entity.⁵⁵ Although the displacement of the former by the latter was surely a much more uneven process than Warner allows, as Lee's case shows, it is a distinction relevant to thinking about Hardy's religious beliefs in relation to his 'public' role. If his private correspondence reveals how far his thinking was structured by his religious zeal, he seems to have been very careful not to allow it to enter any of the LCS's official business or documents. His manuscript 'History' is explicit on the fact that the LCS was careful to avoid religious disputes. All kinds of religious believers were represented in the LCS, Hardy claimed, including those who 'cared for none of those things'.⁵⁶

This claim does not necessarily mean that Hardy himself found the prohibition comfortable. Certainly, religious controversy did rear its head in the LCS, especially after Paine's *Age of Reason* (1794) appeared. By 1795, after Hardy had stepped down from his role as secretary, various schisms appeared over religious matters. Perhaps his former comrades missed his careful navigation of this particular ground. The complexity of Hardy's own position resists any straightforward secular teleology. His concern with political reform did not mean he simply abandoned the religious idea

of progress found in his letters to Bogue. Indeed, next to his comment about avoiding religious disputes, an annotation gives an extract from what he calls 'an excellent recent publication', James Bennett's *Sacred Politics*, as if he couldn't quite help himself.⁵⁷ Published anonymously in 1795, Bennett's pamphlet ends by concluding that 'the Scriptures incline strongly in favour of a well-ordered democracy'.⁵⁸ Reviewers quickly condemned the pamphlet as 'sedition, dressed up in scripture, recommended by the name of Jesus'.⁵⁹ Whatever his enthusiasm for Bennett's thinking, Hardy did not allow it to play a direct part in his 'public' role with the LCS. Hardy's retrospective accounts of the early years place their emphasis on the abilities of the people at large to organise themselves rather than any sense of divine favour. His *Memoir* reprints Lee's poem on the death of Hardy's wife, records the fact that the poet migrated to America soon afterwards, but suggests no other association between them. Understandably enough, Hardy glosses over the enthusiasm of Lee's religio-political poetry, and says nothing about the tribute he was paid as a specifically 'Christian hero'. Hardy's public vision of the LCS, one might say, simply did not acknowledge this category, at least not in the public sphere.

Hardy's primary public mode was to collect popular opinion, placing questions of religious belief to one side. On 10 April 1792, Hardy wrote to the Borough Society, Thelwall's original base, invoking a universal perspective that may have originated in his religious beliefs, but does not allude to them:

As we are all engaged in the same grand and important cause there is an absolute necessity for us to unite together and communicate with each other that our sentiments and determinations may center in one point viz to have the rights of man established especially in this island but our views of the rights of man are not solely confined to this small island but are extended to the whole human race black or white, high or low, rich or poor.⁶⁰

Among those to whom he had also written in the early months of the LCS was Lord Daer, another Scotsman, whom he reminded that his subscription was due. Written on the auspicious date of 14 July, the letter celebrated the success of the society against the 'combined influence of Court Minions and those who do the dirty work of a corrupt and despotick and trembling administration'. Hardy was confident of the imminent fall of tyranny:

The Aristocracy is trembling in every joint for their exclusive privileges.
Excuse me for speaking so plainly I am addressing you as a member of the

same society with me and a fellow labourer in the glorious cause. I am a plain man love honest dealing and hates dissembling. I was happy to see your name at the head of a long list of patriots engaged in a similar cause in another part of the Nation.⁶¹

Typically Hardy ended the letter on a practical egalitarian note: 'I have taken the liberty of renewing your ticket for this Quarter at the very large sum of one penny it is here enclosed.'

If Hardy disciplined his own religious convictions into a public role that he believed would best advance the cause of reform, this self-discipline did not translate into social deference, a point that should be borne in mind when thinking about his relationship with the elite reformers of the 1780s. Daer was the eldest son of the Earl of Selkirk, a member of the Friends of the People that had been formed in April 1792 by Charles Grey and his Whig associates, but also a rare nobleman willing to participate in the more popular societies. He was present at SCI meetings in April and participated in the shadowy 'London Society of the Friends of the People' that existed briefly in mid 1792.⁶² Unlike its Whig namesake, this society was committed to the platform of universal male suffrage. Following the usual practice of finding a nobleman to assume positions of leadership in all kinds of associations, Daer was proposed as chairman of the LCS, but Hardy's manuscript recalls 'it was objected it wd. appear to be a party business and might prevent them exerting themselves in their own cause'. Hardy's manner towards Daer in their correspondence suggests that he shared this opinion. Despite their shared Scottish roots, Daer's social status, and his influential connections within reform more generally, Hardy refused to defer to the nobleman when it came to leadership of the LCS and insisted instead on addressing him as 'a fellow labourer in the glorious cause'.⁶³

Nevertheless, Hardy chose not to come forward in 1792 as the 'founder' of the LCS, a matter he also discusses in the manuscript history. He was concerned as to perceptions of 'respectability', although he quickly provides the gloss, 'the common received idea of respectability'. He insisted upon the origin of the LCS, as we have seen, in the discussions of ordinary tradesmen. If he refused to stand forward as the founder of the society, Hardy did agree to sign his name to its first address as secretary (even though its author was Margarot). The explanation given in the 'History' is that Hardy was the most 'independent' of those involved. He felt the need to go on and explain his idea of this word too, perhaps because it was so mired in the Whig idea that only the propertied classes could truly be trusted with the welfare of the state. In contrast, Hardy disputed any idea of 'independent' as 'rich and increased in worldly goods'. Instead, as a

self-employed journeyman, he was free from the control of an employer, but also independent because 'conscious that I was doing that which was right – fearless of consequence'.⁶⁴

Authorised by the signature of this independent man, the address and resolutions were sent to the SCI, then the newspapers, before being distributed by the LCS as a handbill.⁶⁵ In Hardy's manuscript 'History of the LCS', this event is represented as the crossing of a threshold: 'after that time the London Corresponding Society became public'.⁶⁶ For Hardy, it appears, publicity involved certain acts of self-discipline, the regulation of his own religious zeal, and a certain orientation towards the nation in print, including an independence from the authority of the political elite, whatever advice he may have taken from them. In the published *Memoir*, this discipline meant that the personal was defined primarily in terms of the political, even including the brief description of the death of Lydia Hardy ending with Lee's poem.⁶⁷ Compared to the way Thelwall was to place his private affections at the centre of his claims to political virtue, Hardy seems to have identified his public self much more completely with the LCS, excluding the personal and the religious, both in his political conduct in the 1790s and in his later writing.

Ferment 1792–3

Publication of the April address and resolutions was the first step towards the LCS taking leadership of the popular societies emerging onto the public stage in London and across Britain in 1792. Although in retrospect this role may seem to have been inevitable, the LCS was initially part of a bubbling ferment of such societies, responding to events in France and to Paine's *Rights of Man*. The most prominent of these societies was the SCI, of which Paine himself was a member, and which had facilitated the publication and dissemination of the first part of his book.⁶⁸ Paine's ideas changed in response to this ferment, only explicitly advocating universal suffrage in his *Letter Addressed to the Addressers* after his involvement with the LCS and SCI. Hardy was quick to make contact with John Horne Tooke, the leading figure in the SCI, and the two societies began to collaborate from early on in 1792, sending representatives to each other's meetings. The popular radical movement in London, however, extended further beyond these two key organisations than many accounts notice, even if most of the societies that emerged were short lived and would repay further research.

Hardy's 'History of the LCS' is a useful point of departure for understanding this rapidly developing situation. His sense of the LCS's achievement was predicated on its sustained commitment when other societies rose and fell. He acknowledged the initial importance of elite groups. Grey's Society of the Friends of the People 'carried people to flock in astonishing numbers to the Corresponding Society', but these Whigs were guilty of arrogating to themselves a role as natural leaders that Hardy was unwilling to grant. His moral sense of the importance of 'the people' coming to a sense of itself was always likely to bridle against such assumptions. Those who formed societies in imitation of Grey and his associates – he mentions the Borough and Aldgate societies, as well as others who used some version of the title 'friends of the people' – he dismissed as 'professed friends who are only seen in the sun shine of prosperity'. The readiness of these societies 'to learn from their superiors' he described in a cancelled passage as 'proof of great docility in them':

when these go beforehand, those follow – when those stop, those stand still – they called themselves friends of the people when in reality they were part of the oppressed people they wished to befriend.⁶⁹

Hardy also carefully distinguished the LCS from those who had promoted parliamentary reform in the previous decade. Hardy saw his colleagues in the LCS as 'another class of reformers – they were of the lower and middling class of society called the people':

these two classes of reformers being almost total strangers to each other – some of those strenuous for a certain reform in 1782 scarcely knew those who had associated for a reform in 1792.

The 'History' shows a sharp awareness of what was at stake when it came to the question of leadership within the movement: 'the higher class as they are called have at all times made use of the middling and lower classes as a ladder to raise themselves into power then kick it away'.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, the situation on the ground in 1792–3 was more fluid than Hardy's later account suggests. Clubs and individuals charted various courses across a rapidly changing political landscape in this period. The parts played by Grey's Friends of the People and the SCI are fairly well known, but there were many other groups in London closer to the LCS in this period, even if Hardy treats them as transient.⁷¹ For instance, the LCS courted the assistance of the Borough Society (also known as the Southwark Society of the Friends of the People) for much of 1792. Thelwall was heavily involved there. The Aldgate Society, formed out of a disaffected

division of the LCS early in 1793, made its own contribution to print radicalism via the satirical miscellany *A Thing of Shreds and Patches* (1793), but association with Gordon tainted them in many eyes. Other groups, like the Holborn Society, self-described as republicans, seem to have merged with the LCS early in 1793.⁷² Nor, in this volatile early period, were the class profiles of participants quite as neat as Hardy suggests in his retrospective accounts. Merry was involved in the early stages of Grey's Friends of the People, for instance, but his name disappears from membership lists by the middle of 1792. At meetings of the SCI, which he had joined in 1791, he played a conspicuous role in its collaborations with the LCS. Merry retained a confidence in the 'electric' power of print to spread enlightenment on a global scale. Many 'literary men' who shared Merry's sympathies showed an appetite for association in this period, although far from all of them were willing to condone his sense of its limitless social horizon.

In 1790, Merry was one of several reform-minded writers involved in the inauguration of the Literary Fund. The brainchild of the minister and political theorist David Williams, its primary purpose was to aid authors in distress, but its mission was predicated on a sense of the influence of men of letters on political affairs that drew inspiration from events in France. Many early members of its general committee were political reformers. Aside from Merry, they included John Hurford Stone, Thomas Christie, editor of the *Analytical Review*, Godwin's friend Major Alexander Jardine, and Captain Thomas Morris, brother of the famous political songwriter Captain Charles Morris.⁷³ These were men, as John Gifford put it later, 'neither remarkable for the purity of their religious tenets, nor for the soundness of their political principles', but they were not necessarily averse to exploiting the protection of an aristocratic patron, and early in 1791 Merry was asked to use his connections to approach the Duke of Leeds, already president of the Philanthropic Society.⁷⁴ By 1792, reform sympathies within the Literary Fund manifested themselves in a notable overlap with SCI membership. Merry was unable to attend the Literary Fund's committee meeting of 4 May, because he was at the SCI with Paine in a key period for its discussions of the distribution of cheap editions of *Rights of Man*.⁷⁵ Despite his absence from the meeting, it re-elected Merry to the committee, but he never reappeared. Two SCI members who did attend the May meeting of the Literary Fund were John Hurford Stone and George Edwards (both of whom, as it happens, also seem to have been involved in the short-lived London Society of the Friends of the People at around this time). Thereafter, like Merry, they seem to have been busier

with the SCI than the Fund. Stone is reputed to have turned down Williams's offer to serve on the Fund's committee. By the end of 1792, Edwards, Merry, and Stone were in Paris with Paine, where they participated in the British Club at White's Hotel frequented by John Oswald, vegetarian theorist and revolutionary soldier, who received financial aid from the Fund.⁷⁶

Williams conveyed the Fund's grant to Oswald in Paris, but seems not to have attended the British Club. He already had a reputation in France as a serious political thinker. J.P. Brissot had invited Williams to consult on the new republican constitution. Manon Roland placed Williams above Paine as a philosopher:

Paine throws light upon a revolution better than he concurs in the making of a constitution. He takes up, and establishes those great principles, of which the exposition strikes every eye, gains the applause of a club, or excites the enthusiasm of a tavern; but for cool in a committee, or the regular labours of a legislator, I conceive *David Williams* infinitely more proper than he. Williams, made a French citizen also, was not chosen a member of the Convention, in which he would have been of more use; but he was invited by the government to repair to Paris, where he passed several months, and frequently conferred with the most active representatives of the nation.⁷⁷

The terms of her praise hint at a distinctive aspect of Williams's thinking, particularly his deep ambivalence about popular associations, and his preference for committee work or smaller more 'select' gatherings than he found in the raucous activities of the National Convention.⁷⁸

Williams's justification of a charity for authors had been the assumption that their highest calling was as writers of constitutions:

Princes are influenced, ministers propose measures, and magistrates are instructed by the industry of literature; while the authors of hints, suggestions, and disquisitions, may be languishing in obscurity, or dying in distress.⁷⁹

Both Williams and Merry took up this role in France in the debate on the new republican constitution.⁸⁰ Newspaper advertisements from 1791–2 suggest the pressure of events in France on the definition of the 'literary' supported by the Fund. Take this one from the *World* for 16 February 1791:

At a period when LITERATURE is asserting its just claims, to influence the Councils, and point out the interests of POLITICAL SOCIETIES . . .

The COMMITTEE . . . solicit, not those only who are friends to LITERATURE, from TASTE and LOVE OF SCIENCE, but all who are interested in the

most effective and important instruments of public information and public prosperity.

The strong link between constitutions and literary men was later eclipsed by a defence of the general utility of literature in most of the other writing by Williams on the Fund, but in these heady months it was at the heart of his thinking.

Williams always made it clear that the Fund was not intended to encourage people into authorship. He also saw the provision of relief as a means of stopping the rancour that produced 'libel' and 'personal satire' among those disappointed of a literary career, modes that were at the heart of Georgian political theatre.⁸¹ Beyond the Fund, as a political writer, Williams imagined himself occupying a philosophical position above the political societies, giving them direction perhaps, but not joining them, a position not unlike the one Godwin took up after the success of *Political justice*. He spelled out his position in a letter to Brissot from May 1792:

The Constitutional Societies which have adopted Paine & his Pamphlets . . . are here actuated by bad Men; & their exertions are petulant & intemperate. The Indiscretion of the Government in prosecuting Paine . . . will give these Societies great Advantage. – But I join none of them; because I think they waste the Spirits & excite the Hopes of the People to no Purpose; & they alarm Government just enough to be on it's guard, but not to reform any of it's [sic] Abuses. . . I am for instructing the People only: & having no Contest with Government, until I can give it a mortal Blow.⁸²

Williams was a theorist of conventions as the proper medium for the expression of the general will, but far from sanguine about the direct participation of the people out-of-doors.⁸³ In France at the end of the year, he was shocked by the constant interruptions from the gallery in the Convention. He did make his own contribution to the French constitutional debate in *Observations sur la dernière constitution de la France* (1793), but predictably enough the document seems never to have been printed in England. Despite their ostensible political sympathies, Williams already had doubts about Paine and his associates in the SCI. He had always been a proponent of that species of Enlightenment thinking that looked for unlimited enquiry within regulated conditions. In *Lessons to a young prince* (1790), for instance, he had written 'I never saw an assembly, exceeding twenty, whatever the abilities of the members, that was not more disposed to passion and tumult, than to reason and judgment', a position echoed in Godwin's *Political justice*.⁸⁴ For both Godwin and

Williams, the autonomy of private judgement had to be preserved when it came to political justice.

Nevertheless, like Godwin, Williams actively participated in the more selective versions of conviviality in literary London. In his case, these were mainly comprised of likeminded proponents of improvement like 'The Club of Thirteen' from which the idea for the Literary Fund sprang.⁸⁵ From 1793, soon after its inception, the Literary Fund began to have an annual dinner. A manuscript list of toasts and songs for the 1793 dinner contains the sentiment 'Government without Oppression, & Liberty without Licentiousness'. A sign of the sensitivity of the political context is that the word 'Tyranny' is struck out and replaced by 'Oppression'. By 1800, there was no equivocation. The toasts included: 'The Constitution of England, untampered, & unimpaired by French Quackery' and 'One Mind, one Heart, one Voice, from the Cottage to the Throne'.⁸⁶ No less than the philanthropic gentlemen of the Literary Fund, the LCS confirmed its own sense of identity through toasts and songs, which were later to be scrutinised at the trials of its members, as were the entrance tickets issued in its name. As the membership of the LCS grew, these tickets soon had to be printed rather than handwritten by Hardy, as they initially were. Maurice Margarot had to be persuaded that Hardy's proposed motto 'Unite, persevere, and be free' would not be injurious to the cause. Tickets were also a means of policing entrance to the Society's meetings as it became increasingly conscious of surveillance, by government spies and informers, but issuing them was also an aspect of its conformity to the norms of the associational world more generally. On Thursday 23 August 1792, the LCS's general committee passed a resolution that

no Delegate, no member of the Society do presume to *publish* or send to any newspaper, any letter or pamphlet or writing connected to the society by any member or society, unless by express order from the Committee under the penalty of exclusion.

The resolution seems to have been prompted by the appearance of a broadside song 'God Save the Rights of Man'. At the 13 September meeting, the delegates of three divisions were severely reprimanded for allowing the song to be published. The author was Robert Thomson (sometimes Thompson) who appeared at the committee meeting of 30 August as 'the pro tempore delegate of Division No. 5'.⁸⁷

By trade, Thomson was an auctioneer, whom the MPM's 'History of the Society' (1796) recalled as one of those early members 'indefatigable in visiting and instructing new divisions'.⁸⁸ Perhaps recalling the anxiety

about Thomson's song, the 'History' went on to describe his 'lively poetical genius, which did not exactly accord with the calm prudential principles on which the Society was instituted'. Here, Thomson's 'poetical genius' seems to place him beneath what the LCS required of the 'literary men' it at times tried to recruit, but it is the conviviality of song, hinted at in the word 'lively', that seems to be the primary source of anxiety. None the less, the account acknowledged that he was

extensively admired in the Society, and probably would have experienced a similar degree of approbation from the country at large, had not persecution nearly suppressed his works, and compelled him to seek refuge in France, where, we are happy to learn he has since succeeded as a bookseller.

Thomson was a Scot by birth. He shared ties of religion and a lasting friendship with his countryman Hardy.⁸⁹ Thomson returned from Paris some time soon after 1800 to publish a feisty rebuttal of Paine's *The Age of Reason*.⁹⁰ After Waterloo, impoverished, he returned again, when Hardy among others helped with an application to the Literary Fund, prudently suppressing his early role in the LCS. Although a very different organisation from what it had been in 1792, the Fund granted him £10 on more than one occasion until his death in 1820.⁹¹

The brief account of Thomson in MPM is corroborated and extended by the spy reports of Captain George Munro from November 1792.⁹² Munro had been having trouble gaining entry to LCS divisions as a 'stranger', but his luck turned when he met Thomson:

The third [division] I visited was the Marquis of Granby kept by one Pride this is the 5th Division, there were a vast number of Scotchmen in this, it seemed the best attended and best conducted, the Delegates name was Thomson, discovering I was a countryman of his (for he was Scotch) I was admitted a member of this Division with little difficulty, and have the honour of accompanying this with one of their printed papers, which will give you a clear idea of the nature of these Society's who's intentions [are] that of corrupting the minds of the lower orders of the people by inflaming their imaginations with imaginary grievances, and working them up to comit some great excess.

'Papers' suggests a slip or broadside version, possibly one of Thomson's songs, the most influential of which was 'God Save the Rights of Man', the song that had caused ructions at the LCS in late August. The slip version of that song in the British Library shown here (Figure 4) has 'November 1792' written on it, the month of Munro's visit to the Marquis of Granby. The song was later collected in Thomson's *A Tribute to Liberty* (1793)

A NEW SONG,
To an Old Tune,—viz. "God save the king."

I. GOD save—"THE RIGHTS OF MAN!" Give him a heart to scan Blessings so dear; Let them be spread around, Wherever Man is found, And with the welcome sound, Ravish his ear!	II. See from the Universe, Darkness and Clouds disperse; Mankind awake! Reason and Truth appear, Freedom advances near, Monarchs with terror hear, See how they quake!	III. Sore have we felt the stroke; Long have we bore the yoke, Sluggish and tame; But now the Lion roars, And a loud note he pours; Spreading to distant shores, LIBERTY'S flame!	IV. Let us with FRANCE agree, And bid THE WORLD BE FREE— Leading the way. Let Tyrants all conspire, Fearless of sword and fire, FREEDOM shall ne'er retire, FREEDOM shall sway!	V. Godlike, and great the strife, Life will indeed be life, Should we prevail. Death, in so just a cause, Crowns us with loud applause, And from Tyrannic laws, Bids us—ALL HAIL!	VI. O'er the Germanic powr's, Big indignation lowr's, Ready to fall! Let the rude savage hoist, In their long numbers boast, FREEDOM'S almighty trust, Laughs at them all.	VII. FAME! Let thy Trumpet sound! Tell all the World around! Tell each degree! Tell Ribbands, Crowns, and Stars, Kings, Traitors, Troops, and Wars, Plans, Councils, Plots, and Jars, FRENCHMEN are FREE!	VIII. God save—"THE RIGHTS OF MAN!" Give him a heart to scan Blessings so dear! Let them be spread around, Wherever Man is found, And with the welcome sound, Ravish his ear!
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Fig 4 [Robert Thomson] *A New song, to an old tune,—viz. "God save the king."*
© The British Library Board.

where it is described as 'composed before the Duke of Brunswick ran away', a reference to the French victory at Valmy on 20 September. This composition date fits in with the chronology of the LCS debates over whether it should be owned by the society. By the time the song appeared in *A Tribute to Liberty*, published from Temple Yard with Robert

Littlejohn, another LCS member, Thomson was a confirmed delegate to the central committee, perhaps in recognition of the 'vigour' MPM later credited him with bringing to the failing spirits of the society. Despite the committee's doubts about identifying his songs as official LCS publications, he had probably been among those dispatched to the Marquis of Granby to revive its fortunes in August. Munro's report from November corroborates his success.

'To the London Corresponding Society', one of Thomson's songs gathered in *Tribute to Liberty*, seems a direct contribution to the process of creating solidarity and imparting spirit to the members:

See our numbers how they grow!
Crowding and dividing;
Eager all their Rights to know,
Reason still presiding.⁹³

A note glosses 'crowding and dividing' as a reference 'to the affiliated divisions which file off every night of meeting to different parts of the town'. For those singing the song at a meeting, it would have provided a sense of unity both 'here' within the particular division and also with those 'dividing' meetings imagined as going on simultaneously:

Boldly all with heart and hand,
Meet we here united,
By each other firmly stand,
To see our Country righted.⁹⁴

Like 'God Save the Rights of Man', this song probably first existed as a slip that could be passed around at meetings. Others gathered in the collection are still extant as slips, including 'Whitehall Alarmed!' and 'Burke's Address to the Swinish Multitude'.⁹⁵ Thomson's book also republished songs that he had not written, including two sung by Charles Dignum at the Revolution Society's anniversary dinner in November 1792. LCS member Robert Hawes of Whitechapel had already printed these as slips.⁹⁶ Songs were certainly a very malleable cultural form, easily adapted to circumstances, and capable of being produced as slips, printed in newspapers, or gathered in anthologies. Spence's *Pig's Meat* reprinted 'God Save the Rights of Man' as it did 'Burke's Address to the Swinish Multitude'.⁹⁷

Print allowed songs and toasts to be circulated across different kinds of social space, as with the songs Dignum performed for the Revolution Society, reprinted by Hawes and Thomson for LCS use. The anniversary dinner of the Revolution Society in 1792 took place at the London Tavern,

a venue grander than most used by the LCS. Providing LCS members with access to these songs, Hawes and Thomson implied they had as much right to a place in the domain of British politics as the Revolution Society and more exalted associations. The press closely scrutinised the role of songs and toasts at political dinners and meetings, as we have already seen. Reformers and Whigs often began their toasts with 'the majesty of the people' to make their sense of the relative importance of the different arms of the constitution plain. The king appeared only in third place at the Revolution Society's 1789 dinner.⁹⁸ Things had changed by 1792. The *Morning Chronicle's* report of the 1792 dinner of 5 November does not mention the royal family and gives the first four toasts as 'The Rights of Man', 'The Glorious Revolution of 1688', 'May unjust power be opposed by all the friends of just Government', and 'The Sovereignty of the People acting by an equal Representation'. In *A Tribute to Liberty*, Thomson went further in his list of toasts and signalled his affiliations by placing 'Thomas Paine!!!' first, followed by 'The Rights of Man!!!', 'The Rights of Woman!!!', and then 'The Majesty of the People!!!'⁹⁹

Preparing the evidence for the treason trials in 1794, the *Second report from the Committee of Secrecy* noted the use 'even of play bills and songs, seditious toasts; and a studied selection of the tunes which have been in use since the revolution' as a means to 'seduce and corrupt the thoughtless and uninformed': 'The appearance of insignificance and levity, which belongs at first sight to his part of the system, is, in truth, only an additional proof of the art and industry with which it has been pursued.'¹⁰⁰ But the LCS itself, as its magazine 'History' of 1796 implies, was not without qualms about the political theatre of toasts and songs: 'The fervent desire for moral reform, educational improvement, and rational debate', James Epstein and David Karr have suggested, 'was at odds with the norms of plebeian sociability'.¹⁰¹ One needs to be careful of not oversimplifying the notion of 'plebeian sociability'. Reading, debating, singing, and toasting coexisted as activities within the LCS, even if for some members they might relate to very different forms of print sociability, especially those anxious about descending, as Godwin put it, from 'the conviviality of the feast to the depredations of a riot'.¹⁰² From 1794, for instance, John Thelwall took over something of Thomson's role as LCS songwriter, sometimes printing his songs three to a sheet to ease circulation, but his practice generally made no sharp distinction between the levity of songs, the theatre of toasting, and the gravity of reading groups.¹⁰³ The great archivist of the LCS, Francis Place, apparently felt otherwise. He certainly registered the tension between improvement and theatricality described by Epstein and Karr,

but then his entire account of the organisation is notoriously marked by his concern with respectability, as he saw it. Place's *Autobiography* strongly favoured the idea that reading and debate were the key activities of the LCS and represented its main achievement as the bringing of sobriety and usefulness to working-class culture. Song's association with conviviality pushed it away from the respectability he accorded other more studious forms of literary endeavour. Songs did appear in his accounts of the older plebeian world that he remembered from his childhood before he joined the LCS in 1794, but primarily as markers of its social degeneracy:

Some of these songs sung by the respectable tradesmen who spent their evenings in my fathers [sic] parlour, were very gross, yet I have known the parlour door thrown open, that whoever was in the bar and the Tap room might hear every word.¹⁰⁴

Not that his attitude to this material was simple. He was fascinated enough by it to form a collection and did not note its passing entirely without regret. These songs, he recalled, 'were sung with considerable humour by men who were very much excited'.¹⁰⁵ Place's primary concern is with lewdness rather than politics as such in these passages, but his account of their disappearance is specifically placed in the context of the emergence of the Association for Preserving Liberty and Property:

John Reeves and his associates together with the magistrates extinguished them. The association printed a large number of what they called loyal songs, and gave them to ballad singers, if any one was found singing any but loyal songs he or she was carried before the magistrate who admonished and dismissed him or her, they were then told they might have loyal songs for nothing and that they would not be molested while singing them. Thus the bawdy songs, and those in praise of thieving and getting drunk were pushed out of existence.¹⁰⁶

This scenario is precisely the context of Thomson's flight to France under pressure from Reeves, but Place mentions neither the LCS's songwriter in chief nor radical songs more generally. Indeed the category 'political songs' would probably have represented a kind of oxymoron for him. Nowhere does his account of LCS meetings mention the singing of the songs provided by Thomson, Thelwall, or Reid, to name but three of many songwriters in the LCS. Despite their importance in cementing the LCS together and imparting 'vigour' at times of crisis, Place has nothing to say about the role of songs and toasts in its success. They seem to lie outside his idea of what constituted political discourse and beneath what he might have expected of 'literary men'.

‘These prosecuting times’

Thomson was one of many victims of the intensification of surveillance after the inception of the Association in November 1792. Although Reeves and his associates operated independently of government, the Treasury was also doing what it could to ensure local authorities all over the country clamped down on sedition, not least by encouraging the harassment of booksellers who stocked Paine’s *Rights of Man* and Pigott’s *Jockey Club*.¹⁰⁷ The signal event in this new era of repression was the trial of Paine himself *in absentia* on 18 December. The law officers discussed prosecuting publishers of *Rights of Man* from as early as April 1791, but they did not indict J. S. Jordan until 14 May 1792, a week before the first royal proclamation against seditious writings. A summons was served on Paine on the same day as the proclamation was issued, but the government did not act on it, apart from continuing to encourage abuse of the author in the newspapers. In June, the Home Secretary, Henry Dundas, announced the postponement of the trial until December. On 13 September, Paine left for France, where he had been elected deputy for Calais. He was harassed by customs officers at Dover, who seem to have made great show of going through his papers, but no effort was made to prevent him leaving the country at dawn the next day. Now the government could prosecute without the risk that Paine would be there to use the occasion as a political platform.¹⁰⁸

Paine had placed discussion at the heart of his vision of politics. The commitment to a visible constitution in *Rights of Man* lies not in a desire to set political truth in stone, but to bringing it into print and, thereby, making it available for debate. *Rights of Man* offered an account of political change in the United States as the product of ‘public discussion, carried on through the channel of the press, and in conversations’, an ongoing process of reader-citizens ‘revising, altering, and amending’.¹⁰⁹ ‘In this vision of politics’, as Cotlar has described it, ‘ideas do not emanate from the center, but emerge slowly out of an inclusive and incessant conversation among citizens’.¹¹⁰ The imagined scenario is something like the discussions between Hardy and his friends held after work surrounded by the newspapers and pamphlets of the day. Paine’s presence at SCI meetings in 1792 was another practical manifestation of this cultural imaginary. He both participated in the discussion of political principles, giving advice directly to the LCS, and did what he could – refusing to accept profits from the book – to make sure *Rights of Man* achieved a wide circulation in the popular societies.

Paine's practical involvement with the societies was not something his attorney, Thomas Erskine, emphasised at his trial when it finally came on. He did not wish Paine to be associated with 'tavern' politics. The version of print magic Erskine presented at the trial was distanced from such messy mediations.¹¹¹ Erskine's primary strategy was to present Paine as part of a pantheon of political philosophy. Paine undermined this defence when he wrote to the Attorney General from Paris in November 1792 to deride the prosecution. Not only did Paine mock the royal family and taunt the crown officers with the events in Paris of August and September 1792, but he also insisted that 'coffee-houses, and places where I was unknown' were reasonable places for 'collecting the natural currency of opinion'. For the Attorney General, Sir Archibald Macdonald, this idea was laughable as a serious account of the role of 'the people' in the political system, but it was also encouraging sedition. Paine was inflaming 'that part of the public whose minds cannot be supposed to be conversant with subjects of this sort, and who cannot therefore correct as they go along'. The passages chosen on the indictment are there not because of the political ideas they expressed alone, but because of their 'phrase and manner', in Macdonald's words. Here was not 'reasoning and well meant discussion', according to the Attorney General, but 'a deliberate design to calumniate . . . to perform the shorter process of inflammation'. *Rights of Man*, in Macdonald's eyes, was being directed towards readers who could not distinguish scurrility from 'sober discussion'.¹¹² This part of 'the public', as the Attorney General did at least acknowledge them to be in name at least, was imagined as incapable of any public function.

Erskine objected to Paine's letter from Paris being produced in court, insisting on its irrelevance for the prosecution of a book published months before. His strategy was to abstract Paine's sense of the political nation from any idea of the people at large as directly involved in the political process. The cheapness of *Rights of Man* was simply encouraging 'the most extensive purchase of it' so that 'his work should be generally read'. 'Extensive purchase' allows Erskine to recast the Attorney General's qualitative point about readership into a simple judgement of quantity. Erskine presented *Rights of Man* as addressed 'to the reason of the nation at large, and not to the passions of individuals'. The importance of the French Revolution for Erskine was primarily as a stimulus to the English, 'reminding the people of this country of their own glorious deliverance in former ages'. Paine is to be placed in a long line of British political thinkers, 'persons on whom my friend will find it hard to fasten the character of libellers'. The 'grave speculative opinions' of these

political giants cannot be regarded as intended to 'diffuse discontent'. They are examples of 'great authority in all learning'. Each is brought forward by Erskine as 'a distinguished classic in the language' whose address is to 'an impartial public, or to posterity'.¹¹³ He did not present these constitutional master texts as addressed entirely to an abstract idea of the people. He conceded that some were written 'not in the abstract like the author before you, but upon the spur of the occasion'. Political controversy, from this perspective, might provide the winnowing that delivers forth the nation's political classics. Quoting Montesquieu (and anticipating Godwin in doing so), Erskine asserted that 'it matters not whether individuals reason well or ill; it is sufficient that they do reason. Truth arises from the collision, and from thence springs liberty.' Such vigorous collision leads him to a final stirring vision sustained by Milton's 'mighty imagination' of 'a noble and puissant nation rousing itself, like a strong man after sleep'.¹¹⁴ Erskine was famous for his impassioned performances in the courtroom. Here his speech crackled with tension between the idea of an inter-textual horizon made up of classics and a politically militant nation seeking to turn ideas into action. Not that this tension gave too much pause for thought to the packed jury. Before the Attorney General could rise to reply to Erskine's speech, the foreman declared Paine guilty.

The tension in Erskine's defence did not disappear with the verdict, but lingered on as an issue within the reform movement. On 22 December, four days after the trial, the newly formed Society of Friends to the Liberty of the Press met to congratulate Erskine on his defence. Some of the Friends were very clear that they were not congratulating him on his defence of Paine's book, but only the *principle* of free speech. The Society was an unstable mix of Whig MPs and members of the popular radical movement, including Gerrald and Thelwall. Whatever the Opposition members present thought of those two, they were decidedly uncomfortable with *Rights of Man*. After Thelwall and others spoke in praise of Erskine, an argument broke out centred around a motion of thanks to Erskine. Thomas Maitland, brother of the Earl of Lauderdale, recently returned from France, proposed the motion. Some members questioned 'the propriety, at this time, of making the most distant mention of the work called *The Rights of Man*'. Maitland's vote of thanks 'might imply their approbation of the whole Doctrines contained in the Book'. Joseph Gerrald immediately rose to assert that 'it was absurd to praise Mr. Erskine's Defence and at the same time to censure his Client's Political Doctrines'.¹¹⁵

Gerrald's intervention effectively insisted on the right of the LCS and its members to be understood as an active part of the political nation. Over the course of 1792, the pretensions of the Society of the Friends of the People to shape and control these aspirations had been increasingly under attack in the popular radical press. By November 1792 *The Argus*, the newspaper most sympathetic to the LCS, was unforgiving on the issue:

We at first observed of this Society, that it appeared to us to be designed as a *conductor* to turn away the lightning accompanying the *thunder* of the Public for a reform of abuses in Government . . . we hope they will [now] lay aside their violent fears, at least those expressed for the several classes of men whose interest they profess to have at heart. There is no occasion for apprehensions from Mr. PAINE's advice on the score of Economy and Reform.¹¹⁶

At the Friends to the Liberty of the Press meeting, full of members of the Society of the Friends of the People, these fears were amply on display. The motion of thanks was amended to omit Paine's name and the title of his book. Erskine emerges as the hero of the hour, effectively himself becoming part of a pantheon from which Paine was excluded.

By the beginning of 1793, then, the radical societies were operating in a situation where publishing their opinions and meeting to discuss them were being regarded as seditious. The supposed friends of reform in the political elite were backing away from active collaboration. For the most part it was the booksellers and publishers who became the objects of direct legal sanction. Robert Thomson and Samson Perry were forced out of the country after Paine's departure.¹¹⁷ Indictments for publishing *Rights of Man*, *Letter Addressed to the Addressers*, and the *Jockey Club* secured the convictions of the booksellers Ridgway and Symonds. Indictments were also sent out to the regions. Several prosecutions misfired because of errors in the paperwork. Different editions of the *Jockey Club*, expanded by the addition of different parts over the course of 1792, caused bibliographical confusion and legal failure because the correct edition of whichever part was improperly named in the indictment.¹¹⁸ The comedy of legal errors aside, the question of legal forms seems to have intensified an awareness of nuances of mediation in the radical societies. Notions that it was an Englishman's right to discuss politics or that print was inherently disposed towards political progress had to confront a hostile legal context. This situation encouraged flexibility when it came to printed formats, including the exploitation of satire and parody, but it also drew attention to the question of political opinion and its relation to issues of representation. As Thelwall

put it in 1795, 'he who devises the method of collecting this opinion with the greatest purity (that is to say with the greatest freedom from influence, fear or corruption) will confer the greatest possible benefit upon the human race'.¹¹⁹

Convention politics

Made in 1795, Thelwall's judgement was the result of bitter experience in the struggle to keep open spaces for political discussion. The very language of debate became subject to immense critical pressure. In these conditions, much could depend on a word. John Barrell's *Imagining the King's Death* has delineated the strain put on the key terms of the treason statutes by the government and its supporters. Although at the treason trials the government argued that radicals were arming themselves for a violent insurrection, much of their case turned on the word 'convention' and whether it constituted a forum for the collection of opinion or an anti-parliament, opening up a path, as the prosecution saw it, that must lead to the overthrow of the monarchy. I won't rehearse Barrell's brilliant account of the struggle over use of the word 'imagine' in the statutes on treason, but I do want to pursue the wider question of the battle over words and its relation to other issues of mediation and representation on a larger scale.

Among the very earliest of the publications associated with the LCS, but not actually published in its name, was an attempt at disambiguation in the interest of rational political debate. *An Explanation of the Word Equality* (1793) was a four-page pamphlet probably published in January 1793. In terms of its content, the pamphlet was an explicit rebuttal of the attempts of Reeves and his associates to identify the LCS with the idea that 'the EQUALITY to be contended for, is *an equality of wealth and possessions*'. It goes on to make it clear that equality of rights was the issue, insisting that 'to render property insecure would destroy all motives to exertion, and tear up public happiness by the roots'. Reform, the author went on to insist, was a question of 'great and unchangeable truths' that needed protection 'from the WILFUL PERVERSIONS OF A WORD', but the four-page pamphlet was not quite the straightforward assertion of the plain truth it claimed. The opening paragraph suggested that 'if the "SWINISH MULTITUDE"' should take it into their heads that they are justified in *inforcing* such a system, the consequences will rest upon those, who, by a perversion of terms, have wickedly or foolishly propagated such doctrine'. The idea that loyalists were causing or at least imagining the revolution

they feared was not an uncommon device of radical rhetoric. It played its part, as we have already seen, in several trials, including Eaton's, and it was to reappear at the treason trials. Possibly *An Explanation of the Word Equality* was an attempt to distance the LCS from Spence's land plan, which did argue for the redistribution of property, but most of the latter part of *Explanation* is an address 'TO THE SWINISH MULTITUDE' in the hope that the definition of the word it provides will encourage them to a careful consideration of the case for reform.¹²⁰ Consequently, its primary effect is not to insist on security of property, but to encourage readers of a halfpenny pamphlet into political debate. Indeed, the economic aspects of reform take up the last pages of the pamphlet, which lists a selection of placemen who benefit from taxation and privilege, ending the fourth and final page with a blunt statement of economic constraints: '*The paper will not permit the list to be extended.*'

A motion to have *An Explanation of the Word Equality* published as an official LCS document was put before the general committee of 10 January 1793, but negatived because of the costs. The delegates did agree to subscribe as individuals and 'furnish their Divisions with such as were already printed, at their own Expence'.¹²¹ Quite possibly there was some nervousness in the committee about the pamphlet's equivocations. At this meeting a rule that the committee would only receive manuscripts submitted for publication via delegates was carried. The LCS was worried about the cost of publishing, but also, as with Thomson's 'God Save the Rights of Man', about quite which principles would be affixed to its name. If the LCS did sometimes present itself as the honest repository of grand and inalienable truths, often it seemed more comfortable with presenting itself as a forum for debate and discussion. Even within this scenario, though, issues remained about the exact terms of debate and, not least, the processes by which debate could legitimately be said to represent the popular will. Nowhere were these tensions more acute than in the rolling controversy that surrounded the word 'convention'. Did it simply denote a repository for opinions collected by the LCS from around the country, or was it a medium that might presume to articulate the will of the people?

The account of the American Revolution in Paine's *Rights of Man* had presented a convention as the means of translating the local discussions of smaller clubs and societies into an expression of the popular will. An older tradition went back to at least the 1770s and the writings of James Burgh, an important influence on Spence, and Major Cartwright.¹²² In the societies, these ideas were picked up as early as April 1792 in a letter from

the Norwich Revolution Society to the SCI. In September, the Friends of Universal Peace and the Rights of Man in Stockport wrote to attack the LCS for its caution and argued all the abuses of the system could be 'done away with at once by the people assembled in Convention'. On 11 November, a 'Society for Political Information' wrote from Norwich to ask 'whether the generality of the societies meant to rest satisfied with the Duke of Richmond's plan only; OR WHETHER IT IS THEIR PRIVATE DESIGN TO RIP UP MONARCHY BY THE ROOTS, AND PLACE DEMOCRACY IN ITS STEAD?' Maurice Margarot was cautious in his reply, but made it clear that the LCS was primarily concerned 'to disseminate political knowledge'. Its immediate object was 'annual parliaments', elected by 'the unbought and even unbiased suffrage of every Citizen in possession of his reason'. 'The trifling difference that may have arisen between the several Societies', he downplayed. The main thing, he argued, was to get 'a majority of the nation to act as they do, the proposed reform will effect itself. Annual parliaments would be 'the ground-work of every necessary reform', a response that the prosecution at Hardy's trial took to imply that the LCS was open to an ultimate goal of 'a clear and pure democracy'.¹²³ Margarot's words sound more like a general expression of faith in the power of print to bring about change almost in and of itself.

After consulting with other societies, the LCS decided early in 1793 to unite behind a plan of petitioning Parliament rather than calling a convention. The United Societies at Norwich reluctantly accepted petitioning as the only means available to 'a conquered people', although the same letter also thought that a 'refusal' of the petition would constitute an 'insult' that ought to be registered 'to the remotest part of the kingdom'.¹²⁴ The exchange assumed that petitioning was widely recognised as a traditional means of popular participation in the unreformed system. Nevertheless, it had been argued within the living memory of LCS members – at Lord Gordon's trial for treason – that even petitioning could constitute an attempt to overawe Parliament.¹²⁵ Parliament itself was often hostile to any pretension to direct representation of the popular will in a petition.¹²⁶ In 1793 the LCS was careful to follow what it understood to be the proper forms of addressing Parliament, inviting Fox, as MP for Westminster, to present it to the House. Citing his known opposition to universal suffrage, he refused. Sir Phillip Francis eventually presented it on 6 May. Parliament ordered the petition to lie on the table. Petitions that followed were rejected as disrespectful in their language. Charles Grey's petition fared only a little better, despite representing the opinion of the gentlemen of the Friends of the People.¹²⁷

Given Parliament's perfunctory treatment of what the LCS understood to be a constitutionally ratified form, pressures were bound to mount within the movement to find other ways. Indeed pressures were mounting on many levels to adopt forms free of deference. In his draft reply to Norwich back in November 1792, Margatot had scratched out 'gentlemen' and replaced it with 'fellow-citizens'. At Hardy's trial, the prosecution accepted that the word 'citizen' was in itself inoffensive, but noted the distinction drawn by the LCS committee for revising the constitution between the 'Citizen' of a free state and the 'Subject' of a conquered one.¹²⁸ The February 1794 report on the constitution had certainly been scrupulous in its recommendations on the vocabulary to be used within the LCS:

All political appellations which do not in their immediate interpretation convey an idea of political sentiment or situation, are party names. The following do not fall under this objection as will appear by their explanations.

- Republican*, - One who wishes to promote the general welfare of his country.
- Democrat*, - A supporter of the rights and power of the people.
- Aristocrat*, - One who wishes to promote the interest of a few at the expense of the many.
- Royalist*, - Among the ignorant part of mankind signifies, a person attached to regal government: among artful courtiers it is a veil for their own aristocracy.
- Loyalist*, - A supporter of the constitution of his country.
- Citizen*, - The ancient appellation given to members of free states.
- Subject*, - Can only with propriety, be applied to a member of a State, whose government has been instituted by foreign conquest or the prevalence of a domestic faction.¹²⁹

Philp understands this glossary as an attempt 'to stabilize the language in which people expressed their views and disagreements, as well as stabilizing the order and the institutional structure in which they did so'.¹³⁰ This process turned out to be much more difficult than Hardy could have imagined when he founded the society back in early 1792.

In the debates about its own constitution, a matter I will return to later, the LCS was very alert to questions of democratic practice more generally. Francis Place, who served on a later committee of revision, claimed it aimed at 'assimilating its organization as much as possible to what we conceived to be the best form for governing the Nation'.¹³¹ Place's comment would seem to run counter to Gunther Lottes's suggestion that questions about internal governance of the LCS rarely translated to its

reform programme more generally. Lottes understands the latter as trapped within a tradition wherein 'political representation formed so natural a part of English political culture that the advocates of radical reform had a blunted sensibility to its problems'.¹³² Deafness to these questions is not evident in Thelwall's claim that he who devised the best means of collecting 'the aggregate opinion of a nation . . . will confer the greatest possible benefit upon the human race'. Perhaps it is unsurprising that the LCS did not foreground its own constitutional arrangements in its reform programme when they were still a subject of internal wrangling. Lottes is certainly prone to think of the LCS in corporate terms, when it might be better understood as a more provisional entity, both in relation to its own processes and to wider forms of representation, committed to creating spaces for these issues to be debated.

Questions of representation and responsibility also surfaced in the way the LCS imagined its role in relation to other societies. Margarot's answer to Norwich at the end of 1792 seems to prize the unity of the reform movement over any specific political position, possibly implying, as the prosecution at the treason trials claimed, that he was open to further changes to the constitution in the future. Sometimes, however, a desire for unity became a drive towards uniformity. Eighteenth-century book clubs and other literary societies regularly circulated their rules and regulations. The LCS was frequently asked to provide theirs in the name of more effective circulation of political information.¹³³ A draft letter to Leeds presented at the 1 August committee raised the question of 'uniting their Society to our Own and adopting the title of Corresp. Society'. The committee recommended that a similar offer be made to other societies. This was reinforced the following month when a motion came into the central committee that a circular letter be written to all the 'Country Societies', as those in the regions were called, 'inviting them to adopt our Title & by incorporating themselves, with us form in time a Universal Society'.¹³⁴ Before any debate on the issue could commence, the motion was withdrawn, because Hardy had just received a reply from Tewkesbury declining an earlier offer.¹³⁵

John Lloyd had originally written to the LCS from the Tewkesbury Society in July 1793, signing himself your 'fellow citizen & cooperator in the glorious cause of Liberty'. Margarot had replied with copies of the LCS address to the public and a set of rules, 'adviseable for you to abide entirely by'. The draft goes on to inform the Tewkesbury Society that the LCS 'will willingly incorporate your Society with our own under the

title of the Corresponding Society in Tewkesbury & if so our Rules will become yours, our Intelligence will be the same & our Correspondence weekly and regularly carried on'. Margarot insisted 'our mode of proceeding must be entirely alike & no reserve must take place between us'. He was confident 'some other societies in other parts of the country will fall into the plan'. The effect he imagined as rendering much more 'forcible . . . everything that came from us'. Some societies did adopt a uniform title and rules, including the Manchester Corresponding Society, but one imagines that a society which already existed, like the Tewkesbury Society, with its own rules already adapted to its local circumstances, was less likely simply to dissolve itself into Margarot's plan. Margarot's letter seems tactless to say the least, but it reveals tendencies towards codification and centralisation in the attempt to represent the LCS as the incorporated voice of the people. There seems little doubt that for some at least within the LCS the dream of the flow of knowledge across a commonwealth of reason was part of their idea of improvement. Equally the decision to drop the plan once Tewkesbury and other societies rejected it suggests that the idea of a uniform public sphere was far from being a core principle of the society as a whole. Faced with claims for autonomy from associated societies, the LCS was willing to understand the question of collecting the opinions of the people as a complex matter of representation and self-determination.

On the same day as the LCS approved the letter to Leeds, several divisions recommended that a copyist be hired to transcribe 'all the letters received from the Country'. The purpose was to allow them to be read in each division, so that individual members could have proper access to the activities of the society. The practical question of processing and storing increasing volumes of information for and about the membership was obviously a driving mechanism, but it had political consequences, which the Tewkesbury Society at least resisted, and which the central committee did not necessarily embrace (the debate on the copyist was deferred). Probably as a defence mechanism against prosecution for unguarded comments from correspondents, the committee decided at the next meeting that only 'such parts of the letters received as were proper to be communicated, should be transcribed'. However functionalist one's account of these developments, questions of authorial responsibility and democratic participation were clearly shaping the LCS's decisions at all levels, including the debates, going on at just this time, about whether and in what form the Society should republish *The Englishman's Right*

discussed in Chapter 1. They were also debating the writing of a proposed 'Address to the King', not least in relation to the question of the appropriate forms of address that should be used to the monarch.

This last issue was weighty enough to require the setting up of yet another sub-committee, comprising Margarot, Parkinson, Walne, Baxter, and Moore. The plan was for the address to be published, but only after being read at a second general meeting set for 24 October to canvass opinion more widely. Afterwards, Baxter objected that the agreed statement of public grievances had been dropped in favour of a plea for 'speedy termination to the War'. Eaton also signed the protest against this decision as 'unjustified and unconstitutional'. These things may seem mere minutiae compared with the larger issues for which the LCS was contending, but such a lofty perspective risks missing Baxter's insistence on respecting democratic forms and on an uncowed disposition towards the king. Gerrald was chosen to read the 'Address to the King' at the general meeting. Not long afterwards he published *A Convention the Only Means of Saving us from Ruin* (1793). Gerrald's pamphlet opened with an account of the disastrous effects of war on the nation in order to argue that conditions in the country were so exceptional as to warrant the calling of a convention of the people. In the wake of the failure of the petitions supporting Grey's half-hearted motion for reform in May, the societies had begun discussing alternatives in earnest, including the possibility of a convention. Gerrald came at the issue in a roundabout way. After spending many pages attacking the war and the corruption of the legal system, he claimed that 'to the want of an adequate representation in parliament may be traced all our sufferings, under whatever aspect they are presented'. Given the refusal of Parliament to reform itself, there was 'no other resource, than the interposition of the great body of the people themselves, electing deputies in whom they can confide, and imparting instructions which they must injoin to be executed'.¹³⁶

Gerrald is typical of what Green calls the 'confrontational exploitation of the ambiguities of constitutional limits'.¹³⁷ He was only too well aware that the word 'convention' had a fraught history caught up with questions of whether the people were understood to wield a constituent power. His own uses of the word in the pamphlet's early pages are to do with the National Convention of France's decision to depose Louis XVI, but his argument avoids the word for the most part and concerns itself with British precedents. Gerrald argued that the right 'of assembling to deliberate on the best mode of promoting the public welfare, is no where forbidden by any positive statute'. If the '*right* of assembling then is lawful', he

continued, then 'the *power* of exercising that right is a necessary consequence of it'. He finds ample precedent in British constitutional history, but ultimately goes right back to Anglo-Saxon times, at one point providing 'convention' as a gloss for 'folk-mote'.¹³⁸ Blackstone's *Commentaries* and the Scottish radical John Millar treated the folk-mote as 'an oligarchic council of wise men', as Barrell phrases it, but Gerrald presented it as 'a democratic assembly'.¹³⁹ Burke, Gerrald claimed, had once ranked it 'among public misfortunes, that the House of Commons should be wholly untouched by the opinions and feelings of the people out of doors'. Gerrald dismissed the idea of virtual representation as 'nonsensical jargon' and set about presenting his own plan for a convention, with deputies elected at primary assemblies.¹⁴⁰ An attempt to set up an Irish convention in 1792 had been met with legislation banning just such an association, but Gerrald used this legislation as proof of the legality of such a meeting in England, where no such law existed. He also invoked the authority of the associations of the 1780s, enjoying the fact that ministers like Pitt and the Duke of Richmond had been involved. There are also echoes in the plan of the proposals that Gerrald's friend Robert Merry had put forward to the National Convention in France at the end of 1792.¹⁴¹ The influences of Paine and David Williams, the latter explicitly acknowledged, are also apparent. Overall, Gerrald made his convention sound much less like a forum for collecting public opinion and more like an alternative to Parliament, but the uncertainty was unresolved. Ambiguity over the implications of calling a convention was soon to land Gerrald in prison.

The LCS never really resolved its attitude to what a convention would be or do, if it ever called one. From early on, various societies had written to the LCS suggesting it as the best way forward. In Scotland, the Scottish Friends of the People – an organisation quite different from Grey's association – had already held conventions in December 1792 and May 1793, without ever resolving the issue. On 17 May, Hardy and Margatot had written to Scotland to ask William Skirving for his view: 'Our Petitions have been all of them unsuccessful; our Attention must now therefore be turned to some more effectual Means – from your Society we would willingly learn them.' In his reply, Skirving recommended what he called 'a general union' of the reform societies as a first step. In July a general meeting of the LCS resolved to promote closer union with all the reform societies, perhaps the origin of the suggestion made to Tewkesbury about names and rules, but also perhaps a step towards Skirving's suggested course. In the correspondence between Skirving and the LCS, a suspicion is registered that Pitt may have been contemplating a version of

the anti-convention laws passed in Ireland. Barrell has suggested this fear may account for the hasty meeting of the 'British Convention' in Scotland at the end of 1793.¹⁴² On 24 October, the LCS called a general meeting to elect its delegates for Edinburgh. Helped by the reputation of his pamphlet no doubt, Gerrald was elected. The meeting itself was held on grounds in Spitalfields, owned by a pump-maker Thomas Breillat.¹⁴³ The large crowd that attended confirmed to the LCS the potential in large open-air meetings. 'Many who came there to ridicule and abuse', Hardy claimed later, 'went away converted and afterwards joined the society and became zealous promoters of the cause.'¹⁴⁴ Given the scepticism about virtual representation, such meetings came to be understood as an embodied presence of the constituent power of the people daring Parliament to ignore its views.

The government certainly did not ignore events in Edinburgh. The LCS delegates Gerrald and Margarot arrived too late for the General Convention of the Friends of the People, which began on 29 October and ended a few days later with a resolution to petition Parliament for a reform based on the Duke of Richmond's plan. Their advent forced the meeting to reconvene as the British Convention on 19 November. Despite Gerrald's gestures towards the 'folk-mote', it soon began to model itself consciously after the National Convention of France. The implication, as Barrell puts it, was that it understood itself 'as a legislative, not as a petitioning body'.¹⁴⁵ The question of its constitutive power was still being debated when the Scottish authorities dispersed the meeting. The LCS delegates understood a motion to have been passed that justified the calling of a convention if a petition was rejected by Parliament. Skirving and Margarot were brought to trial in January and sentenced to fourteen years transportation. Charles Sinclair, the SCI delegate, was arrested at the same time, but later released. Granted bail, Gerrald appeared as a guest of honour at the SCI meeting on 17 January. Three days later he appeared at the general meeting of the LCS at the Globe Tavern. Friends, including his former teacher Samuel Parr, advised him to flee, but he returned to Scotland for his trial.¹⁴⁶ His decision may have been influenced by a sense of his 'public' role enjoined on him by William Godwin who wrote to congratulate him for being 'Fertile in genius {,} strong in moral feeling {,} prepared with every accomplishment that literature & reflection can give.' Godwin advised him to make use of the trial to tell 'a tale upon which the Happiness of Nations depends'.¹⁴⁷ In one obvious sense the advice failed, as Gerrald received the same sentence as Skirving and Margarot and died in New South Wales in 1796. In another sense, he achieved the immortality that

Godwin promised him. 'Gerrald understood', as James Epstein has put it, 'that he was creating a literary text', one very alert to the mediating contexts of courtroom and print. In order to transmit his words to the reading public as swiftly as possible, the LCS sent a shorthand writer to the court.¹⁴⁸

Gerrald took up the role of martyr in his defence speech with gusto. Presenting himself, as Epstein shows, as 'a simple individual' upon whom had fallen 'a sacred trust', he placed himself in a long tradition of British liberty.¹⁴⁹ Not presuming to speak for the people, he presented himself as a martyr to their right to be heard. After an opening that set out the case for reform on the grounds of natural rights, he quickly moved to arguing that those grounds were intrinsic to the ancient constitution being eroded by the encroachments of the Crown. He certainly succeeded in entering the pantheon of the radical movement, not as a theorist perhaps, but as an icon of heroic suffering for the people. John Richter wrote an address to Gerrald that he read at the Chalk Farm general meeting on 14 April 1794. Following a string of declarations that presented the nation as declining towards a state where 'BRITONS ARE NO LONGER FREE', Richter addressed Gerrald as 'beloved and respected friend and fellow citizen, a Martyr to the Glorious Cause of Equal Representation'.¹⁵⁰ Here was a reimagining of the 'Glorious Cause' as always tending towards universal suffrage, an idea Thelwall was hammering away at in his lectures at the time, with the crowd at Chalk Farm being implicitly treated as the embodied form of the political nation, 'a literal representation of the virtual collectives enabled by the press'.¹⁵¹ Richter's address was published in an official LCS account of the meeting. Gerrald's trial had concluded a month earlier, and versions were also quickly published, 'for the BENEFIT of his INFANT DAUGHTER'.¹⁵² Succeeding to Gerrald's role as the LCS's most dashing orator, Thelwall barely gave a lecture without mention of his predecessor, and scarcely ever failed to make use of the seventeenth-century precedents Gerrald used at his trial. A visit to Gerrald on board the *Surprise* before he sailed for Australia added to his stock of emotional scenarios.¹⁵³

By 1795, there was a substantial canon of Gerraldiana. *Joseph Gerrald, A Fragment* published by John Smith, gives a short version of his life, supplemented by another newspaper account, together with 'To Citizen Gerrald' a poem in his praise. Eaton had already published 'Tribute of a Humble Muse to the Memory of Joseph Gerrald' by 'a patriotic female', one of several other poems of this kind, in the pages of *Politics for the People*.¹⁵⁴ *Joseph Gerrald, A Fragment* includes a list of other works by and

about Gerrald published by Smith: a new edition of *A Convention* at 2s 6d, *The Trial of Joseph Gerrald . . . with his Portrait*, 4s, *The Defence of Joseph Gerrald*, 1s 6d, *Gerrald's Address of the British Convention*, at 6d. Some of these prices suggest that it was not only members of the LCS who were expected to react to their portraits of the suffering patriot. Eaton brought out two editions of *Authentic biographical anecdotes of Gerrald* in 1795 'written by a friend'. In *Conciones ad Populum* (1795), Coleridge invited his audience to imagine Gerrald:

Withering in the sickly and tainted gales of a prison, his healthful soul looks down from the citadel of his integrity on his impotent persecution.

Within a year, Coleridge had changed his tune. He tried to persuade Thelwall that Gerrald was one of those 'Atheistic Brethren' who 'square their moral systems exactly according to their inclinations'. The radical movement more generally continued to promote Gerrald as a suffering martyr. Acknowledging that his hero had some faults, Thelwall insisted that Gerrald's life remained largely 'unblemished': 'for what are the little extravagancies of a young man of genius, born, not for the narrow circle of a family, but for the universe – and who, dissipating only what was his own, lays no burthen on society to replace it'.¹⁵⁵

Constitutional schisms

Gerrald bequeathed to the radical societies a strong idea of the legitimacy of convention politics, but a continued uncertainty as to exactly what they meant. In the early months of 1794, the possibilities of calling one were debated at various meetings and in correspondence between the LCS and the regional societies, but enthusiasm for it seems to have dwindled by May 1794. Nevertheless, the idea that a convention was being planned to overawe Parliament played a crucial role at the treason trials at the end of the year.¹⁵⁶ Rather than retrace Barrell's discussion of the trials, I shall revert to the internal issues of representation within the LCS, especially those surrounding the revision of the constitution. Security matters intensified these debates, especially after the arrests in May 1794, but they were clearly informed by ongoing issues surrounding democratic processes and forms of address. In this regard, the question of the convention was not unrelated, as both turned on how relations between representation and participation were to be conceived. By 1795, these issues had become even more acute within the LCS, as a significant body of members seems to have resisted strengthening the power of an executive committee as a

usurpation of the rights of the members gathered in the divisions. Some of the latter left the LCS and formed themselves into separate societies, devoted to reading, discussion, and political lectures as the proper means of political change, sometimes with a distinctively Godwinian inflection.

A strain of thinking in the LCS that tended towards imagining print as telegraphic in the immediacy of its effects, as we have seen, always coexisted with a practical attentiveness to the materiality of its mediations. In this regard, the idea that every document had to be subjected to some form of democratic scrutiny was a foundational if often divisive aspect of the print culture of the LCS. This scrutiny extended to the question of the constitution of the society and ended up opening the larger question of understanding reform in a broader 'moral' sense, where the latter could even include scepticism about the need for government at all. In response to the arrests for treason in May 1794, the central committee hurriedly proposed the adoption of a new constitution without fully consulting the divisions. They were quickly accused of 'an act of great usurpation and aristocracy'.¹⁵⁷ Such accusations had scarred earlier debates on the issue. Reporting on a meeting at division 29 in February, the spy Taylor described the debate between Thelwall and Hodgson on 18 February mentioned in Chapter 1. Despite their agreement on the need for change, Hodgson argued in favour of a proper constitution for the society, but Thelwall thought it unnecessary and gained most applause. Three days later at his lecture, according to Taylor's notes, Thelwall argued that 'Reason truth and justice were at all times better than positive Laws'.¹⁵⁸ His position probably drew on his reading in *Political justice*, where Godwin had declared that 'law is merely relative to the exercise of political force, and must perish when the necessity of that force ceases, if the influence of truth do not sooner extirpate it from the practice of mankind'.¹⁵⁹

The central committee's proposal for a new constitution was the culmination of the report by different committees that had been sitting since at least March 1793. The *Report of the Committee of the Constitution, of the London Corresponding Society* published in February 1794 was rejected, and a sub-committee to revise it was appointed at the meeting where Hodgson and Thelwall clashed. Hodgson and Richter objected to the new committee and made the issue into one of direct participation: 'any discussion or resolutions of any constituted body relative to this object are Factious & can only tend to *over awe* the opinion of our Constituents'.¹⁶⁰ At around this time, John Pearce, an attorney, seems to have taken to attending meetings with a copy of Blackstone's *Commentaries* under his arm: to

‘make a quotation or two for the instruction of the Citizens, respecting the power’s [sic] of Bodies who *create* & the Subordination of the *Created*’.¹⁶¹ The question was of the relative authority of constitutive and constituted power. Blackstone had been a major force in cementing the idea of the sovereignty of Parliament over the people.¹⁶² The LCS’s internal struggle over its constitution intersected with its debates about the authority of a convention relative to Parliament. The report of the new committee of revision was ready by April and sent out to be debated by the divisions. The spy Groves claimed that division 2 had to adjourn its debate when it came to the phrase ‘all government abstractly considered, being itself an evil’. When the debate restarted at their meeting of 5 May, it was objected that the statement against government ‘would give room to the Enemies of the Society & the cause to declaim against their principles’.¹⁶³

While these heated debates were continued, the question of whether a national convention of societies ought to be summoned was also being discussed. Given urgency by the fear that the government was contemplating anti-convention legislation, these were primarily conducted by a secret committee, but complicated by the different opinions on what kind of body constituted a convention. For some, it was the most direct mode of expressing the popular will, and as such potentially a direct challenge to the authority of Parliament. For others, it seems, the gathering was only a means of sounding opinion and deciding on what their next course of action should be. Those who favoured this last understanding, including the SCI’s representatives, tended to steer away from the word ‘convention’ as savouring too much of French practices, notwithstanding the purchase of the word within British constitutionalist discourse. At the beginning of April 1794, a joint conference of the LCS and SCI met to discuss the calling of a convention. Thelwall produced a plan, but the SCI delegates objected to the use of the word ‘convention’. Later at his interview before the Privy Council, William Sharp the engraver claimed that most of the meeting was taken up with arguments over forms of words.¹⁶⁴ A few days later, on 14 April, the LCS held a general meeting at Chalk Farm, on the road north out of London. The meeting resolved that the treatment of Gerrald and his fellows was proof that Britons were no longer free. Further, echoing Gerrald, their treatment ‘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 the SUPREME, and in cases of necessity, the ONLY Law*’. This opinion could certainly sound like preparation for a convention that would presume to speak for the will of

the people to a Parliament that had defaulted on its duty. At the address of thanks to Lord Stanhope, Richter and Hodgson condemned the aristocratic title 'lord' and proposed 'citizen' instead. A similar wrangle followed about the word 'senate', which Thelwall claimed meant 'Respectful & Wise Men'. In all the arguments about words, the question was one of deference to received forms and how much they might be reconstituted in the state of crisis.¹⁶⁵

The government's decision to arrest the leaders of the societies in May was predicated on the strongest possible understanding of 'convention' politics, that is, in terms of the statute on treason, as an attempt to overawe and ultimately replace Parliament.¹⁶⁶ Although the arrests understandably soon put a stop to the debates in the LCS about internal structures, the hiatus did not last long, despite the absence of key figures in custody. The debate over the authority of the executive rekindled in June 1794, now reinforced by the need to protect meetings from infiltration by spies and informers. Groves explained to his masters that these debates had always had an eye to the question of what was being imagined for the governance of the nation at large:

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 Governmnt. And as investing Powers & creating Offices & Officers among themselves which would infallibly render the Division a Cypher, and the whole management & Controul be placed in the hands of a few, & thereby their Government will be Monarchical or something worse.

Now it seemed the question of the LCS's constitution might serve to rally the society:

The increased operations of Government having excited a general panic, and the defection being so great as to threaten the Society with a total annihilation, and it having been adjudged that bringing forward the Constitution again, in any form, rather than being without one at all, would serve to rally the Society, and restore it to its original vigour, the preceding expedient was hit upon & the Motion accordingly submitted.

The central committee recommended that the revised report be adopted, but some of the divisions reiterated the objection of 'usurpation and Aristocracy'. Despite supporting the revised constitution, John Bone rose to observe that 'the French Convention had never dared speak of a Constitution until it had been sanctioned by and had received the

compleat approbation of the people'. In the circumstances of needing to prepare for the impending trials, it was decided to put the debate aside and continue using the original constitution, although Hodgson wrote in August from 'on the tramp', having fled to escape arrest, to insist on his old position that the LCS urgently required a new one.¹⁶⁷

In the light of the government's attempts to prepare for the trials by peppering the press with accounts of the LCS's plans for a convention as a treasonable conspiracy, the committee insisted on its primary role as the dissemination of political information. Accounts of Hardy's arrest and the fate of his wife were published, mainly taken up with rebutting the claims made by the first report of the committee of secrecy that there was any conspiracy afoot.¹⁶⁸ With numbers dwindling in the face of the arrests, attempts were made to revive conviviality. Division 9 devoted an evening to 'pleasure rather than business'. The spy Metcalfe noted 'many Treasonable songs were sung'.¹⁶⁹ Other songs were written by Thomas Upton, an informer, and distributed to the divisions to sell at a half penny. Printing costs were squeezing finances straitened by defections. On 3 July, the printer Citizen Davidson wrote to complain that his bills had not been met, his irritation compounded by the fact the LCS was starting to employ others, presumably to spread its debts. One additional cost was the need to produce new membership tickets to replace those that had fallen into the hands of the government. At first the engraver William Worship was entrusted with the task, but he seems to have been struck by panic at the arrests. A week later Citizen Williams promised a 'voluntary Engraving for the New Tickets' in the form of an old man instructing his three sons that they could only break a bundle of sticks by snapping them one at a time: 'The Allegory is The acquisition of Strength by Unanimity'.¹⁷⁰ The central committee also invested in a series of pamphlets primarily aimed at rebutting the idea that it supported violent revolution, most of them written or revised by Eaton's old collaborator James Parkinson. They were *Revolutions without Bloodshed*, published by Eaton and Smith, with proceeds going to the wives and children of the prisoners; *Reformers no Rioters*, written by Bone, but revised by Burks and Parkinson, published in response to the Crimp riots that shook London a few weeks earlier; and *Vindication of the London Corresponding Society*, largely concerned with defending the LCS from the government press campaign in the weeks leading up to the trials.¹⁷¹ The final page of Parkinson's *Vindication* carries an advertisement for the others, each sold at a penny, together with one for the LCS's other major print project, a new periodical called *The Politician*.

The idea for *The Politician* had been around in the LCS since July when John Bone raised the issue of a weekly publication 'in the Nature of Paine's Crisis'. No doubt the proposal was partly inspired by the reputation of the *Crisis* as the paper that had stiffened the resolve of the Americans in the War of Independence. Bone's suggestion was agreed and a public receiving box was set up for contributions. Not unusually in the LCS, there then followed weeks of debate about how to go about the business, despite the fact that John Smith reported to the committee of correspondence that 'a New Patriotic Newspaper would shortly be published twice a week'. There was a hint of pride in Smith's confidence that it would be 'a compleat Democratic paper . . . indeed the Society might call it their own Paper'. In this regard, the committee was trying to occupy the ground so successfully worked by Eaton's *Politics for the People* and Spence's *Pig's Meat*, with more control of the content by the LCS itself. The delay may have been exacerbated by the fact most of the members experienced with print were in prison, as was Spence, or on the run, as Eaton seems to have been. A long list of 'literary men' who might be approached was deliberated over. With the pending trials in mind, the committee approached the attorneys Gurney and Vaughan for an essay on 'the Rights of Witnesses'. Hodgson drew up a prospectus for the new paper that provoked furious debate, especially about a passage 'which seem'd to hold out the publication as a medium for discussing other questions than those which immediately related to a Reform in Parliament and universal Suffrage, and partaly [sic] to a part which courted a discussion upon the Merits and advantages of other Governments'. As well as French affairs, Hodgson seems to glance at the broader 'moral' aspects of the LCS's mission of social 'improvement'.

The meeting decided that the document ought to be referred to Parkinson, probably the most experienced LCS writer at liberty. Parkinson decided on a list of 'literary gentlemen' who ought to be approached to revise the prospectus, including James Mackintosh, still regarded as the defender of the French Revolution; the dissenting minister Joseph Towers; Thomas Holcroft, soon to turn himself in on the treason charge; and someone called Beaumont, probably the journalist at the *Telegraph*.¹⁷² Each declined and Parkinson decided Hodgson's prospectus should be sent to a Mr Bayley, who had said he would revise and correct it.¹⁷³ At the same meeting, Bone produced the original draft of *Reformers no Rioters*, according to the spy Metcalfe, 'full of the most violent and seditious expressions & calculated to renew the tumults which so lately prevail'd'. Parkinson and Burks were called on to 'revise and modify'. With the

treason trials looming, the LCS was being particularly careful about the sentiments associated with its name. Smith was left with the decision as to who should print and edit the *Politician*, 'whose Name is not to be made public'. Contributions were only to be received at Smith's shop. Burks was then given the task of writing to a list of forty-eight 'Literary Men' requesting contributions. Further progress must have been delayed by the fact Smith himself was arrested a few weeks later for his supposed involvement in the pop-gun plot to assassinate the king.¹⁷⁴ In the event, the paper did not appear until 13 December.

Coming only a week or so after the acquittal of Thelwall, the paper was a sign of confidence blossoming again after the victories at the treason trials. The title-page was bold enough to name William Townly as editor, contrary to the earlier decision to withhold such details. Burks and Smith were to receive communications. The paper presented itself as a forum for political discussion, allowing 'rational' attacks against universal suffrage as well as support for the principle. The first number duly contained an essay arguing for reform but against universal suffrage. Another essay, celebrating Margarot, returned to the issue of 'party names'. Signed 'R. H.', the stalwart printer Robert Hawes may have been the author. On a similar theme, an essay in the final issue called for the LCS to rename itself 'Society for Reform', so as to avoid any aspersion that it was in correspondence with the French.¹⁷⁵ Thelwall dominated the third and penultimate number, although he apologised that 'my engagements at this time do not permit me to comply in a more ample manner with your request for literary Communications'. Acknowledging 'the important utility of little publications' as a ready means for the dissemination of political information, Thelwall went on to rebut some of the specific charges made against him at his trial. The next few pages were taken up with a copy of his speech given to the court after the verdict and a poem he had composed in the Tower.¹⁷⁶ Other poems were promised for later numbers, but in the event only one more ever appeared. The fourth number of the *Politician* (3 January 1795) was the last. Contrary to the expectations of the LCS, the stamp commissioners informed the publishers that they were liable for duty. The editors ended with a pledge to return that was never fulfilled.

The LCS made other investments in print over these dark months following the arrests of May 1794. Poems were sent in to the LCS from 'Tommy Pindar junior'. July saw Hodgson receive another 'large parcel of printed verses'. 'Written by a good citizen for the relief of the Wives & Children of the imprisoned Citizens', these were doled out to each delegate to be sold at a halfpenny'.¹⁷⁷ Possibly they were Citizen Lee's poems as

Powell later described him as 'very active in supporting the subscriptions for the persons imprison'd & very liberal himself'. Smith and Burks were selling Lee's poem *On the death of Mrs Hardy, wife of Mr. Thomas Hardy* for 1d each or 7s per hundred in the same cause.¹⁷⁸ The onset of the treason trials also produced some virulent satire against Pitt, including *A warning to judges and jurors on state trials*, which ends with a protracted account of the Grand Vizier hanging himself. Many other imaginings of Pitt's death soon followed, including the wonderful series of mock advertising bills for Signor Pittachio.¹⁷⁹ By mid-1795 satires like *A faithful narrative of the last illness, death, and interment of the Rt. Hon. William Pitt* were flying off the radical presses, not least Citizen Lee's, by this time operating as a bookseller in his own right.

In general terms, the acquittals at the treason trials gave a spur to radical print culture, but the legal process left scars that threatened the unity of the movement. Horne Tooke announced that he was retiring from politics. The SCI effectively ceased to exist. Hardy concentrated on recovering his shoemaking business. Thelwall recommenced lecturing at Beaufort Buildings, but withdrew from the LCS for months. A number of narratives recorded the anger of those who had been arrested, including Thelwall's *Natural and Constitutional Right* (1795), Holcroft's *A narrative of facts* (1795), and Jeremiah Joyce's *Mr. Joyce's arrest* (1795). Not all the prisoners were released quickly. Richter and Baxter remained in prison until mid-December, John Martin until September 1795. *Pig's Meat* published songs from the various celebrations, but Spence also supplied some bitter reflections on the festivities after his release on 22 December:

If half the wealth, and half the wind,
That there was spent to no great end,
Had been employ'd for to relieve
The wants of pat'ots that now grieve,
Who blushing for a nation's crimes,
Dare yield to truth the homage due? ¹⁸⁰

Horne Tooke's conduct at the trials themselves was subjected to scathing attack in the anonymous *John Horne Tooke Stripped Naked and Dissected*:

After adhering like a buzzing and teizing gnat, for so many years, to the buttocks of the Aristocracy, you now in the period of the grand climacteric, apologise for the annoyance, by the forfeiture of your admitted principle.¹⁸¹

If there was personal resentment here, there was also a sense that the movement ought to be orienting itself to its broadest constituency, giving

voice to the popular will, rather than deferring to friends of liberty within the elite.

Ill feeling translated itself into rancorous debates in the LCS itself, as the arguments over its constitution flared again between February and May 1795. Several divisions seceded. In an attempt to draw the LCS back together, the committee published an appeal that characterised the contending parties in terms of two extremes. One position questioned the need for any constitution at all. This body of opinion appeared to believe:

That the only means of securing social happiness is by the general diffusion of Knowledge, and this being effected, all regard to constitutional and legal rules would become unnecessary.

From this position, identifiable with Thelwall's in his argument with Hodgson back in 1794, the LCS ought to have been committed to a democratic version of Godwin's faith in the power of discussion alone as a force for political change. The other party in the LCS debate saw such thinking as visionary delusion and insisted that 'constitutional regulations, judiciously formed, are to be considered as beacons rather than as fetters'. This position owed more to Paine's thinking about the importance of constitutions and less to Godwin's ideas of perfectibility. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the leadership showed more sympathy for a position that accepted the impossibility of 'achieving moral perfection'. Instead, it affirmed the need for 'prudent regulations, and the propagation of laudable principles, to guard against those follies and vices which have so frequently disturbed the happiness of Society'. It also confirmed its commitment to 'the Diffusion by means of cheap publications of such Knowledge as may tend to awaken the Public Mind to the necessity of Universal Suffrage & Annual Parliaments'.¹⁸²

The appeal was insufficient to recall the two divisions who had already seceded. At the end of March, division 12 had written to complain of the treatment of its delegate John Bone (who had been accused of spying) and separated itself as the London Reforming Society. At the same time, the main body of his accusers, primarily members of division 16, had left to form 'the Friends of Liberty'. In a letter to the central committee, their secretary Stephen Cooper made clear that the schism had to do with constitutional matters and stated that he had always been against the formation of an executive within the Society. For its part, the London Reforming Society set about proposing a book plan, effectively a restatement of the idea that the divisions represented autonomous cells for the dissemination and debate of political information. It was not averse to

cooperation with other societies in this regard, indeed Bone wrote to the LCS in May with his plan.¹⁸³ If his idea seems to chime in with an ecumenical vision of little societies bringing about reform via the media of reading and discussion, then Bone's religious views were proving more troublesome to the LCS. He seems to have been a 'saint' who propagated his religious opinions at meetings, probably one of several unhappy with the society's support for Paine and Volney's deism. On 15 October 1795 a letter came from 'the religious Seceders', formerly division 27, saying they had formed a society called 'the Friends of Religious & Civil Liberty'. Despite the rift, they wished to continue to correspond with the LCS, although Hodgson and other LCS members opposed their 'conduct' as enshrined in the first article in their regulations: 'no members should be admitted but who pledged themselves to believe in the Scriptures'.¹⁸⁴ Citizen Lee was probably a casualty of these schisms within the LCS. He may even have joined the Friends of Religious and Civil Liberty. Certainly he and Hawes, another religious man, were the only booksellers of any previous standing with the LCS who sold the new society's tracts.¹⁸⁵

For the most part, the schismatics continued to coordinate their efforts in one way or another with the LCS, whatever their differences. With food shortages and military setbacks threatening the stability of the government, by early summer 1795 conditions seemed ripe for another concerted push for reform. The situation turned attention away from the question of the LCS's constitution and back to the idea of a larger crisis that threatened a suspension of the compact between the people and their government. The LCS called the first in a series of outdoor meetings for the end of June. The official LCS account described 'a spectacle at once sublime and awful, since it seems as though the whole British Nation had convened itself upon this extraordinary occasion, to witness the propriety of our conduct, and testify for the legality of our proceedings'. This vision of the people gathered in protest, of course, implies that the will of the people was finding an alternative voice in response to Parliament's failure to fulfil its obligations to the nation. At this critical juncture, the 'Address to the Nation' insisted, the slow spread of political information must give way to more urgent councils. 'Calm remonstrances of reason', the introduction continues, must now cede to the 'strong impulse of necessity.' In the face of 'impending danger' it goes on 'YOUR CHIEF, PERHAPS YOUR ONLY HOPE IS IN YOURSELVES'.¹⁸⁶

Much the same message was hammered out at meetings through the summer and autumn, as it became clear the government intended to introduce legislation against a convention. Threats were made against

ministers, especially Pitt, and in one infamous broadside published by Citizen Lee even king killing was imagined. Edward Henry Iliff's *A summary of the duties of citizenship!* on the other hand, cautioned patience. Writing in response to the king's refusal to countenance the addresses of the LCS, Iliff sketches out a situation where the citizenship is surrounded by species of tyranny ranging from the army to the bishops. His pamphlet imagines that the government has broken its compact with the governed, but ultimately advises the LCS to continue its campaign of political education along Godwinian lines: 'Tis not amidst the buzzing tumult of popular assemblies that you will reap the harvest of information.' Instead of listening to 'hot-brained demagogues, that inflame your passions', he urged his readers to seek 'men familiarized to practical, and speculative morality'.¹⁸⁷ Nevertheless, his message was deemed dangerous enough for the pamphlet to be included on the indictment against its publisher Lee.

Apparently much less Godwinian in emphasis, John Baxter delivered a lecture to the Friends of Liberty (9 November) that insisted on the right to resistance. Printed and sold for a penny by his old associate Burks, Baxter insisted that his aim was to preserve the constitution against the incursions of despotism. Resistance, Baxter argued, was not simply a matter of arms, although he produced historical precedents anyway, but also of a right to 'association to obtain a redress of grievances'.¹⁸⁸ Here was an idea of the right of resistance that probed what Jeremy Bentham called the 'juncture for resistance', that is, the point where even Blackstone acknowledged that the people had the right to assert their constituent power. Uncertainty about what Bentham called the '*Common sign*', the signal that this point had been reached, was part of the ambiguity surrounding Baxter's insistence on the right of the people to resist. The same fuzzy logic had informed Gerrald's convention politics. To the government, this way of thinking was simply a new form of treason, asserting a bogus idea of the popular sovereignty against the constituted authority of Parliament.¹⁸⁹

Despite their differences, Baxter and Iliff both imagined that public opinion would force the government into conceding the argument for reform, as if the manifestation of the constituent power of the people would quite literally overawe Parliament. Exploiting the attack on the king's coach at the end of November, the government chose instead to bring the Two Acts before Parliament, severely restricting rights of association and freedom of expression. London radicalism had built up for itself a complex network of routes for the circulation of political information. Reading, writing, and discussion were the primary media

for its imagining of political transformation, in some imaginings even transcending forms of political organisation in favour of a slowly unfolding moral revolution of the kind, for instance, Iliff seems to have derived from Godwin. For a few, especially Citizen Lee, this power of the word was actually a fulfilment of the Word, as the divine right of republics played itself out in human affairs. Thomas Hardy was a religious man, but he did not make the same appeal to divine providence in his shaping of the LCS's public role. Most radicals shared Godwin's secular sense of public opinion shaped by discussion and the dissemination of print, but with Paine showed much more faith than the philosopher in the power of public assembly and constitution making. Despite in some regards being a disciple of Godwin's, John Thelwall argued that these two visions of change were not mutually exclusive. The period had seen a growing confidence in the constituent power of the people as 'stubbornly active and physical'.¹⁹⁰ Many like Thelwall retained the same robust attitude to print as a medium that had to be adapted to circumstance rather than simply left to work its magic. Many authors and publishers came forward in the attempt to shape and give voice to this popular will. Some survived as writers and publishers beyond the heady years of the 1790s. In the process they and their comrades created a new kind of national imaginary that influenced the radicalism of the nineteenth century. Their achievement was in their contentious ideas about what constituted 'the public' and the role of print in forming it for the new century.

