



# The Scottish History Society Learning Resource

## Scotland and the French Revolution

### What impact did the French Revolution have on popular politics in Scotland?

The French Revolution was a dramatic event which had profound consequences in Scotland as it did elsewhere in the world. In Scotland, as elsewhere, it impacted on a society already changing rapidly and which had already seen developments in politics. The American Revolution had raised issues of reform and from the mid-1780s Scotland had witnessed reform movements aimed at the political systems of the town and the countryside. Religious issues, such as a modest proposed measure of relief for Roman Catholics in Scotland, had also provoked protests which pushed the development of what we would see as features of 'modern' politics: the use of the press, petitioning and the establishment of societies and associations.

Scotland was not, therefore, politically 'asleep' before the French Revolution. The impact of events in France was, however, colossal and resulted in two processes: politicisation and polarisation. More and more people from further down the social scale were being encouraged to engage with politics and a middle ground between positions in favour of and against reform rapidly disappeared in the context of war with revolutionary France.

### Radicalism

Historians have concentrated on how the French Revolution stimulated popular radical societies, whose principal aim was reform of the political system in Scotland (but who had a wide range of other concerns, including the slave trade and religious reform). The expansion of these societies was rapid. Before September 1792, Scotland probably had 2 or 3 reform societies – in Edinburgh, Glasgow and perhaps Perth. By the end of the year, it had somewhere between 80 and 100, many of them in urban centres but also spread across the lowlands. It is quite easy to see from where some historians have got the idea of a transformative 'awakening'.

Inspired by the ideas of Thomas Paine, whose *Rights of Man* (1791) circulated widely, radicals explored and developed a wide range of political strategies. Paramount was the expansion of the press, which provided distinctive Scottish pamphlets, such as James Thomson Callender's *The Political Progress of Britain* (1792) and a relatively short-lived radical newspaper, the *Edinburgh Gazetteer*. This paper publicised the activities and resolutions of radical societies and especially of the series of radical conventions, which were held in Edinburgh between 1792 and 1794. These conventions gathered delegates from the radical societies and published wide-ranging resolutions.

The last and most controversial was a 'British Convention' in the winter of 1793-1794. It adopted the forms and language of the radical French National Convention, dated its minutes from 'The First

Year of the British Convention' (in conscious imitation of the French revolutionaries' abolition of the calendar), while members addressed one another as 'Citizen'. It was partly this worrying similarity to the increasingly radical course of events in France (with whom Britain was at war) which saw the Convention broken up in January 1794 and its leaders arrested and, ultimately, transported.

After 1794 the government passed legislation which made open political activity increasingly difficult. The Scottish equivalent of Habeas Corpus was suspended and in 1795 legislation made meetings and the publication of political writings more difficult. With this closing down of the constitutional opportunities for political activity a dwindling number of radicals had to explore different strategies. In 1794 the 'Pike Plot' (a plan to stage a revolutionary coup in Edinburgh as the start of a general insurrection) was uncovered and its architect, Robert Watt (a former government spy), was executed. Later in the decade secret republican societies of United Scotsmen were established, partly in imitation of and with the support of the United Irishmen. By their nature these groups are difficult for historians to explore, though they seem to have had some role in the opposition to the unpopular Scottish Militia Act, which was passed in July 1797.

## Loyalism

For a very long time historians have only been interested in the fortunes of the radical movement. Recently there has been interest in how the French Revolution also created a conservative or 'loyalist' response to these radical ideas, which commanded considerable support. Loyalism had support from political elites and had a powerful mouthpiece in the established Church of Scotland. It was similarly based on a range of ideas, both secular and religious. These included the ideas of Edmund Burke, whose *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) provided a powerful case for the status quo and against ill-considered reform. Loyalism was especially successful in being able to make a patriotic appeal at a time of war. The British political system, it was argued, might not be perfect, but it provided an admirably wide range of freedoms and a real degree of prosperity. This was contrasted with the supposed anarchy and poverty that characterised revolutionary France. Loyalism also politicised the population and explored similar methods of political communication. Like radicalism, it attempted to get its message across through societies and propaganda. At the same time, loyal political elites had other resources such as the courts, through which coercion rather than persuasion could operate. Radical leaders were transported to Botany Bay for periods of 7 or 14 years during the 1790s. Ultimately, war with revolutionary France was loyalism's most powerful resource. It allowed for the formation of patriotic Volunteer corps across much of Scotland (more, proportionally, than in England or Ireland) and for the consistent depiction of reformers as somehow foreign and French, rather than patriotic and British.

## How close did Scotland come to revolution?

Historians have implicitly explored how 'stable' or 'unstable' Scottish society was during this period. Ultimately this means explaining why Scotland experienced lower levels of political and social upheaval than Ireland in the 1790s. Three different types of explanation are possible:

### Radical Weakness

It might be argued that radicals, who numbered in the thousands rather than tens of thousands, were simply not strong enough to create high levels of political instability. Furthermore, men like Watt and

Downie, who were prepared actively to consider fomenting revolution in Scotland, were in a distinct minority. Most radicals were married to a constitutionalist idea of politics.

## Loyalist Strength

It might be argued that the intellectual and numerical strength of loyalism was the decisive factor. More Scots were prepared to defend or tolerate the status quo than actively to challenge it. To this explanation might also be added the repressive force of the Scottish courts and the powerful role of Scotland's churches.

## A Stable Society?

Finally, it might be argued that Scotland's social structures and its economic life made for a more generalised stability that allowed it to weather the acute crises of the 1790s. Real wages, for example, were rising across this period and it has been suggested that the strongly paternalist ideas of Scotland's ruling classes helped to ensure a population with less interest in revolution.

# Key figures

## Robert Burns (1759-96):

Burns was a great supporter of the French Revolution and of the radical societies in Scotland. Many of his poems from the 1790s breathe the spirit of the French Revolution. Famous examples such as 'Scots, wha hae' (1793) and 'For a' that' (1795), became anthems of radical politics across Britain and beyond. His commitment to the French Revolution was clearly strong, but there has been much debate about its exact nature. As an exciseman, Burns was a government employee and so his radicalism was suspect. He also played a key role in the Dumfries Volunteers.

## James Thomson Callender (1758-1803):

A radical journalist, who represented Canongate No. 1 at the first Convention. He had to flee Scotland shortly after this after the prosecution of his radical pamphlet *The Political Progress of Britain*. The 1790s was a great decade of internationalism and journalists such as Callender and Paine considered themselves as 'Citizens of the World'. Callender made his way to the United States, where he continued his journalistic career.

## Henry Dundas (1742-1811):

Scotland's most prominent politician and the right hand man of the prime minister from 1784, William Pitt the Younger. Dundas's political control of Scotland was such that he has been known pejoratively as 'King Harry the Ninth'. Dundas has been demonised by some historians as the scourge of the radical movement, especially during his time as Home Secretary between 1791 and 1794. He was a powerful politician whose focus was as much on Imperial matters and, as Secretary of War after 1794, on defeating France as it was on events in Scotland. There is an enormous pillar topped with a statue of Dundas in Edinburgh's St Andrew Square.

## **Robert Macqueen, Lord Braxfield (1722-1799):**

The judge who tried the Scottish martyrs. He has gone down in popular memory as a 'hanging judge' and someone who persecuted radicals and prejudged the causes of those men who came before him. This image was compounded by stories about his statements from the bench, delivered in broad Scots. For example, when Joseph Gerrald, defending himself, suggested that Jesus himself had been a reformer, Braxfield is said to have muttered: 'Muckle he made o'that; he was hanget'. He achieved literary immortality as the model for Robert Louis Stevenson's Weir of Hermiston.

## **Thomas Muir (1765-1799):**

A Glasgow lawyer who was active in the establishment of reform societies and the distribution of the works of Thomas Paine. He took an active role at the first convention and was singled out by the legal authorities for prosecution. After the convention he went to France in January 1793 to remonstrate against the execution of King Louis XVI. This trip did him no favours when it came to his trial. Muir chose to defend himself at his trial and was convicted and sentenced to be transported for 14 years. He managed to escape from New South Wales in 1796 (on an American ship) and after a series of adventures he returned to France in 1797. He died in France and is buried in Chantilly.

## **'Scottish Martyrs':**

The men who were transported to the penal colony of New South Wales in the 1790s are collectively known as the 'Scottish Martyrs' (though not all of them were born in or lived in Scotland!) There is a monument to the five most famous 'martyrs' – Thomas Muir, Thomas Fyshe Palmer, Maurice Margarot, Joseph Gerrald and William Skirving – in the Old Calton burial ground in Edinburgh. It was erected by political reformers in the 1840s in remembrance of an earlier generation of activists.

# Suggested Reading

Bob Harris, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution* (London, Pickering & Chatto, 2008).

Kenneth J. Logue, *Popular Disturbances in Scotland, 1780-1815* (Edinburgh, John Donald, 1979)

E. W. McFarland, *Ireland and Scotland in the Age of Revolution: Planting the Green Bough* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1994).

L. McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical. Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (East Linton, Tuckwell Press, 2002)

H. Meikle, *Scotland and the French Revolution* (Glasgow, James Maclehose, 1912)

# Brief account of events

YEAR

SCOTLAND

FRANCE

## 1789

May:		Sitting of Estates-General
June:		Third Estate declares National Assembly
July:		Storming of the Bastille

## 1791

Feb:	Publication of Thomas Paine, Rights of Man Part I	
June:		Royal family flees but forced to return to Paris
July:	Meetings in Scotland to Commemorate storming of the Bastille	

## 1792

April		France at war with Austria.
June:	Riots in Scotland during the King's birthday celebrations.	
July:	Association of the Friends of the People formed in Edinburgh and other societies follow across Scotland.	
Aug:		Royal family arrested
Sept:		Massacres of prisoners and establishment of National Convention
Dec:	First Scottish Convention (Edinburgh) and first loyalist associations formed	

## 1793

Jan		Louis XVI executed after trial in Convention
Feb		France at war with Britain, Holland and Spain
Mar		Royalist revolt in Vendée
Apr-May:	Second Scottish Convention (Edinburgh)	(April) Power centred in Committee of Public Safety [start of 'Terror' and radical phase of Revolution
Aug-Sept:	Trials and convictions of Thomas Muir (14 years transportation) and Thomas Fyshe Palmer (7 years)	
Oct:	Third Scottish Convention (Edinburgh)	
Nov:	British Convention (Edinburgh)	
Dec:	Leaders of British Convention arrested	

1794		
Jan-Mar:	Trials and convictions of William Skirving, Maurice Margarot, Joseph Gerrald (all sentenced to 14 years transportation)	
May:	Suspension of Habeas Corpus (England) and Act anent Wrongous Imprisonment (Scotland)	
Aug-Sept:	Arrests in Edinburgh for 'Pike Plot'	
1795		
Food shortages and some protest		
Oct:		Convention dissolved and Directory governs
Dec:	Government passes Treasonable Practices and Seditious Meetings Acts	
1797		
Formation of secret Societies of United Scotsmen		
July-Sept:	Anti-Militia protests	
1798		
May-June:	Insurrection in Ireland	
1799		
First of a series of bad harvests		
Nov-Dec:	Coup and installation of Napoleon and Consulate	