

Edinburgh Conventions of the Delegates as One Example of British Radicalism in the 1790s



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When the *Convention of Delegates from the various Friends of the People Societies* was summoned in Edinburgh in December 1792, this type of extra-parliamentary political activity was already known in Britain. Since the inauguration of George III in 1760, a new kind of political movement had been launched and gradually formed its activities. This movement affected by Wilkes' affair, created an extra-parliamentary pressure organisation. In the 1760s, the wider public began to engage in political issues. Although they did not have voting rights, under direction of local agitators they often supported a programme by politicians and intellectuals who stood in opposition to the government. They demanded a shorter Parliament in order to prevent corruption and also called for an extension of the franchise to some newly growing industrial centres such as Leeds, Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield, at the expense of meaningless constituencies, known as "rotten boroughs". The middle class, which possessed sizeable capital, demanded broader political rights and representation of their commercial and industrial interests in Parliament. At that time, the interests of landowners of large properties were predominantly advocated in Parliament.¹

James Burgh was an important pioneer who proposed the establishment of associations to exist within the extra-parliamentary pressure movement to deal with the issue of reform. He submitted a plan of reform in his work, *Political Disquisitions*, at the beginning of the 1770s.² Another significant reformer, Christopher Wyvill, was an important representative of what was known as the *Yorkshire Association Movement* to defend the idea of Conventions. According to his concept, this would be an assembly where members could discuss important matters and proposals concerning parliamentary reform. In March 1780, Wyvill summoned a *Convention of Delegates of the Yorkshire Movement*, attended by nearly forty delegates from twelve counties and four boroughs. The Convention discussed the issue of a shorter Parliament, i.e. a triennial Parliament, and debated the submitted proposal concerning the addition

1 D. G. WRIGHT, *Popular Radicalism: The Working Class Experience 1780–1880*, London 1988, pp. 25–28.

2 C. B. CONE, *The English Jacobins, Reformers in Late 18th Century England*, New York 2010, p. 49.



of one hundred county members to the House of Commons.³ In January 1781, Wyvill organised the next London Convention which submitted a petition to Parliament. However, their petition was rejected by the House of Commons.⁴

Extra-parliamentary activities, which were also manifested in the form of the Conventions of Delegates, did not represent any significant political threat in Britain during the 1760s, 1770s and 1780s. Neither the government nor Parliament perceived this opposition as a potential danger that could lead to greater social unrest. It was not until events of the 1790s that the government was compelled, under threat of the ideas of the French Revolution, to rethink its relationship to the new radical reformers. Unlike their predecessors, these new reformers came mostly from the lower class. In the course of 1792, new reform societies⁵ emerged in England and Scotland. Ranking among the best known and most influential were the *London Corresponding Society* (the LCS) and the *Society for Constitutional Information* (the London SCI), which had been founded in London as early as 1780 and, after a long interval, had resumed its activities. Other significant and influential reform societies were the *Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information* (the Sheffield SCI) and the *Society of the Friends of the People* (the Edinburgh FOP) in Edinburgh which had many branches, including Dundee and Perth.

The ideas of these new reform societies were not only influenced by thoughts of the French Revolution, but were also affected by the famous book by Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*, which was published in response to *The Reflections on the Revolution in France* written by the significant Whig politician, Edmund Burke. Unlike Paine, who based his criticism of hereditary monarchy and the defence of the republican system only on the theory of the natural rights of man, the new radicals also derived an argument for the defence of universal suffrage from the historical precedent. This argument was based on the alleged existence of an Anglo-Saxon democratic society during the reign of Alfred the Great. In the view of most radical reformers of the 1790s, an Assembly of Freemen had been held annually in England during the period before the arrival of William the Conqueror.⁶ In the middle of this Assembly, the “folk-mote”,⁷ the King had been in place to listen to general complaints and his duty had been to redress them. The radicals were firmly convinced that the abuse of law had been just an isolated phenomenon in this “Golden Age”.⁸ Everything had changed “with the arrival of a Norman robber who defaced the beautiful edifice, which had given equal shelter to the peasant and the prince”.⁹

³ Ibidem, pp. 56–57.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 63.

⁵ J. CANNON, *Parliamentary Reform 1640–1832*, Cambridge 1973, p. 121.

⁶ The National Archives, London-Kew (further only TNA), Treasury Solicitor (further only TS) 24/3/28, Edinburgh: The Address of the British Convention Assembled at Edinburgh, November 19, 1793, to the People of Great Britain, p. 5.

⁷ Joseph Gerrald in his work *A Convention the Only Means of Saving Us from Ruin* (1793) compared the folk-mote to a Convention just at the time when the third Edinburgh Convention of delegates was organised. Nevertheless, Gerrald did not mention anywhere in his work that the Edinburgh Convention wanted to replace Parliament.

⁸ TNA, TS 24/3/28, Edinburgh: The Address of the British Convention Assembled at Edinburgh, November 19, 1793, to the People of Great Britain, p. 5.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 6.



This naive idea of a democratic Anglo-Saxon society was one of the important arguments of the radicals during the third session of the Edinburgh Convention in 1793. The radicals did not only use the natural rights of man, which had been spread by the American and French Revolutions for the defence of their reform programme,¹⁰ but also the historical precedent. This argument was intended to convince the British public that their programme of parliamentary reform was neither a novelty nor an innovation, but only a restoration of lost liberties. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 had begun the regeneration of rights and liberties, but the measure had not been sufficient, and during the 18th century the gains of the Glorious Revolution had been gradually abused and eventually degenerated.¹¹ The radicals firmly insisted on the notion of restoration, because the British public and European society in general had literally panicked in fear of every idea of innovation. After all, Burke had submitted these concerns in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Only the French revolutionaries openly rejected the *ancien régime* and any precedent. Like Thomas Paine, the revolutionaries only accepted the argument of natural rights, on which then they built their new civil society.

In the course of 1792, Parliament approved two Royal Proclamations, which had a considerable influence on the activities of radical reformers and greatly affected not only the result of the trial of Thomas Paine, but also the political trials in 1793 and 1794. The first Proclamation was a response to the issue of the second part of *The Rights of Man* and the subsequent cheap edition of this book, which was intended to be available to the general public. The main propagator of this book was the London SCI. The government saw a threat not only with regard to the contents of this book, but they also had concerns about potential lower class readers who, thanks to this cheaper edition, had easy access to the book. The involvement of reformers in promoting Paine's book and the subsequent influence of this work led to the enactment of the *Royal Proclamation against Seditious Writings and Publications* on 21 May 1792.¹² The Proclamation was intended to prevent seditious practices and discourage those who had a tendency to follow this pernicious example "and we do strictly charge and command all our magistrates in and throughout our kingdom of Great Britain, that they do make diligent inquiry in order to discover the authors and printers of such wicked and seditious writings as aforesaid, and all others who shall disperse the same. And we do further charge and command all our sheriffs, justices of the peace, chief magistrates in our cities, boroughs, and corporations, and all other our officers and magistrates throughout our kingdom of Great Britain, that they do, in their several and respective stations, take the most immediate and effectual care to suppress and prevent all riots, tumults, and other disorders [...]."¹³ In this way, the radicals would be

10 The reform programme in the 1790s promoted the introduction of universal suffrage and an annual parliamentary election. They wanted to replace the septennial Parliament which was enacted in 1716 by an annual Parliament. This programme of reform was generally accepted as a 'panacea' for all economic and social grievances.

11 TNA, TS 24/3/28, Edinburgh: The Address of the British Convention Assembled at Edinburgh, November 19, 1793, to the People of Great Britain, p. 12.

12 C. EMSLEY, *Repression, 'Terror' and the Rule of Law in England during the Decade of the French Revolution*, in: *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 100, No. 397, 1985, p. 805.

13 W. COBBETT, *Parliamentary History of England: From the Norman Conquest, in 1066 to the Year 1803*, Vol. XXIX, London 1817, p. 1477.



brought under greater pressure and the control of local authorities. Despite the Proclamation briefly being able to dampen the activities of some reformers, the summoning of the National Convention in Paris on 20 September 1792 gave them renewed energy. The reform societies even united in drafting the *Joint Address to the French National Convention*, formulated by the Chairman of the LCS, Maurice Margarot.¹⁴

Under pressure of the new radical events in France, such as the *Proclamation of the Republic*, the September Massacres, as well as the first success of the French Army and the consequent influx of immigrants to Britain, the British government was seriously alarmed. The Cabinet of William Pitt the Younger became increasingly convinced that a conspiracy existed, organised by agents of the French Republic in cooperation with local French sympathisers in England. Of course, an important role was played by government spies, who often exaggerated or even invented reports of alleged conspiracies. Despite the government not being so naive, the alarming report by an informer, Dubois de Longchamp, convinced them of the existence of a plot. At the beginning of December 1792, on the basis of the de Longchamp report, Pitt's Cabinet declared a state of emergency in London. However, the expected insurrection never transpired.¹⁵ Nevertheless, at the beginning of a session of Parliament on 13 December 1792, the King supported the Government's assertion that the danger to Britain was still acute and reaffirmed the Proclamation of May 1792. After consultation with members of the government, the King even proposed the restoration of part of a militia: "*A spirit of tumult and disorder has shown itself in acts of riot and insurrection, which required the interposition of a military force in support of the civil magistrate.*"¹⁶ Even though the small Whig opposition, led by Charles Fox, Richard Sheridan, Charles Grey, Lord Lauderdale and Lord Stanhope, criticised this governmental proposal in Parliament, subsequent events in Edinburgh became a trump card in the hands of the King's ministers and evidence of an alleged conspiracy of anti-government activity. On 13 December, when the King spoke about riots which had occurred in different parts of the Kingdom, he undoubtedly had the unrest in Scotland in mind, of which the Government was also informed through correspondence from the Home Secretary, Henry Dundas.

In Scotland, some radical reform societies emerged in the course of 1792. They were influenced not only by French revolutionary ideas and the work of Thomas Paine, but also by a tradition of the domestic reform movement. *The Scots Magazine* clearly expressed an opinion on the impact of Paine's book on the public: "*Societies are every where formed, and clubs instituted, for the sole purpose of political debate. Mr Burke's pamphlet seemed to lead the van. Mr Paine published and opposed hit sentiments and these two writers have, by disseminating their sentiments, excited such a difference of opinion among mankind that one half of the people seem to have become politically mad.*"¹⁷ *The Scots Magazine* also stressed, that "*two medals have been struck at Edinburgh, with the following inscriptions: On one — 'liberty, equality, and the end to impress warrants'. On the reverse — 'the nation is*

14 M. T. DAVIS (Ed.), *London Corresponding Society 1792-1799*, Vol. 1, London 2002, p. 28.

15 E. ROYLE, *Revolutionary Britannia? Reflections on the Threat of Revolution in Britain, 1789-1848*, Manchester 2000, p. 17.

16 COBBETT, Vol. XXIX, p. 1557.

17 *The Scots Magazine*, 1792, p. 516, <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044092547314;view=1up;seq=6>, [cit. 2016-02-03].

*essentially the source of all sovereignty'. On another — 'liberty of conscience, equal representation, and just taxation'. On the reverse — 'for a nation to be free, it is sufficient that it wills it'.*¹⁸

The origin of the Scottish Friends of the People dates back to early June 1792. At that time, reformers from the Perth, Dundee, Glasgow and Edinburgh societies agreed to maintain regular correspondence with the object of promoting a new reform society. By the end of June, a provisional plan of organisation had been drafted. The authors of this plan were Thomas Muir and William Skirving. On the basis of this plan, reformers of the above-mentioned Scottish cities founded the *Society of the Friends of the People* in Edinburgh on 26 July 1792, which had at least eighty-seven branches in January 1793. Although the name of this new society was taken from the prominent London society of New Whigs, the programme and social composition of the membership was the same as in the case of the LCS. Muir was elected Vice-President and immediately called for the summoning of a General Convention of the Societies.¹⁹

Along with the formation of the Scottish FOP, reports of local unrest began to appear. Although they were not usually political in nature, the government saw these events within the context of the radical movement and explained these riots as a response to the new radical agitation. During the first days of May 1792, a crowd gathered in Lanark, with riots lasting for eight days. Discontent spread throughout the north of Scotland, with people burning effigies of Home Secretary Dundas in almost every village.²⁰ During the celebration of the King's birthday on 4 June 1792, a crowd burned the effigy of Dundas. These riots lasted for three days in Edinburgh. Angry protesters even attacked the home of Robert Dundas, nephew of the Home Secretary Henry Dundas, and broke the windows of his house.²¹ Among the protesters who took advantage of the King's birthday to voice their opposition to the British government were some Jacobin sympathisers.²² However, most of the riots represented a typical picture of the popular unrest in the eighteenth century, which mostly had nothing in common with policy. Poor people mainly demanded lower bread prices and a redress of current economic grievances.²³ The Home Secretary spent some time in Scotland in the winter of 1792 and reported on the situation. *The Times* published some of his reports from Dundee. "Coals, as in every other place, having been remarkably scarce and dear, the people insisted that the shipmasters should sell them at a certain price, which was refused. The Magistrates offered to indemnify the shipmasters, but this, it is said, was also declined and the consequence was that the hatches were broke open, the coals carried to the High street, and there made a bonfire. Other accounts mention, that the Tree of Liberty having been planted opposite the Town Hall by the people. A gentleman imprudently ventured to pull it down; in revenge for which, the people after burning him in effigy, proceed to his house, and demolished the windows. [...] On Wednesday a number of person assembled

18 Ibidem.

19 O. BAYLEN — J. N. GOSSMAN (Eds.), *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals: 1770-1830*, Vol. 1, Sussex 1979, p. 331.

20 W. H. MEIKLE, *Scotland and the French Revolution*, Glasgow 1912, p. 80.

21 R. K. JOHNSTON, *The First and Last British Convention*, in: *Romanticism*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2007, p. 103.

22 D. ALLAN, *Scotland in the Eighteenth Century: Union and Enlightenment*, London 2014, p. 31.

23 JOHNSTON, p. 103.



in a riotous manner at Langholme, on account of the road money, and after burning several effigies, as is now the custom, they dispersed without doing any mischief.”²⁴

Although the report mentioned the Tree of Liberty, this was rather traditional popular unrest. Despite the rioters being able to take over some of the new symbols of revolutionary France, the demands of the lower class remained oriented towards a redress of current economic grievances. However, the Government saw these events within the context of the radical reform movement. Officially, all this popular unrest was attributed to the writings of Thomas Paine. The Sheriff of Lanarkshire informed Henry Dundas that the real cause of the outrages was “*an almost universal spirit of reform and opposition to the established government*”.²⁵

From September to December 1792, i.e. until the opening of the Convention in Edinburgh, Thomas Muir, one of the most prominent figures of the Scottish reform movement, engaged in setting up some new reform societies in Scotland. Muir played an important role in setting up the FOP in Glasgow and agitated for reform in Lanarkshire, Dunbartonshire, Stirlingshire and Renfrewshire. Muir also helped to form new societies in Kirkintilloch, Paisley, Birdston, Lennoxton and Campsie.²⁶ The government watched his activities, but until the opening of the Convention in December 1792, he was not considered a direct threat. When Muir was brought before the High Court of Justiciary in Edinburgh and charged with sedition in the summer of 1793, one of the witnesses for the defendant, Robert Weddel,²⁷ confirmed in favour of Muir that his only aim was to redress the unequal representation in the House of Commons and that this active reformer had always been a supporter of the political system of balance: the King, the House of Lords and the House of Commons.²⁸ According to Weddel, “*nothing was said about the expenses of the King, or the burden of taxes, or any comparison made between the Government of France and of this country*”.²⁹ Despite the fact that many reformers sympathised with the French Revolution and openly congratulated revolutionaries on the Proclamation of the French Republic, they disapproved of the violent practices of the Revolution as a way of achieving parliamentary reform. Even the ideas of Thomas Paine were only partially accepted, because the author openly espoused republicanism.

In a political process in the summer of 1793, Muir was finally sentenced to fourteen years’ transportation to Botany Bay. However, he managed to escape from exile and, after a perilous journey, landed in Bordeaux in November 1797. The French

²⁴ TNA, ‘Edinburgh’, Times [London, England] 30 Nov. 1792: 4. The Times Digital Archive, Web. 8 Oct. 2015.

²⁵ MEIKLE, p. 82.

²⁶ BAYLEN — GOSSMAN, p. 331.

²⁷ Robert Weddell, weaver in Kirkintilloch, was elected Vice-President at a meeting of the FOP in Kirkintilloch in November 1792. It was at this meeting where he met Thomas Muir.

²⁸ P. MacKENZIE, *The Life and Trial of Thomas Muir, Esq. Advocate, Younger of Huntershill, near Glasgow: One of the Celebrated Reformers of 1792–93 Who Was Tried for Sedition before the High Court of Justiciary in Scotland and Sentenced to Transportation for Fourteen Years: With a Full Report of His Trial*, Glasgow 1837 (reprint 2010), p. 58.

²⁹ Ibidem.



welcomed Muir eagerly as a “Martyr of Scotland”. Nevertheless, their targeted propaganda against the British government, through which they tried to celebrate the deeds of brave Scots in the struggle for independence, was completely wrong. In fact, Muir and his contemporaries from the Scottish and English reform societies only promoted parliamentary reform and the Scots never called for independence. Although the French Revolution gave a strong stimulus to English and Scottish radical sentiment, this radicalism was associated with cosmopolitanism rather than nationalism as in the case of Ireland. Nationalism, or rather patriotism, began to form under the pressure of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.³⁰ After Muir’s arrival in Paris, an article was published in the *Moniteur* on 2 December 1797. The author was poet, diplomat and orientalist Pierre David, who outlined the history of Scotland’s turbulent relations with England: “*The Scots had not forgotten their ancient independence, the massacre of their ancestors, the tragic death of their last queen, the expulsion of the Stuarts from the throne of Great Britain: those memories, the sentiment of their poverty, the shocking contrast which it offers alongside English opulence, and perhaps, finally, the example of our revolution, became the causes of the insurrectionary movements which arose in Scotland in 1792, and in which Thomas Muir played one of the leading roles.*”³¹ The objectives of the reformers were therefore not only misunderstood by the British public, but were also misinterpreted by the French. Nevertheless, in the case of France, this could have been deliberately distorted for reasons of propaganda.

On 21 November 1792, a *General Meeting of Delegates* was held in Edinburgh. The meeting was attended by reformers from the Edinburgh FOP, as well as from neighbouring branches. This assembly discussed the summoning of a General Convention. Colonel Johnston was proposed as Chairman of the General meeting of Delegates, but he relinquished this function. Finally, Hugh Bell, a brewer, was unanimously elected as Chairman and William Skirving was elected as Secretary at the meeting, with James Denholm as his Assistant. Subsequently, the delegates elected Committees of Declaration, of Organisation and of Correspondence. Thomas Muir suggested that they should write circular letters to other Scottish reform societies to participate in the planned Convention. Muir’s proposal was received enthusiastically, and at the next official meeting he was elected Vice-President of the *General Association of the Friends of the People* in Edinburgh. The General Meeting of 21 November openly rejected all forms of violence and resolved “*that any person or persons, belonging to the Associated Friends of the People, if found guilty of rioting or creating or aiding sedition in the country, his name shall be expunged from the books of the society*”.³² On the other hand, they resolved “*that any person acting properly who may be persecuted and oppressed by the arm of power, be protected by the society to which he belongs*”.³³

It is necessary to emphasise that, at the time when the radical movement was spreading throughout Scotland, disturbing reports from France hit Britain. The Brit-

30 O. DANN — J. DINWIDDY (Eds.), *Nationalism in the Age of French Revolution*, London 1988, pp. 52–54.

31 M. RAPPORT, *Loyal Catholics and Revolutionary Patriots: National Identity and the Scots Revolutionary Paris*, in: *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2008, p. 67.

32 *The Scots Magazine*, 1792, p. 569.

33 *Ibidem*.



ish public was visibly shaken by the September Massacres and Pitt's Cabinet had to deal with two French decrees. On 16 November, the National Convention issued a Decree throwing open the navigation of the Scheldt to all nations, and on 19 November a Decree of Fraternity, offering assistance to all nations who were striving for liberty.³⁴ The war with the young Republic became more realistic. When the first General Convention of the Delegates from about seventy reform Scottish societies³⁵ finally assembled on 11 December 1792 in Edinburgh, the trial of the former King Louis XVI began in the National Convention in Paris. It was not a good political situation for the reformers. Their assembly was compared to the French Convention and their political opponents suspected them of sympathy with the French revolutionaries and accused them of plotting violence which could lead to revolution. This was one of the main reasons for the first Convention of the Delegates to behave cautiously. All its resolutions were in a spirit of loyalty to the Constitution, the King and Parliament. The social composition of the Convention was also important. Unlike the subsequent second and the third Conventions, the first General Convention was even represented by some members of the aristocracy,³⁶ such as Lord Dear³⁷.

Colonel Dalrymple³⁸ was appointed as the first Chairman of the Convention of the Delegates, although, he worried that the election of a President with a military rank would cause suspicion among local authorities. The first General Convention lasted for three days, from 11 to 13 December 1792 and, according to the Minutes of the Assembly, none of the deputies sharply criticised the government, with some of their resolutions even resembling loyalist resolutions. They all knew that their meeting was being watched by the local authorities who subsequently informed the government: "*When Lord Dear, generally on the side of caution, made some proposals concerning the conduct of business, Thomas Muir, the young Vice-President, opposed everything that had been proposed.*"³⁹ Nevertheless, Muir caused a real stir at the second-day session, when he presented the *Address from the Society of United Irishmen in Dublin*, which was devoted to the Scottish delegates at the Convention. At first, the members of the Convention refused to listen to the content of the Address, because unlike the Scottish reformers, the Irish emphasised nationalism and national emancipation. The Scots did not show the slightest interest in any form of independence. One of their objections was to strengthen the union between Scottish and English radicals and this effort was clearly reflected in the organisation of the third Convention of 1793. To the Scottish reformers, the Glorious Revolution represented basic liberties and rights. Thanks to the union with England, they could enjoy the benefits of the English Con-

³⁴ MEIKLE, p. 101.

³⁵ CONE, p. 167.

³⁶ JOHNSTON, p. 107.

³⁷ Lord Dear visited Paris at the beginning of the French Revolution and became a passionate advocate of parliamentary reform. He belonged not only to the London FOP but was also a member of the LCS.

³⁸ Colonel Dalrymple, together with Colonel Johnston, during the persecution of members of the Convention, were deprived of further career growth in the army. They received the intimation that His Majesty had no further occasion for their services.

³⁹ CONE, p. 167.



stitution.⁴⁰ Muir caused a serious division of opinion when he insisted on reading the Irish Address. Lord Dear, Colonel Dalrymple, and the more moderate delegates opposed this proposal because, according to them, this Address “*contained treason or at least misprision of treason*”.⁴¹ Finally, Muir was able to read the Irish Address, but his proposal to answer this address was rigorously rejected. According to Muir, there was no impropriety in answering the Address and he imprudently stated that he would take the burden on his own shoulders.⁴² The government took his words literally, because later, when he stood before a court, he was also charged with promotion of the Irish Address.

The Address of the United Irishmen was held in the spirit of strong nationalism. The United Irishmen rejoiced that Scots “*do not consider yourselves as merged and melted down into another country, but that in this great national question you are still Scotland*”.⁴³ The Address proclaimed that the Irish were independent in their fight for freedom and reform of ministers and their concessions and they depended only on a coalition of Irishmen with Irishmen. They did not blindly assume the liberties from America or France, but their goal was to build their own free society based on local tradition. Their movement united representatives of Catholics and Protestants, and one of their objectives was to acquire full rights and justice for people of the Catholic faith. “*It is not the Constitution, but the people which ought to be inviolable, and it is time to recognize and renovate the rights of the English, the Scotch, and the Irish nations. [...] Let this union extended throughout the empire. Let all united for all, or each man suffer for all. In each country let the people assemble in peaceful and constitutional Convention.*”⁴⁴ These were truly revolutionary words and the Scottish reformers openly distanced themselves from the Irish activities.

What was the aim of the Convention? What was its intended role within the context of the reform movement? The delegates approved several resolutions proclaiming allegiance to the King, the Lords and the Commons. They were even willing to assist local magistrates in the case of any signs of popular unrest being directed against the Constitution or the social order of the Kingdom. Allan, one delegate, went so far as to propose the establishment of some form of militia.⁴⁵ This, however, was rejected by the delegates as being too radical. The first Convention was cautious and modest. The Secretary of the Convention, William Skirving, urged delegates to launch a close cooperation with the London Whig FOP⁴⁶ and hoped that

40 G. PENTLAND, *Patriotism, Universalism and the Scottish Conventions, 1792–1794*, in: *History*, Vol. 89, No. 295, 2004, p. 347.

41 MEIKLE, p. 108.

42 MacKENZIE, p. 68.

43 *Report of the Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons*, London 1799, p. 45, <https://books.google.cz/books?id=8SZXAAAACAAJ&pg=PA26&dq=Report+of+the+Committee+of+Secrecy+of+the+House+of+Commons>, [cit. 2016–02–03].

44 *Report of the Committee of Secrecy*, pp. 44–45.

45 *The Minutes of the Proceedings of the General Convention of the Delegates, from the Societies of the Friends of the People throughout Scotland: At Their Several Sitzings in Edinburgh, on the Eleventh, Twelfth, and Thirteenth of December, 1792*, Edinburgh 1793 (reprint 2010), p. 11.

46 *Ibidem*, p. 10.



in this way Scottish reformers could create a closer coalition with Members of Parliament. But this idea was very naive. Despite the fact that the small Whig opposition was the only defender of rights of the radicals in Parliament, none of these well-educated and eminent men had any interest in closer cooperation with the radicals.⁴⁷ When a subsequent petition movement in May 1793 showed that the new Whigs were interested in a closer relationship with the radicals, Skirving eventually turned to the LCS, whose reform programme and social membership composition were closer to the Scottish FOP.

The first Convention promoted the restoration of “*the freedom of election, equal representation of the people in Parliament and a frequent exercise⁴⁸ of their right of electing their representatives*”.⁴⁹ Simultaneously, they were cautious and proved their allegiance to the government and the Constitution through resolutions of loyalty. Some members of the Convention even offered to assist magistrates to suppress any seditious activities. The delegates tried to convince their opponents that they had not conspired against the Constitution and the system of government in the country and that these allegations were false. The Convention therefore did not act offensively, but became a place for the defence of reform activities.

When the local loyalist *Goldsmith’s Hall Association* issued a public declaration, proclaiming allegiance to the Constitution, the King and Parliament, members of the Convention decided that they also supported this signature campaign. It was decided that the delegates, in parties of eight or ten, should go to the Goldsmith’s Hall and subscribe to this loyalist declaration and add to their names the supplement that they belonged to the FOP or to the delegates of the Convention.⁵⁰ In fact, this declaration was directed against radicals and the members of the Convention knew it. The loyalists of the Goldsmith’s Hall Association resolved, “*that we will jointly and individually use our utmost endeavors to counteract all seditious attempts, and, in particular, all associations for the publication or dispersion of seditious and inflammatory writings, or tending to excite disorders and tumults within this part of the Kingdom*”.⁵¹ Whether some members of the FOP provocatively approached the signature or indeed wanted to attempt some reconciliation with local loyalists and thus legalise the meeting of the first Convention, members of the Goldsmith’s Hall Association perceived this act as a challenge. Therefore, the committee of this loyalist Association decided that

⁴⁷ At the beginning of the 1790s, two prominent Whig politicians and lawyers, Henry Erskine and Archibald Fletcher, were living in Edinburgh. Although both sympathised with the ideas of the French Revolution and Henry Erskine was willing to defend Muir in court, neither of them became a member of the Edinburgh FOP. The demands for universal manhood suffrage and an annual Parliament were too radical for Fletcher and Erskine. Henry Erskine also feared that the radical propaganda directed against the government could get out of hand and popular riots could break out in the Kingdom, as had been the case in France. (In: *Autobiography of Mrs. Fletcher*, p. 65, FERGUSSON, p. 330).

⁴⁸ Delegates of the Convention deliberately avoided the term “annual Parliament”. The first Convention tended more towards the reform proposals of the New Whigs than the radical proposals of the LCS.

⁴⁹ *The Minutes*, p. 8.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

the names of the members of the FOP, including Thomas Muir, would be immediately deleted from the declaration.⁵²

The only “revolutionary” acts of the Convention were Lord Dear’s proposal to call each other “citizens”⁵³ and the final oath in the French style “live free or die”, formulated by delegate Fowler.⁵⁴ Such conduct convinced the government even more firmly that reform was only a pretext and that the radicals in fact were preparing a conspiracy. For some delegates of the Convention, even the final ‘revolutionary’ oath was considered extremely dangerous and therefore the Convention, at the urging of Colonel Dalrymple, did not note this oath in the Minutes of the Assembly. Nevertheless, Minister Henry Dundas had spies everywhere and the government was informed about the negotiation in detail.⁵⁵ Before the first General Convention was adjourned, its members unanimously resolved that a subsequent Convention would be held in April 1793 and that Secretary Skirving was appointed as its chief organiser.

Despite the fact that the Convention itself did not constitute any threat to the government and they did not have any intention of replacing Parliament, according to *the Report of the Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons*, which was published in 1799, the government had serious concerns about the radical societies. Although the Report of the Secret Committee was published in 1799, its contents only confirmed the earlier Reports of the Secret Committees for both Houses of Parliament of 1794, that Pitt’s government was taking the radical movement very seriously. The Report of 1799 was certainly affected by events relating to the Irish Rebellion of 1798, but the opinion of British radicals had remained essentially the same since 1792. The Report describing the December Convention clearly stated that “*the first attempt which was openly directed to the object of overthrowing the government and effecting a revolution was made in Scotland*”.⁵⁶ The Report paid attention to the Address of United Irishmen in Dublin, who “*recommended assembling the people in each country in, what they term, ‘peaceable and constitutional convention;’ the object of which they attempted to disguise by the pretence of reform and petition to Parliament*”.⁵⁷

In addition, the Convention agreed to read this Address and, according to the government, this should also mean that the majority of the delegates approved this ‘seditious’ address. In fact, it was not true. However, the Pitt government was under strong pressure of foreign and domestic events and the radical movement was reminiscent of the activities of the French *sans-culottes*, especially when the social composition of the membership of British radical societies was essentially the same as had been the case of the Jacobin Clubs in France. Like the French revolutionaries, the English and Scottish reformers targeted their attention at the lower classes and demanded political rights for the people whom educated and affluent people considered as the “rabble”. The government and wealthy people feared agitators, who tended to be from the working class. The bloody scenes from the Gordon Riots of 1780

52 MEIKLE, p. 109.

53 Ibidem, p. 107.

54 Ibidem, p. 110.

55 Ibidem.

56 *Report of the Committee of Secrecy*, p. 13.

57 Ibidem, p. 14.



and the French Revolution were still fresh in their memory as a perfect example of “the rule of the people”. Although it is retrospectively clear that the reformers were only promoting a legal and peaceful way of achieving parliamentary reform, we can not accuse the Pitt government of exaggerated panic. On the other hand, the question is to what extent the government’s propaganda often influenced the violent, illegal activities of loyalists who were acting under auspices of the local authorities.

The government’s persecution of the first Convention was reflected in the trial conducted of its most significant member, Thomas Muir. He was arrested on the charge of sedition on 2 January 1793, while on his way to Edinburgh to act as Counsel for the Defence at the trial of James “Balloon” Tytler.⁵⁸ When Muir was released on bail after several hours of interrogation, he travelled to London, where he wanted to report on the situation of the Scottish reformers. Muir obviously expected support from prominent New Whig politicians. However, the trial of former French King Louis XVI was conducted at that time and it seemed unlikely that the Whig politicians of the London FOP would be willing to engage in the defence of the Scottish reform movement. Muir then decided to travel to Paris, where he wanted to plead for the King’s life. He was very naive of course and his journey to revolutionary France transpired to be the incorrect decision. Moreover, he appeared in Paris on 20 January 1793, too late to rescue the King.⁵⁹ Like most of his contemporaries, Muir rightly understood that the execution of the former French King would mean the end of any possibility of reconciliation with France for other European monarchies and that this event would lead to war.

Although Muir was accused of sedition, he acted almost carelessly in Paris. On 23 January 1793, he wrote a letter to James Campbell in Edinburgh, stating that he would not leave Paris without regret. “*I am honoured by the notice and friendship of an amiable and distinguished circle [...]*”⁶⁰ He met the Girondists leaders and visited the salon of English novelist and poet, Helen Maria Williams. He became acquainted with revolutionary, Manon Roland, who introduced him to Brissot, leader of the Girondists. He also met Thomas Paine. Muir’s trial was to be held on 11 February. However, before he could leave France, war broke out between Britain and the French Republic. Muir wrote to Campbell that “*the formalities requisite to be gone through, before I could procure my passport, would at least have consumed three days. [...] Armed with innocence, I appeal to justice; and I disdain to supplicate favours*”.⁶¹ The Scottish authorities did not comply with his request to postpone his court date. Subsequently, he was outlawed and, on 6 March, his name was erased from the Roll of the Faculty of Advocates, a member of which he had been since 1787.⁶² Muir finally arrived in Belfast in July 1793 and then

58 James “Balloon” Tytler was a member of the FOP and earned his unusual nickname from a daring balloon flight in 1784. He was charged with sedition, because he called Parliament “a vile junto of aristocrats” in his pamphlet and demanded universal manhood suffrage. However, he did not wait for his trial, but escaped from Britain to the United States. In his new home in Massachusetts, he became an expert on the prevention of Yellow Fever and consequently became a valued successful citizen of the United States.

59 BAYLEN — GOSSMAN, p. 332.

60 MacKENZIE, p. 120.

61 Ibidem, p. 16.

62 Ibidem, pp. 16–17.



continued on to Dublin. In his naivety, he believed that if someone was innocent, he could not be convicted. In Dublin, this almost 28-year-old idealist met leaders of the United Irishmen. Muir had been in friendly contact with them for a long time. However, this Irish society was considered as being very dangerous and its activities were under the watchful eyes of the government. Muir stayed with Hamilton Rowan and subsequently was appointed an Honorary Member of the United Irishmen. After arriving in Portpatrick, Muir was finally arrested on 30 July 1793 before being taken to Tolbooth prison in Edinburgh to await trial.⁶³

William Skirving was responsible for organising the second Convention, which took place in late April 1793. At that time, Vice-President of the FOP, Thomas Muir, was accused of sedition and his participation was therefore unrealistic. The second *General Convention of the Friends of the People* was a failure, in comparison with its predecessor. Under threat of persecution, as was the case with Thomas Muir, but also under the pressure of war with revolutionary France, the second Edinburgh Convention turned into a rally of artisans and shopkeepers. Aristocratic delegates from the previous Convention refused to engage in a radical reform movement. There were only about a dozen original members of the first December Convention and there were no Edinburgh advocates present who had attended the former Convention. At the second Convention, there was a total number of 116 delegates from societies of some 28 towns and villages.⁶⁴ The aim of the Convention was the formal acknowledgment of petitions to Parliament, which were drawn up by members of reform societies from cities such as Edinburgh, Linlithgow, Dunfermline, Kirkcaldy, Perth, Dundee, Montrose, Roxburghshire, Newmilns and Kilmarnock.⁶⁵ On 2 May, Skirving announced at the Convention that “*this morning petitions for parliamentary reform were sent off to Colonel MacLeod*”.⁶⁶ Members of the Convention turned to Colonel Norman MacLeod, because he was a Member of Parliament and was one of the advocates of reform. The Convention also discussed the issue of war with France which was sharply condemned. Thompson, one delegate, even proposed the drafting of an anti-war petition to the King.⁶⁷

Members of the Convention were cautious and finally, after a long debate, which was adjourned several times, decided to reject Thompson’s proposal. Skirving and Aitcheson argued that “*as the object of the association of the Friends of the People was peace and reform, and their opponents had prompted the minister to adopt war, the Con-*

⁶³ JOHNSTON, p. 110.

⁶⁴ MEIKLE, p. 125.

⁶⁵ *Minutes of the General Convention of the Friends of the People in Scotland: At Their Several Sitings in Edinburgh, 30th April, 1st and 2nd May, 1793*, (reprint 2010), p. 15.

⁶⁶ Colonel Norman MacLeod was a member of Parliament for Scottish town Inverness. Despite the growing loyalist movement MacLeod wrote the work, which advocated reform activities of the Scottish FOP. It was the pamphlet *the Two Letters from Norman MacLeod, M.P., to the Chairman of the Friends of the People at Edinburgh*, which was published in 1793. Therefore, the members of the second Convention decided to write MacLeod a letter of thanks and also asked him for the mediation of their petitions to Parliament. *Minutes of the General Convention*.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 5.



vention, by taking a lead in petitioning for peace, might again rouse the public prejudice to prevent the accomplishment of their desire, they therefore declined all interference at present".⁶⁸ The Convention finally adopted some resolutions in support of their main goals. They resolved that any reform which did not grant equal rights and privileges to all citizens would be inadequate and unjust. The Resolution also condemned the system that measured the value and utility of man according to his property, but not according to his ability and talent. Skirving proposed that the plan of the Duke of Richmond be adopted, transmitted by "their brethren" from the Sheffield SCI. This reform plan of 1780 defended an annual Parliament and universal manhood suffrage.⁶⁹ Before the second Convention was adjourned, the date for the next Convention was approved. The reformers were to meet again on 29 October 1793 in Edinburgh.⁷⁰

In January 1793, the Sheffield SCI sent circular letters to other reform societies with a proposal for the organisation of an extensive petition movement. Their objective was to promote parliamentary reform and simultaneously to support the forthcoming reform proposal by the New Whigs.⁷¹ In fact, the leaders of this small parliamentary Whig opposition, such as Charles Fox, Richard Sheridan and Charles Grey, had no intention of compromising in this matter with the radicals. Their aim was to promote a moderate reform proposal. They did not want to be associated with the radical reformers, who explicitly demanded universal manhood suffrage. The Whigs from the FOP did not even want to reveal their plan of reform to the LCS radicals. The New Whigs clearly showed that they had no intention of discussing this topic with the radicals. When members of the LCS committee asked Charles Fox in a letter to express his opinion on their draft of a petition to Parliament, Fox did not respond for several days. He finally replied on 2 May. He did not agree with the proposal for universal manhood suffrage and an annual Parliament. Nevertheless, he was willing to submit their petition to Philip Francis, MP and a member of the FOP. He subsequently presented this petition to Parliament.⁷²

Debate on the petitions commenced in the Commons on 2 May 1793. The first which was to be discussed was the petition from the Sheffield SCI. In fact, this petition was never really discussed in Parliament. MP Duncombe harshly criticised the Sheffield petition, which he considered stylistically inappropriate and too vulgar for the House of Commons. Duncombe said "*that although he presented this petition, he did not approve the manner in which it had been worded. [...] But, however, as far as the words of this petition were to be considered, he begged leave to tell the House, that the petitioners were only manufacturers, and not very well acquainted with the language required for addressing the House, and that circumstance he trusted would be an extenuation of their fault*".⁷³ The petition was actually not written offensively, but its 'popular' character was probably offensive to some learned men in Parliament. The petition demanded

⁶⁸ Ibidem, pp. 16–17.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, pp. 20–23.

⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 23.

⁷¹ Ibidem, p. 161.

⁷² M. THALE, *Selections from the Papers of the London Corresponding Society 1792–1799*, Cambridge 1983, pp. 62–63.

⁷³ COBBETT, Vol. XXX, p. 777.



equal rights for all people in Britain and stressed that “*your petitioners are lover of peace, of liberty, and justice. They are in general tradesmen and artificers, unpossessed of freehold land, and consequently have no voice in choosing members to sit in parliament; — but though they may not be freeholders, they are men, and do not think themselves fairly used in being excluded the rights of citizens. Their all is at stake equally with the freeholder’s; and whether that all be much, or little, whilst they pay their full share of taxes, and are peaceable and loyal members of society, they see no reason why they should not be consulted with respect to the common interests of their common country. They think men are objects of representation, and not the land of a freeholder, or the houses of a borough-monger*”.⁷⁴

After this first failure, subsequent petitions were presented on 6 May to the House of Commons. They were from cities such as Norwich, Westminster, Suffolk, Warwick, Huddersfield, Dundee, Paisley, Kilmarnock, Kirkcaldy, Perth and Edinburgh. The petition from Norwich was also immediately rejected, even though it had 3,700 signatures, because it was presented in a printed and not in a written form. The latest blow to the radicals was a speech by their supposed ally, Richard Sheridan. He suggested postponing the debate on the petitions, because, according to him, the House of Commons had more important issues for processing that could not be delayed any longer.⁷⁵ An urgent issue which Sheridan had in mind was the proposal of a moderate parliamentary reform, which Charles Grey was to present to the House of Commons. Although the New Whigs always defended the activities of the radicals in Parliament, in this case Sheridan dealt pragmatically. Lengthy debate on the petitions from the radical societies could stir up even more opposition to any reform and then the moderate reform proposal would be doomed to failure. Despite this political tactic, Grey’s proposal was rejected by a majority of Members of the House of Commons.⁷⁶

After the failure of the petition movement, the radicals needed to adopt a new plan of action. Although it seemed that, after such heavy defeat, their activities would subside, this did not happen. On 13 May 1793, the Committee of the Birmingham SCI thanked Charles Grey for his patriotic effort in the fight for reform. They then commended Thomas Erskine for his unwavering struggle for freedom of speech and also thanked Charles Fox and Richard Sheridan. The members of the Committee also decided to write and circulate an *Address to all the Societies associated in Great Britain, for promoting a Constitutional Reform in the Representation of the People*. The Address was formulated in a grandiose style of Enlightenment: “*The truth, like a flood, which under a divine providence is now sweeping from the earth the relies of bigotry, superstitious, and error, with all its concomitants, will form a never-failing fountain, whose streams will fertilize the human mind, and establish that filial affection among mankind, which is so essentially necessary to their future happiness and prosperity. Let us hail the approaching the day when kings shall no more wage war against the people [...] and nations cultivate the blessings of peace. Then shall we hear of no slave trade at home or abroad.*”⁷⁷ The members of the Birmingham SCI also resolved to renew the petition effort. Nothing

⁷⁴ Ibidem, p. 776.

⁷⁵ Ibidem, p. 787.

⁷⁶ CONE, pp. 161–163.

⁷⁷ TNA, TS 24/3/24, At a Meeting of the Committee of the Birmingham Society for Constitutional Information, held in the Hare and Hounds, Hill Street, 13 May 1793.



deterred them because, as once said by the Duke of Richmond,⁷⁸ they “*have no choice, but to give every man his own*”.⁷⁹ They also agreed entirely with William Pitt, who declared that the purity of representation was the only true and permanent source of the confidence of the people of England in the House of Commons.⁸⁰

On 28 May 1793, the Constitutional Society in Leeds informed Adams, Secretary of the London SCI that, according to the proposal of the Sheffield SCI, they were ready to initiate correspondence with other reform societies not only in England but also in Scotland.⁸¹ The reformers thus started to search for a way to unity, because they realised that isolation and fragmentation of the movement would lead to the next failure. On 24 April, before the May petition to Parliament, the Sheffield SCI wrote a letter to Hardy, Secretary of the LCS, asking whether it would be preferable if the whole petition movement was united. Then all reform societies in England and Scotland could express a common opinion about the “inappropriate and destructive war”. This requirement would be written in a petition or resolution, and this would certainly have much more weight and influence than “scattered” and separately organised petitions.⁸²

The following correspondence on 3 May only reaffirmed the cooperation and unity of opinion between the LCS and the Sheffield SCI.⁸³ These two societies always had a similar radical approach to reform. Nevertheless, unity among the reformers was not a matter of course and reform objectives often differed among various reform societies. The radicals from London and Sheffield advocated an annual Parliament and universal manhood suffrage from the outset. Through their active correspondence with other reform societies, this programme was gradually accepted by radicals throughout the whole of England. However, the situation in Scotland was different. In September 1792, the *Scottish Society of the Friends of the Constitution in Dundee* only vaguely defined a requirement for change in the electoral system as “*a more limited duration of Parliament*”. They did not clearly express whether it should be an annual Parliament, which was advocated by the English radicals, or a triennial Parliament, which was mainly favoured by moderate reformers. However, supporters of reform in Dundee shared the common view of the urgent need for promoting parliamentary

78 Charles Lennox, the third Duke of Richmond, was a member of Pitt’s government from 1784. In the early 1780s, Richmond together with Prime Minister William Pitt, had been advocates of parliamentary reform and the Duke of Richmond was even a supporter of universal manhood suffrage. However, when Pitt became Prime Minister in 1783 and Richmond subsequently became a Minister in his government, they gradually lost interest in reform. In the early 1790s, they were even considered ‘apostates’ from reform. Radicals frequently cited their statements on reform, especially during the political processes of 1793–1794.

79 TNA, TS 24/3/24, At a meeting of the Committee of the Birmingham Society for Constitutional Information, held in the Hare and Hounds, Hill Street on 13 May 1793.

80 Ibidem.

81 TNA, TS 24/3/35B, London Corresponding Society: Circular to Societies Concerning the Formation of a British Convention; *Meeting of Delegates of Constitutional Society in Leeds, May 28, 1793*.

82 Ibidem.

83 DAVIS, Vol. 6, p. 79.

reform and restoring the original British liberties. Like most radicals, they pointed out how reluctance for reform in France had led to the Revolution.⁸⁴

When one of the witnesses was questioned at Muir's trial and asked to explain who should actually gain the right to vote, the witness hesitated. Finally, the witness said that there were different opinions and that reformers from Kirkintilloch, where he had been appointed Vice-President, wanted a more equal representation. When the Solicitor General asked what "a more equal representation" meant, the former Vice-President did not reply. Then the Solicitor General turned to Muir and said mockingly that if all the members of the reform societies were as ignorant as this witness, who had been a Vice-President, they must know nothing about the matter. The witness then tried to answer the question to explain that there were two opinions. One section of reformers advocated the idea that the voting right should be limited only to landowners and the other section demanded universal manhood suffrage. When the Solicitor General again asked him which of these views he preferred, the former Kirkintilloch Vice-President did not reply.⁸⁵ This testimony showed the inconsistency of opinion on reform that existed among reformers. The opinion that the voting right should be limited only to landowners did not need to be defended, because it was precisely this electoral system against which the reform movement had been formed. In fact, in the 1790s two views existed on this issue. The first was based on a moderate reform plan and advocated an electoral census and the second view advocated universal manhood suffrage. When the British Convention assembled in Edinburgh in November 1793, one of its main objectives was to unite the reform movement and continue the education of working-class people. Maurice Margarot, an LCS delegate in the British Convention, was also aware of the disunity among reformers. On 24 November 1793, he sent a letter to London in which he expressed the hope that, after the Convention, he would have the opportunity of travelling across Scotland for at least one month. Margarot wanted to support local reformers and present a unified reform plan to them, which had been approved by the British Convention.⁸⁶ However, his propaganda tour never took place, because the third Convention was forcibly dissolved and Margarot, along with other leaders, were charged with sedition and brought before the High Court of Justiciary in Edinburgh.

One of the results of the April General Convention in Edinburgh was a joint resolution to reinforce the reform effort and to initiate correspondence with English reformers. In fact, it was the LCS which, as a first, sent a letter to the Edinburgh FOP. London radicals also sought a new way to strengthen, increasingly unify⁸⁷ and popularise the reform movement. LCS members tried to contact the Edinburgh

⁸⁴ *The Scots Magazine*, 1792, p. 516.

⁸⁵ MacKENZIE, p. 60.

⁸⁶ TNA, TS 24/3/35B, London Corresponding Society: Circular to Societies Concerning Formation of a British Convention; *Letter of Maurice Margarot to the London Corresponding Society*, 24 November 1793.

⁸⁷ It was the effort to unify the reform movement and the emphasis on unity between the English and Scottish nations which eventually convinced the government to take strong steps against the radicals in 1794 and 1795.



FOP in August 1792. However, they received no answer.⁸⁸ In a letter on 17 May 1793, the LCS turned again to the Scottish reformers and asked them to join the effort in the fight for reform.⁸⁹ The English radicals also stressed that they wanted to avoid any further failures, as had been the case of the petition movement in May 1793. The simultaneously condemned the war against France and also expressed a belief that the war conflict would “*open the eyes of many people*”.⁹⁰ They seemed to believe that the war and its negative impact on trade and on the cost of living would turn public opinion to their side. In fact, the majority of Britons supported government policy and the radicals were eventually accused of anti-patriotism due to their anti-war agitation. Skirving welcomed the letter from the London radicals. His reply was in a messianistic style. It seemed that the letter was not only addressed to members of the LCS, but to the whole British public. Some reformers indeed believed that their mission was determined and the arbiter of their conduct should not be “narrow-minded” judges, but their descendants. Thomas Muir considered his trial a historical event: “*The records of this trial pass down to posterity. And, Gentleman, when our ashes shall be scattered by the winds of heaven, the impartial voice of future times will rejudge your verdict.*”⁹¹ In the Address of the British Convention assembled at Edinburgh, the reformers confessed: “*For ourselves, we say — we have no interest distinct from yours — we do not servilely feed on the patronage of the great — we prey not for the spoils of an injured country — in our conduct, we are neither influenced by the corrupt hope of obtaining places, nor the slavish fear of losing them, [...] and we can have no foes but those who are the foes of freedom, the foes of our country, the foes of the human race.*”⁹² Their mission had a higher aim than service in a State office. Maybe because of this feeling of exclusivity and a “global mission”, they could overcome the hardships associated with public persecution and political processes. In fact, these men did not pose a threat to the British public. Moreover, support for their movement was minimal among the public. Constant renewal of their struggle for parliamentary reform was not only a sign of their perseverance and courage, but also a sign of their faith in the absolute truth of what they advocated.

In response to the LCS, Skirving confirmed the view that it was necessary to overcome national prejudices and to join in the union of reformers. “*I am happy to assure you that I have hitherto discovered no sentiment in our association adverse to the most intimate and brotherly union with the associations in England.*”⁹³ Then Skirving turned to ancient history by stating that one should “*look back to the wretched state in which Roman monarchy, enfeebled and broken by its own corruption, left the nations which it had subjected, like ‘Sheep without a shepherd;’ they soon became a prey to every invader, because there was none to gather and unite them. [...] If you go no farther than separate meetings in different towns, we will not be able to confide in your confraternity, because while in such*

⁸⁸ JOHNSTON, p. 109.

⁸⁹ DAVIS, Vol. 6, p. 79.

⁹⁰ Ibidem.

⁹¹ MacKENZIE, p. 80.

⁹² TNA, TS 24/3/28, The Address of the British Convention Assembled at Edinburgh, November 19, 1793, to the People of Great Britain, p. 20.

⁹³ DAVIS, Vol. 6, p. 79.



a state, you may be but the tools of a faction. We could have all confidence, and unite with all affection, in one assembly of commissioners, from all countries of the world, if we knew they were chosen by the unbiased voice of the people [...].⁹⁴ In his letter, Skirving confirmed that Edinburgh reformers were interested in closer cooperation with English radicals. This correspondence laid the foundations for a future Anglo-Scottish Convention. It should be emphasised that Margarot, the Chairman of the LCS, and Hardy were the only two members of the LCS who knew about the first correspondence between the LCS and the Edinburgh FOP. Until the beginning of October, the correspondence was conducted privately and other members of the LCS did not know about it.⁹⁵

Before the third Convention was summoned in Edinburgh, there had been two significant political processes whose conduct and result had shocked not only the public but also some Members of Parliament. These were the trials of prominent Scottish reformer, Thomas Muir, and the Unitarian Minister, Thomas Fysche Palmer. Despite Palmer having been born in England, he had preached as a Unitarian Minister since 1783, advocating religious tolerance under the influence of Joseph Priestley's ideas. During the summer of 1793, he began to engage openly in the reform movement, and this activity brought him before the Perth District Court.⁹⁶ Muir was arrested and charged with sedition on 2 January 1793, but his appearance before the High Court of Justiciary in Edinburgh was delayed because of his adventurous decision to travel to France on the eve of the execution of Louis XVI. Muir was eventually brought before the court on 31 August and his French journey was included in the indictment. In court, he tried to defend his activity in France. Nevertheless, neither jury nor judges accepted his defence. Muir explained that he had by no means acted in France as "a missionary to a foreign power or even received any delegation, either from individuals of from any Society whatever".⁹⁷ According to him, it was ridiculous to accuse him "of a species of 'high treason' in being a missionary to a foreign power without any legal authority from this country".⁹⁸ It was his private journey, as he had hoped to plead for the life of the former French King. He never tried to act as a representative of the British government. Naturally, this was not the only crime he had committed and the indictment was submitted to the jury. He was accused of seditious speeches in a spirit of disloyalty to the King and the established government. He was also indicted of speeches addressed to meetings of people from the lower social class. He was alleged to have advised people to purchase seditious publications, such as *The Rights of Man* and *A Declaration of Rights*, and *An Address to the People, approved of by a number of the Friends of Reform in Paisley*. He was also accused of distributing seditious publications and, according to the indictment, Muir had attended two meetings in Kirkintilloch and Milton where he had supposedly systematically criticised the government for being tyrannical and Parliament for being corrupt. Simultaneously, Muir had allegedly emphasised the differences between the French government and the British constitutional system. He allegedly vilified the monarchical part of the Constitution and presented it as useless,

94 Ibidem, pp. 79–80.

95 Ibidem, p. 86.

96 BAYLEN — GOSSMAN, p. 364.

97 MacKENZIE, p. 81.

98 Ibidem.



cumbersome and expensive. One of the accusations was also his imprudent reading of the Address from the United Irishmen in the first Edinburgh Convention of 1792.⁹⁹

Muir's trial was political, the result of which was known before the trial commenced. Lord Justice Clark was the infamous Robert McQueen, Lord Braxfield, also known as "Jeffreys of Scotland".¹⁰⁰ Lord Braxfield considered the demand for universal manhood suffrage as seditious and therefore indictable. The Lord Advocate was Robert Dundas, who was also a nephew of the Home Secretary. Therefore, the government was well informed about the conduct of the trial. The composition of the jury was proof that the process would not be fair. Most members of the jury belonged to the loyalist *Goldsmith's Hall Association* and this was the first clear sign of the manipulation of the process. It was clear that the jury, whose members publicly denounced any involvement in the reform movement, would not be impartial. Muir's process became a real travesty of justice. Muir objected in vain to the composition of the jury: "*The gentlemen now selected by your Lordship, as my Jurymen, belonged [...] to an Association [...] calling themselves the Friends of the Constitution, united to support it against what they pleased to call 'republicans and levellers' [...] I belonged to the association of the 'Friends of the People'. [...] Never have we professed to be its enemies; yet the Association in Goldsmith's Hall, by a deliberate and public act, have declared that we were the enemies of the Constitution [...] shall those men by my Jurymen, who not merely accused me, but likewise judged and condemned me, without knowing me — without hearing me in my vindication?*"¹⁰¹

Muir's objection was not accepted and the Prosecution called the witnesses. However, none of the Crown witnesses' testimonies proved sufficient evidence and was subsequently refuted by witnesses of the defendant. The closing speech¹⁰² by Muir was not only his own defence, but also the defence of the whole reform movement. However, this speech had a negative impact on Muir's defence. If he had thought it would convince the jurymen and have an impact on their feelings and patriotism, he was wrong. Muir's unshakeable conviction of the correctness of reform had a totally negative impact on the jury's verdict. He had naively hoped that his intellectual abilities and rhetorical talent would be sufficient to convince the judges and jury that reform was a panacea for all the economic and social grievances. Instead, he alienated the jury even further. Muir was not the only example of this political naivety. The subsequent political trials of radicals were also examples of this idealism.

Henry Erskine, the brother of the famous lawyer and Whig politician, Thomas Erskine, suggested to Muir that he would be willing to defend him, but only under the condition that Muir would not interfere in the conduct of his defence. Erskine presumed that Muir's unwavering belief in reform could jeopardise the jury verdict.

⁹⁹ *An Account of the Trial of Thomas Muir, Esq. Younger of Huntershill, before the High Court of Justiciary at Edinburgh, On the 30th and 31st days of August, 1793*, New York 1794, pp. 5–18.

¹⁰⁰ George Jeffreys, also known as the "Hanging Judge", was a Welsh judge during the reign of the King James II. He gained his reputation as a cruel and ruthless judge, due to his uncompromising enforcement of the King's policy.

¹⁰¹ MacKENZIE, p. 55.

¹⁰² Muir's closing address to his jury became a declamation piece in schools in the United States throughout the 19th century. It did not in England ever.



Muir, however, refused the lawyer's offer, deciding to defend himself. In his closing speech, he tried to refute the accusations that he had spread, or recommended Paine's *The Rights of Man* and vigorously denied that he was Republican.¹⁰³ When Robert Dundas indicated the Address of the United Irishmen as proof of his treachery, Muir argued that the Lord Advocate had not pointed out a single passage to support this assertion.¹⁰⁴ When Muir sat down after his nearly three-hour closing speech, a unanimous burst of applause erupted from the spectators. However, Lord Justice Clark Braxfield pointed to this outburst of passionate emotion as another sign of treachery and manipulation of the crowd. According to him, the defendant had once again shown that he was a really dangerous man.¹⁰⁵ Muir was chiefly accused of abusing the ignorance of people to inculcate "seditious ideas" in them against the government and the traditional order of society.¹⁰⁶

Braxfield's views were sometimes so extreme that even some ardent enemies of reform dissociated themselves from him. On the other hand, Braxfield's views reflected the fears of wealthy people of political agitation by the lower classes. It was "*the state of time, which admitted of no neutrality, and of scarcely any moderation, and which, therefore, encouraged excess on all sides, and suggests the unfairness of applying ordinary standards to a crisis so extraordinary, — a crisis during which, under this standards, verdicts might be pronounced by any one-half of the nation against other*".¹⁰⁷ The main argument during the course of the trials of the radicals in 1793 and 1794 was the "seriousness of the times". Britain was at war with revolutionary France and any involvement in the reform movement was considered a crime at that time. This was mainly the case in the Scottish criminal justice system where jurymen did not decide on the basis of clear evidence and did not seek a criminal intent, but pronounced judgement on the basis of assumptions. In the time of crisis and tension in Europe, the small Whig opposition tried in vain to promote freedom of speech in Parliament. When the reign of terror broke out in France and Europe was struggling with a new "civic ideology", there was no space for discussion in British society to question the 'perfection' of the Constitution.

The jury found Muir guilty and, on the same day, the judge pronounced the sentence. He was sentenced to transportation to Botany Bay for fourteen years¹⁰⁸ for the crime of sedition. The strict penalty was a shock not only to Muir's supporters,

103 Ibidem, pp. 95–96.

104 Ibidem, p. 105.

105 Ibidem, p. 107.

106 Ibidem.

107 H. COCKBURN, *An Examination of the Trials for Sedition Which Have Hitherto Occurred in Scotland*, Edinburgh 1888, p. 168.

108 Lord Henderland, one of the judges at Muir's trial, advocated transportation as the only suitable punishment for Muir: "*Banishment would be improper, as it would only be sending to another country, a man, where he might have the opportunity of exciting the same spirit of discontent, and sowing with a plentiful hand sedition. Whipping was too severe and disgraceful, the more especially to a man who had bore his character and rank in life. And imprisonment, he considered, would be but a temporary punishment, when the criminal would be again be loose, and so again disturb the happiness of the people. There remains but one punishment in our law, and it wrung his very heart to mention it, the transportation.*" *An Account of the Trial of Thomas Muir*, p. 124.



but also to the jury. In 1849, Sir James Gibson-Craig wrote: “He was found guilty, and sentenced to transportation. All were thunderstruck with the extreme severity of the sentence, and none more than the jury. They met immediately after the court rose, and unanimously expressed their opinion that the sentence was beyond all measure severe.”¹⁰⁹

Initially, they thought that Muir would spend only a few weeks in prison. Some of them even resolved to prepare a petition to the court.¹¹⁰ However, it was too late to protest. This trial was perhaps the most monstrous of this period and Charles Fox accurately stated: “God help the people who have such judges”.¹¹¹

The Unitarian Minister and advocate of parliamentary reform, Thomas Fyshe Palmer, was arrested for sedition on 2 August and his trial lasted from 12 to 13 September 1793. The government began to be interested in Palmer’s activities after his participation in a meeting of reformers in Dundee in July 1793, where the Society of the Friends of Liberty had been founded. George Mealmaker, one of the members of this society, suggested publishing an address that was highly critical of government policy. Palmer had initially opposed publication of *The Address to their Friends and Fellow Citizens*. However, he finally suggested some alteration to the language and moderation of some of the more scathing phrases. Then one thousand copies were printed for distribution. It was specifically for this Address that Palmer was charged with sedition and brought before the Perth District Court.¹¹² The accusation was very similar to Muir’s indictment, but in the case of Palmer, it was a “shorter” version. Palmer was accused of the writing and printing of seditious literature, which was intended to incite people against the “Happy Constitution” and the British government. According to the court, *The Address to their Friends and Fellow Citizens* was libellous and allegedly misinterpreted the activities and goals of the government. The Prosecution claimed that Palmer’s publication defended the enemy with whom Britain was at war, and that he had tried to sow discontent among the people. Therefore, this activity was intended to lead to rebellion.¹¹³ These were “crimes of an heinous nature, dangerous to the public peace, and severely punishable”.¹¹⁴

As in the case of Muir’s trial, Palmer’s crime was also based on assumptions and a fabricated story. *The Address to their Friends and Fellow Citizens* was cited in court as evidence by the Prosecution: “Is not every new day adding a new link to our chains? Is not the executive branch daily seizing new, unprecedented, and unwarrantable powers? Has not the House of Commons (your only security from the evils of tyranny and aristocracy) joined the coalition against you? Is the election of its members either fair, free, or frequent? Is not its independence gone, while it is made up of pensions and placemen? [...] Fellow citizens, the time is now come, when you must ether gather round the fabric of Liberty to support it,

109 COCKBURN, p. 182.

110 Ibidem.

111 CONE, p. 174.

112 The New Annual Register (1793), *Occurrences*, London 1794, p. 37, <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hxj8vf;view=1up;seq=9>, [cit. 2016-02-03].

113 *The Trial of the Rev. Thomas Fyshe Palmer, before the Circuit Court of Justiciary, Held at Perth, on the 12th and 13th September, 1793 on an Indictment for Seditious Practices*, Edinburgh 1793 (reprint 2012), p. 5.

114 Ibidem.



or to your eternal infamy, let it fall to the ground, to rife no more, hurling along with it every thing that is valuable and dear to an enlightened people. [...] You are plunged into a war by a wicked Ministry and a compliant Parliament, who seem careless and unconcerned for your interest [...].¹¹⁵ As with most reform pamphlets, in this case the author also focused attention and criticism on the unequal electoral system and the influence of the Crown on the Commons. When the war with France broke out, an integral part of such publications was also criticism of the war. The Prosecution could also argue that, according to the Royal Proclamation of May 1792, the pamphlet constituted seditious writing. At the end of 1792, vigorous debate broke out in both Houses of Parliament about the question of what exactly “seditious literature” entailed and where the limits of freedom of speech should be. The majority in Parliament supported the Royal Proclamation. Richard Sheridan, who belonged to what was known as the “Foxities”,¹¹⁶ was convinced that the government had caused panic to make the people believe that some sedition in fact existed.¹¹⁷

Palmer’s trial was similar to Muir’s. His jury also consisted of local loyalists. Lord Advocate Dundas described him as most determined rebel of Scotland.¹¹⁸ Palmer was sentenced to transportation to Botany Bay for seven years. However, his belief in reform did not fade even after his sentencing: “I thought, my Lords that a parliamentary reform would enhance the happiness of millions, and establish the security of the empire. For these reasons it is, and with these views only, as God is my Judge that I joined the society of low weavers and mechanics [...] in Dundee.”¹¹⁹

Conduct of the trials of Muir and Palmer aroused a wave of opposition not only among supporters of reform but also among some Whig MPs. In both Houses of Parliament, some vigorous debates were held on this topic from January to April 1794. The small but significant Whig parliamentary opposition attempted to review and reopen both trials. In February 1794, William Adam, a Member of the House of Commons and a friend of Charles Fox, even submitted a proposal which was intended to unify English and Scottish criminal law. According to his proposal, the possibility of appeal by Scottish criminal courts including The High Court of Justiciary should be introduced. The Court of Appeal should be the House of Lords as in the case of English criminal law. However, his proposal was supported by only thirty-one MPs and his amendment was not passed.¹²⁰ When William Adam again proposed an amendment of Scottish criminal law in March 1794, Henry Dundas argued that “conceived it his duty to enter his solemn protest, as a representative of the people of Scotland, against any alteration taking place in the jurisprudence of that country; [...] and to assure him [William Adam — J. B.], that such an attempt would be completely opposite to the wishes of the people of Scotland”.¹²¹

On 10 March, Adam spoke again in the Commons, attempting to point out that both Scottish trials had been conducted illegally. He explained that, in English ter-

115 Ibidem, pp. 7–8.

116 Foxities were small New Whig parliamentary opposition.

117 COBBETT, Vol. XXX, p. 526.

118 BAYLEN, GOSSMAN, p. 365.

119 *The Trial of the Rev. Thomas Fyshe Palmer*, p. 158.

120 COBBETT, Vol. XXX, pp. 1346–1349.

121 COBBETT, Vol. XXXI, p. 62.



minology, the crimes of Muir and Palmer signified offences concerning “libel”, or “leasing-making”. According to Queen Anne’s Act of 1703, a fine or banishment were suitable penalties for this type of crime. However, the Act did not mention transportation anywhere.¹²² On 15 April, James Maitland, the Earl of Lauderdale, who was a supporter of the French Republic, argued similarly in the House of Lords. The Earl of Lauderdale, also known as “Citizen Maitland”, said that deportation could not be used as punishment for Muir and Palmer’s crimes because, according to the Act of 1703, they were only guilty of misdemeanours and thus should be punished by a fine, imprisonment or banishment. Moreover, not until the Union with England, did Scotland have its own colonies and thus there could be no penalty of deportation.¹²³

In one of his speeches in the Commons, Adam also emphasised that deportation to Botany Bay was not the same as living in exile in America, which had been a form of punishment until the Declaration of Independence. America had cultured, educated people with fine manners and behaviour. Moreover, they spoke English. On the other hand, the voyage to Botany Bay was long, fatiguing and dangerous. One could clearly see the contrast between Australia and mild and friendly America. The soil was harsh and barren in Australia and livelihood depended on meagre supplies. The inhabitants were barbarous and hostile people with savage customs and an unknown language. Instead of an educated society, there one could see “*the outcast of every gaol in England, ignorant in mind, abandoned in their morals and devoid of every quality that belongs to civilized man*”.¹²⁴

According to Adam, it was not a suitable place for Muir and Palmer who were educated men of refined manners.¹²⁵ MPs often stressed the social origin of Muir and Palmer, which played an important role with regard to reviewing both processes in Parliament. In the debate of 24 February, Adam stressed that Mr. Palmer came from one of the oldest families in the county of Bedford¹²⁶ and Richard Sheridan did not forget to mention that Palmer had originally attended Queens’ College in Cambridge.¹²⁷ A friend of Palmer, George Dyer, later described him as a man of letters who possessed an exquisite taste in the fine arts, in painting, poetry and music, and who was also an excellent judge of architecture, gardening and husbandry.¹²⁸ Muir also came from a respectable family¹²⁹ and, due to his legal education and excellent oratorical skills, belonged to the intellectual high society. MPs actually defended their equals — educated men of good taste and fine manners. The punishment of transportation for such cultured men touched them personally. Therefore, they did not only defend the rights of convicted radicals and freedom of speech, but also defended themselves and their social class.

However, Prime Minister William Pitt resolutely refused to reopen the trials of Palmer and Muir. Because there was no possibility of appeal by the criminal courts

122 COBBETT, Vol. XXX, pp. 1490–1491.

123 COBBETT, Vol. XXXI, pp. 267–269.

124 COBBETT, Vol. XXX, p. 1539.

125 *Ibidem*, pp. 1538–1540.

126 *Ibidem*, p. 1455.

127 *Ibidem*, p. 1449.

128 BAYLEN — GOSSMAN, p. 364.

129 MacKENZIE, p. 1.

in Scotland to the Appellate Committee of the House of Lords, the parliamentary opposition did not have a chance of success. Pitt also objected to a petition to Parliament because, according to law, a plea for mercy should be sent directly to the King.¹³⁰ The MPs who defended Muir and Palmer in Parliament did not have the intention of asking for mercy, but wanted to achieve the re-examination of these trials in the House of Lords. However, the law did not allow it. Pitt *“thought that the judges would have been highly culpable, if, vested as they were with discretionary powers, they had not employed them for the present punishment of such daring delinquents, and the suppression of doctrines so dangerous to the country”*.¹³¹ Adam went on to *“express his astonishment that ministers should advise the execution of such sentences against men whose offence might perhaps be traced to the doctrines formerly inculcated by some of those [Pitt and the Duke of Richmond — J. B.] who held distinguished situations in the cabinet”*.¹³² Charles Grey, an ally of Fox said, *“that Mr. Pitt had acted on their principles at the meeting at the Thatched house in 1782, that the doctrines promulgated from thence by Mr. Pitt and the Duke of Richmond were of the same tendency as those maintained by these two unfortunate gentlemen; nay, that the Duke of Richmond had gone greater lengths than either of them, in recommending universal suffrage, and telling the people that they must depend on their own exertions in procuring a parliamentary reform; and that the efforts of the noble Duke and Mr. Pitt in 1782, on that subject, might be regarded as having produced the exertions of Messrs. Muir and Palmer in Scotland. But what was the result? The noble Duke and Mr. Pitt sat in his majesty’s cabinet, and gave their sanction for carrying into execution the sentence passed on Mr. Palmer and Mr. Muir, that they should be banished for fourteen years”*.¹³³ Grey also said that he entirely agreed with Fox, that if the criminal law of Scotland were extended to England, then it would no longer be the country of freemen.¹³⁴

An organisation of what was called the British Convention in Edinburgh was launched at the beginning of October 1793. The General Committee of the FOP was summoned to Manson’s Lodge, Blackfriar’s Wynd in Edinburgh. The meeting was headed by Skirving and its task was to organise an election for the upcoming Convention of Delegates. The General Committee also expressed support for the martyrs, Muir and Palmer, and called for unity in the struggle for freedom.¹³⁵ After the meeting of the General Committee, Alexander Calender, a member of the FOP, wrote a letter to the London LCS to express the wish that delegates of the LCS would attend the future Convention in Edinburgh. Simultaneously, Calender assured Hardy, Secretary of the LCS, that he spoke on behalf of the FOP and that his desire was the desire of all the members of the Friends of the People.¹³⁶ In fact, the leadership of the LCS had already been in touch with Skirving, the main organiser of the Convention, since

130 COBBETT, Vol. XXX, p. 1450.

131 Ibidem, pp. 1575–1576.

132 Ibidem, p. 1576.

133 Ibidem.

134 Ibidem.

135 TNA, TS 24/3/35B, Friends of the People, Mason’s Lodge, Blackfriar’s Wynd, 4th Oct. 1793.

136 TNA, TS 24/3/35B, Letters from Edinburgh, Letters from A. Calender to Thomas Hardy, 5th Oct. 1793.



May 1793. Not only members of the LCS but also other radical English societies were interested in participating in the Convention. However, a problem was the date of the upcoming Convention which was to be launched on 29 October. The time pressure forced some English societies to ask for representatives of their interests in the forthcoming Convention from other allied radical societies. Although Hardy was pleased with the correspondence with the Norwich reformers that they would also vote delegates for the Convention,¹³⁷ finally the United Societies of Norwich decided that its interests would be represented by Maurice Margarot, a member of the LCS. Radicals from Leeds also asked for representatives from other English radical societies. Matthew Campbell Brown, who was a delegate from the Sheffield SCI, would also represent the interests of the Leeds Constitutional Society.¹³⁸

The LCS voted delegates in its first open-air meeting on 24 October. Due to the large number of spectators¹³⁹, this meeting was held under the control of five hundred constables and the assembly also attracted representatives from the Treasury Solicitor with three local magistrates “*ready to hold hearings right there as soon as arrested were made*”.¹⁴⁰ However, the meeting took place peacefully and Maurice Margarot and Joseph Gerrald were elected as delegates to the Convention.¹⁴¹ The SCI had even chosen its delegates the day before the official opening of the Convention, namely on 28 October. Charles Sinclair and Henry ‘Redhead’ Yorke were appointed as delegates.¹⁴² Nevertheless, Henry “Redhead” Yorke finally did not attend the Convention. The late election of the English delegates caused them to be unable to attend the official opening of the British Convention. The Scottish delegates were disappointed because they did not know the exact reason for the absence of their English colleagues. Therefore, members of the Convention who gathered at Manson’s Lodge, Blackfriar’s Wynd on 29 October, decided to adjourn this assembly until the following April.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, on 6 November, Margarot, Gerrald, Sinclair together with Hamilton Rowan and Simon Butler¹⁴⁴ who belonged to the United Irishmen, finally appeared before the General Committee of the FOP.¹⁴⁵ Skirving could write to Norwich that the delegates had just arrived from London and others were on the way to Edinburgh “*in order to establish an indissoluble Fraternity between the two Nations, and to adopt those Measures which, in this*

137 TNA, TS 24/3/35B, Letter from Secretary of LCS to Henry Buckle, Secretary of the United Societies of Norwich, 17th Oct. 1793.

138 T. HARDY, *Memoir of Thomas Hardy: Founder of, and Secretary to the London Corresponding Society: For Diffusing Useful Political Knowledge among the People of Great Britain and Ireland, and for Promoting Parliamentary Reform, from Its Establishment in Jan. 1792 until His Arrest on a False Charge of High Treason, on the 12th of May, 1794*, London 1832, p. 30.

139 Attendance at the open-air meeting was estimated at four thousand persons.

140 JOHNSTON, p. 118.

141 TNA, TS 24/3/35B, Letters from Thomas Hardy to Adams, Secretary of SCI, 25th Oct. 1793.

142 TNA, TS 24/3/35B, Letter of LCS, signed by the Secretary Thomas Hardy, 23rd Nov. 1793.

143 JOHNSTON, p. 119.

144 On 5th November 1793, the Convention resolved that “*any of the members of the Society of the United Irishmen of Dublin should be admitted to speak and vote in the Convention*”. In *Report of the Committee of Secrecy*.

145 CONE, p. 180.



awful Period, may have a tendency to save the Country".¹⁴⁶ After the arrival of the English delegates, the Convention was again summoned. The English radicals very quickly gained the decisive influence not only in a Committee of the Convention,¹⁴⁷ but played a significant role during the whole session.

The delegates also had some duties to their societies. A suitable example were the *Instructions of the LCS to their Delegates*. Gerrald and Margarot should advocate "the two essential principles — General Suffrage and Annual Representation, together with the unalienable right in the People to reform".¹⁴⁸ They should conduct regular and especially frequent correspondence with London¹⁴⁹ and, in the case of Margarot, these instructions also concerned the duties to the United Societies of Norwich.

A session of the Convention¹⁵⁰ was reopened on 19 November 1793. From the first day, the delegates from England took their role very seriously in the Convention. Gourlay, one delegate, moved that Lord Dear should be called to the Chair. However, Lord Dear refused this post and agreed with Gerrald and Sinclair that it would be too much in "a spirit of aristocracy".¹⁵¹ The Convention, also known as the British Convention, unlike the first Edinburgh Convention, was limited strictly against the aristocracy and was loosely inspired by the rules and organisation of the French National Convention. Although its members did not try to take over legislative power, as they were later wrongly accused of doing, their proceedings and organisation had a tinge of revolutionary methods. Margarot later suggested that, before a regular session of the Convention, a Committee should be appointed to draw up rules for internal procedures. According to the proposal, members were to be divided into sections¹⁵². Members of the sections were to debate on every question before it was discussed in the Convention. Then they would clearly understand the subject and could form their opinions in their different sections.¹⁵³

From the beginning, the Convention discussed the issue of the formation of a "union of the two nations". On 24 November, Margarot wrote to London that the Convention approved *the Committee of Union between the two Nations* and *the Committee of Finance*. A provisional Decree of Union was approved by the Convention on Saturday, 23 November. Thereafter, according to Margarot's letter, all members of the Convention stood, joined hands and swore solemnly to renounce all national differences and prejudices. They also approved the new official name of their assembly:

146 TNA, TS 24/3/35B, Letter from W. Skirving to the United Societies of Norwich, 7th Nov. 1793.

147 TNA, TS 24/3/35B, Letters from Maurice Margaret to LCS, Edinburgh, 24th Nov. 1793.

148 *The Trial of Joseph Gerrald, before the High Court of Justiciary, at Edinburgh, on the 13th and 14th of March, 1794, for Sedition: With an Original Memoir, and Notes*, Glasgow 1835, p. 119.

149 Ibidem.

150 According to Maurice Margarot's letter dated 24 November 1793, the Convention was attended by one hundred and eighty delegates.

151 *An Account of the Proceedings of the British Convention: Held in Edinburgh, the 19th of November, 1793*, [s. l.] (reprint 2010), p. 1.

152 The term "section" could be recalled by British governmental authorities as the revolutionary sections of Paris. Indeed, the Convention several times used terms taken over from the vocabulary of the French Revolution.

153 *An Account of the Proceedings*, pp. 3–4.



*The British Convention of Delegates of the People Associated to obtain Universal Suffrage and Annual Parliaments.*¹⁵⁴ The President of the Convention then turned to the “fellow citizens” to read the following address: “*The union which we have now accomplished will, I hope, form an important epoch in the history of our country. The event, indeed, is unprecedented; it is the voluntary union of the people of two nations, long separated by ancient prejudices and unnatural animosities [...].*”¹⁵⁵ Brown, a delegate from the London SCI, also added that he hoped “*the distinctions of North and South Britain will be soon forgotten, and that these countries shall only be known by the common name of Britain*”.¹⁵⁶

It was not only members of the Convention who took their role seriously, but also the government which regarded the Convention seriously. “*The views of this dangerous assembly appears from the minutes of their proceedings. [...] They assumed, in almost every particular, the style and mode of proceeding adopted by the National Convention of France: they divided themselves into ‘section, committees of organization, instruction, finance, and secrecy’. And some were dated ‘first day of the British Convention, one and indivisible’.*”¹⁵⁷ The Convention was open to the public and attendees had access to the proceedings. The government obviously took advantage of this opportunity and thus there were also some informants among the audience. However, the delegates knew very well that among the audience were not only supporters of reform. On 4 December, Margarot turned to government informants: “*It has been observed that we admitted spies under the name of strangers. I say they are welcome, and if the men, by whom they are employed, were to come here they should be welcome also — for we have no secret which we dare not avow.*”¹⁵⁸ According to Margarot’s words, enemies of reform endeavoured to put a stop to their meetings and therefore the reformers always had to act in accordance with the law. “*But as the people in power may take measures against us, not warranted by law we ought to be prepared.*”¹⁵⁹

Gerrald’s speech on Thursday, 21 November was perhaps the most significant performance in the Convention. He referred to the ancient alleged democratic Anglo-Saxon history which was destroyed by the invasion of the Norman conquerors. The original purity of a democratic Constitution had been gradually eroded and a national representation had begun to act in its own interests, with the interests of the people increasingly being marginalised. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 had brought hope, but it had ultimately not met expectations. The Revolution had not transferred complete change or remedy, i.e. had not introduced universal suffrage. According to Gerrald, the right of universal suffrage was their lost heritage of the “Golden Age” of Anglo-Saxon democracy.¹⁶⁰ Gerrald again stressed that the right of universal suffrage had a precedent in their history and therefore they did not have to use merely the natural rights of man as an argument. He also emphasised the need for the education of the lower classes, which was also one of the main objectives of

154 TNA, TS 24/3/35B, Letter from Maurice Margarot to LCS, Edinburgh 24th Nov. 1793.

155 *An Account of the Proceedings*, p. 21.

156 *Ibidem*, p. 21.

157 *Report of the Committee of Secrecy*, p. 15.

158 *Ibidem*, p. 43.

159 *Ibidem*, p. 44.

160 *An Account of the Proceedings*, pp. 11–12.



the Convention. *“It may occur that the voice of the people will be wrong; when their understandings are perverted by priestcraft, darkened by political superstition, like the voice once heard in Jerusalem of, Crucify him, crucify him. [...] But were the tyrants of the earth as solicitous to enlighten, as they are to punish their unfortunate subjects? Were government to instruct the poor, instead of hanging up their bodies upon gibbets, the voice of the people would then be the voice of God.”*¹⁶¹

It was important that people were informed about policy and their rights, because it was the only way to understand the necessity for parliamentary reform. *“Let us endeavour to instruct the people in their rights, and to inform them of our views and our intentions, they will come and sign our petitions. [...] The voice of the people will be heard whenever it is spoken in the language of truth [...]”*¹⁶² Faith in the ability of the infallible political thinking of the people was naive. Radicals considered education of the common people as being most important. According to them, people only needed to read the newspapers and pamphlets regularly. For this purpose, John Thelwall, a member of the LCS, later organised regular political lectures for common people. Radicals believed that, in the case of the introduction of universal suffrage, people could not make any political mistakes and would certainly not vote against their own interests. Nevertheless, British radicals lacked any experience related to modern forms of dictatorships, mendacious propaganda and populism. On the other hand, the French Revolution was the first great example. However, the wealthy feared the politicisation of the lower classes. This concern was also reflected in Muir’s indictment that accused him of using his legal education to spread seditious ideas among the common people. Without his agitation, the people would never have learned about the alleged political injustice and Paine’s seditious book.¹⁶³ William Paley, a loyalist and author of an influential pamphlet, *Reasons for Contentment*, stated that *“so long as a man is intent upon the duties and concerns of his own condition, he never thinks of comparing it with any other; he is never troubled with reflections upon the different classes and orders of mankind, the advantages and disadvantages of each, the necessity or nonnecessity of civil distinctions, much less does he feel within himself a disposition to covet or envy any of them”*.¹⁶⁴ Paley seriously tried to convince poor people that to be rich was actually a disadvantage and *“if I were disposed to this weakness, the subject of my envy would be a healthy young man, in full possession of his strength and faculties, going forth in a morning to work for his wife and children, or bringing home his wages at night”*.¹⁶⁵ Although Paley submitted hypocritical, sometimes absurd examples of “reasons for contentment” with a poor life, he meant those ideas seriously.

The government was informed, of course, of a decision by Edinburgh authorities to dissolve the British Convention, because Lord Advocate Robert Dundas had been sending regular reports on the proceedings of the Convention to his uncle, Henry Dundas. Due to the presence of spies, the proceedings of the Convention were under

161 Ibidem, p. 13.

162 Ibidem, p. 15.

163 MacKENZIE, p. 75.

164 W. PALEY, *Reasons for Contentment; Addressed to the Labouring People of the British Public*, London 1793 (reprint 2010), p. 4.

165 Ibidem, p. 18.



the control of Edinburgh magistrates. Local authorities were willing to accept this assembly until 4 December. The turning point was the creation of a *Secret Committee* that was intended to summon a new assembly of delegates in the case of illegal dispersion of the existing British Convention. An impetus for the creation of this Committee was the fear of delegates of the situation in Ireland. In 1793, the United Irishmen called for a National Convention and, like the English and Scottish radicals, they wanted to achieve parliamentary reform. However, in July the Irish Parliament decided to intervene and passed the Convention Act, forbidding meetings for the purpose of asking for a “redress of grievances”.¹⁶⁶ The Secret Committee was intended to be a response to any violent and illegal dissolution of the British Convention. On 2 December in a letter to London, delegates Gerrald and Margarot emphasised that the Convention would proceed permanently in the case of “*any attempt be made by Government for the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Bill, the introduction of a Convention Bill, or the landing of foreign troops in Great Britain or Ireland*”.¹⁶⁷ On 5 December 1793, Edinburgh authorities decided to intervene against the British Convention and arrested its leaders, Maurice Margarot, Joseph Gerrald, William Skirving, Alexander Calender, Alexander Scott and William and George Ross. When they were released on bail, they attended the last meeting. Thereafter, the Convention was forcibly dissolved on 6 December 1793.

Margarot, Gerrald and Skirving were charged with sedition. In January 1794, the trials of Margarot and Skirving commenced. Margarot was called by many of his contemporaries “the Frenchman”, because he had a French surname and his appearance and behaviour were reminiscent of a Frenchman. Unlike the current fashion, Margarot had relatively short, black hair. He was a lively and well-educated man. Radicalism had a tradition in his family, because his father had already been involved in the support of John Wilke’s affair. Like Skirving, Margarot decided to defend himself in court. Naturally, this was a mistake. Margarot and Skirving made a lot of procedural mistakes and, like Muir, they had no chance of success. They firmly believed in their own innocence, and were convinced that there was no incriminating evidence against them. For this reason, Skirving called no witnesses, because he believed that the Crown witnesses had no evidence against him. His belief in the justice of the court was so unshakeable that he not only expected a verdict of “not guilty”, but also believed that they would exculpate him from all suspicions of seditious intent.¹⁶⁸

However, political trials are neither impartial nor fair. Lord Justice Clark Braxfield chaired the court, only reinforcing the expectation that the trials would take a similar course as in the case of Muir. During the trial of Margarot, Lord Braxfield turned to the jury: “*When you see them [Reformers in the Convention — J. B.] holding out that the Parliament is guilty of the grossest irregularities, as having no regard to the laws or the good of the subject, and in short, that we are just upon the brink of ruin. When that is the light in which they pretend to hold forth the Parliament, it is impossible to believe but they must mean something else than a reform in Parliament; they must well expect to get*

166 D. KEENAN, *The Grail of Catholic Emancipation 1793 to 1829*, [s. l.] 2002, p. 77.

167 *The Trial of Joseph Gerrald*, p. 121.

168 CONE, p. 184.



a redress of their grievances from a Parliament whom they have thought proper to state in such terms. [...] Gentlemen, if a society of so many people, divided themselves into sections, committees, coming from the sections, motions made, and upon this a Committee of Secrecy appointed, and a Convention of Emergency established, and the sittings declared permanent, and all that. Was this necessary for a reform in Parliament? I think there could be no occasion for all this secrecy. [...] You see, that they have established a Convention of Emergency, in the case of a Convention Bill being brought into Parliament, similar to that brought into the Parliament of Ireland. [...] But Gentlemen, in order to constitute the crime of Sedition, it is not necessary that the meeting should have had in view to overturn the Constitution by mobs and by violence, to overturn the King and Parliament; for I apprehend, in some sense the crime of sedition consists in poisoning the minds of the lieges, which may naturally in the end have a tendency to promote violence against the state, and endeavouring to create a dissatisfaction in the country, which nobody can tell where it will end, it will very naturally end in overt rebellion.”¹⁶⁹

On 14 January 1794, when after the “guilty” verdict, Margarot wanted to appeal “against the whole procedure”, Lord Braxfield replied in his typical way: “He has had a fair trial; he went on for four hours in his defence; he is a stranger in this country; and not having counsel, we allowed him to go on in a manner in which we would not have permitted a native of Scotland; he went on four hours in such a way as was contrary to the Constitution of the country, and your Lordships will now proceed in giving your opinions upon what shall be the result of this verdict.”¹⁷⁰ In the words of Lord Braxfield, Margarot’s behaviour was an “insolence, effrontery and petulance unparalleled”.¹⁷¹ He also said that Margarot’s defence, that was obviously dedicated to a wide audience, was nothing other than sedition from beginning to end.¹⁷² Margarot and Skirving were sentenced to fourteen years’ transportation to Botany Bay.

Gerrald was released on bail and expected a similar fate. But before his trial began, he returned to London to report on the situation in Scotland. In January 1794, in a letter to Home Secretary Dundas, Gerrald expressed what he thought about the persecution of former delegates of the Convention. “I take my departure for Edinburgh tomorrow evening; — not for the purpose of taking my trial, but, as you well know, for the purpose of receiving my sentence of transportation for fourteen years.”¹⁷³ Although, Gerrald anticipated a guilty verdict, he refused to escape to the United States. His friends tried to persuade him to leave Britain, but his conviction of the cause of reform was too strong. In the letter to Dundas, Gerrald criticised the illegal procedure of the magistrates who had removed him from his bed in his Edinburgh flat in the early morning hour and, without a warrant, had immediately begun to confiscate all his

169 *The Trial of Maurice Margarot: Before the High Court of Justiciary, at Edinburgh, on the 13th and 14th of January, 1794, on an Indictment for Seditious Practices*, London 1794, p. 171.

170 *Ibidem*, p. 177.

171 BAYLEN — GOSSMAN, p. 308.

172 *Ibidem*.

173 I. D. EATON, *Authentic Biographical Anecdotes of Joseph Gerrald, a Delegate to the British Convention in Scotland from the London Corresponding Society, and Who is Now on His Passage to New Holland for Having Acted in that Capacity: 1794, Written by a Friend, Who Knew Him in the Year 1765*, London 1795 (reprint 2010), p. 28.



papers. In Gerrald's words, this step was clearly illegal, as well as was the dissolution of the Convention. The papers which were illegally seized in his flat were to be used as evidence against him in court.¹⁷⁴

Gerrald was chronically ill and it was almost certain that, if he were convicted, it would be a miracle for him to survive the voyage to Australia. Despite this fact, just like Margarot and Muir, he was prepared to use his trial for the defence of parliamentary reform. If Margarot's trial had mobilised wide public support and rallies in the streets of Edinburgh, then Gerrald's eloquence and charismatic personality attracted an equally large audience, ready to support their "Tribune". William Godwin, a member of the LCS, wrote a letter to his friend Gerrald to encourage him to remain morally strong. "*Stand up to the situation. Be whole yourself. [...] If you should fail of a verdict, this manner of stating your defence is best calculated to persuade the whole audience, and the whole world, for the same reason that it is best calculated to persuade a jury*".¹⁷⁵ Godwin also emphasised that his mission did not concern only local matters, but the whole world. "*The jury, the world, will feel your value, if you show yourself such a man*".¹⁷⁶ However, neither judge nor jury saw Gerrald or any reformer as a "messenger of world peace". On the contrary, they saw them as "pests" of the Constitution and followers of the French Jacobins. Lord Braxfield said clearly: "*My lords, the happiness of the innocent part of mankind requires of us to punish the guilty and protect the innocent; and we cannot give that protection to the innocent part of society unless we inflict adequate punishments upon crimes committed against society*".¹⁷⁷ Gerrald was sentenced to fourteen years' transportation to Botany Bay and, together with Margarot, Muir, Palmer and Skirving, awaited their fate in Portsmouth until early May 1794 when the vessel, *Surprise*, left England and sailed out to sea, bound for Australia.¹⁷⁸

The London radicals responded immediately to the Edinburgh trials through resolutions and addresses. On 17 January 1794, the SCI issued some resolutions to condemn the illegal dissolution of the British Convention. The SCI resolved that "*the law ceases to be an object of obedience whenever it becomes an instrument of oppression*".¹⁷⁹ Injustice in Scotland was injustice in England and the safety of Englishman was endangered whenever their brethren in Scotland were judged for noble ideas like common criminals. SCI members also fully supported the "Scottish Martyrs" — Muir, Palmer, Skirving, Margarot and Gerrald.¹⁸⁰ The LCS also supported the conduct of "citizens" Margarot and Gerrald and their patriotism which was so eminently displayed and which "*has inspired an enthusiasm of zeal and attachment which no time can obliterate, and no prosecution remove*".¹⁸¹ Radicals also received support in Parliament, although

¹⁷⁴ Ibidem, pp. 28–30.

¹⁷⁵ *The Trial of Joseph Gerrald*, p. 116.

¹⁷⁶ Ibidem, p. 117.

¹⁷⁷ Ibidem, p. 108.

¹⁷⁸ BAYLEN — GOSSMAN, p. 308.

¹⁷⁹ *First Report from the Committee of Secrecy, to Whom the Several Papers Referred to in His Majesty's Message of the 12th of May, 1794, and Which Were Presented to the House, by Mr. Secretary Dundas upon the 12th and 13th Days of the Said Month, by His Majesty's Command*, London 1794, p. 10.

¹⁸⁰ Ibidem, pp. 10–12.

¹⁸¹ Ibidem, p. 36.



it was only from a minority of MPs willing to act in favour of the convicted radicals. Debates on the trials were held in both Houses of Parliament. On 31 January 1794, Lord Stanhope condemned the conduct of the Scottish trials as illegal and submitted his draft of a review of the trials. He concluded, that “*an humble address be presented to His Majesty, [...] that this House has been informed that Thomas Muir, esq. who was tried before the High Court of Justiciary at Edinburgh, in the month of August last, upon a charge of sedition, has been condemned and sentenced to be transported beyond seas, for the space of fourteen years; and further to represent to His Majesty, that this House intends to proceed, without delay, to examine the circumstances of such condemnation and of such sentence; and therefore humbly to beseech His Majesty, that the said Thomas Muir, esq. may not be transported beyond the seas, until this House shall have had sufficient time to make such examination*”.¹⁸² Although, Lord Stanhope mentioned only Muir in his proposal, his goal was the complete revision of all the Scottish trials of the aforementioned radicals. As expected, the proposal by Lord Stanhope was not passed.

Like the House of Lords, the House of Commons conducted a lively debate on the issue of the illegality of the Scottish trials. Fox’s adherents such as Grey, Adam, Sheridan and Whitbread argued in favour of suspending the sentences of the imprisoned radicals, who were awaiting their fate in Portsmouth. They tried to discuss the matter of the convicted reformers in Parliament before the *Surprise* sailed to Australia. Charles Fox and his followers had never been supporters of radicalism and certainly did not belong to the supporters of universal manhood suffrage. Since 1792, Fox had believed that constitutional reform had degenerated into anarchy in France. However, despite the revolutionary brutality, he was convinced that the Bourbon absolute monarchy had always been the greater evil. Therefore, he was always willing to give priority to the excesses of the Revolution before the idea of the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy and the *ancien régime*. But why did Fox support the radicals so strongly in Parliament when he rejected the idea of universal manhood suffrage? Firstly, because he believed in the freedom of speech and, secondly, because he wanted to have the radicals under control. It was the fear of the idea that British radicalism could metamorphose into Jacobin violence that convinced Fox to maintain contact with the metropolitan radicals throughout the 1790s. Thus he allowed them a free legal defence of their demands in Parliament.¹⁸³ On the other hand, Lord Lauderdale, another supporter of the radicals, was truly a sincere friend of the French Revolution. However, neither his defence of the radicals nor his request for a review of the trials, which was submitted to the House of Lords on 15 April,¹⁸⁴ helped to reverse the fate of the imprisoned reformers. On 2 May 1794, the *Surprise* left England. This event was also watched by the Committee of Public Safety. The Scottish Martyrs were so valuable to French propaganda that on 18 February the Committee ordered “*all necessary measures to deliver Muir, Palmer and Margarot and intercept the vessel which is carrying them into exile*”.¹⁸⁵

The Scottish trials did not discourage the English radicals from their activities and, in April 1794, they engaged in organising the fourth Convention to be held in

182 COBBETT, Vol. XXX, pp. 1300–1301.

183 J. MORI, *Britain in the Age of the French Revolution 1785–1820*, London 2000, pp. 8–9.

184 COBBETT, Vol. XXXI, pp. 267–269.

185 RAPPORT, p. 66.



England. After the trials, the Scottish radical movement was dampened by the end of the 18th century and therefore the English radicals took over the organisation of the fourth Convention. However, this effort ended in failure and the fourth Convention not only did not take place, but in May the government arrested leading representatives of English radical societies, such as the London SCI, the LCS and the Sheffield SCI, charging them with high treason. Subsequently, the Habeas Corpus Act was suspended and the London trials of the leading radicals began in October 1794. Despite the English radicals finally being acquitted, the British government had clearly shown that it would not accept any radical activities in Britain during the war with revolutionary France.¹⁸⁶

Three Conventions took place in Edinburgh between 1792 and 1793. Nevertheless, the most significant were the first Convention of Delegates in December 1792 and the third Convention, known as the British Convention, which was also attended by English delegates and was held in Edinburgh one year later. The time between the holding of the first and the second Convention marked the significant radicalisation of the reform movement. Participants in the first Convention were mostly from an educated society and some of them were even members of the aristocracy. However, the trials of Muir and Palmer, the new radical events in France, the subsequent outbreak of war and pressure from loyalists discredited the reform movement. Therefore, if the first Convention of delegates had appealed to the London elite FOP and its moderate reform programme, the third British Convention clearly advocated universal manhood suffrage, an annual Parliament, with its members belonging mainly to the lower middle or working classes. On the other hand, both Conventions, whether moderate or radical, promoted a programme of reform to be obtained legally. None of these Conventions tried to replace Parliament, even though in the case of the British Convention and its unfortunate statement about the “permanent Convention”, it might have seemed that they were striving for a permanent assembly. In fact, they were harmless meetings of delegates from different reform societies, which basically had neither a significant influence, nor the support of the general public. They also did not have sufficient finance to organise any rebellion.

The objective of both Conventions was an effort to consolidate a reform programme and to submit a petition to Parliament, as was the case of the first Convention. Working class people played an important role in the radical reform movement. They also formed the core of the member base of the radical societies. However, wealthy people in fear of agitators, turned on the working class and accused them of Jacobinism. Whoever turned to the common people and tried to agitate on behalf of some rights represented a threat to society. Fear of popular riots, which were a natural part of life in the eighteenth century, was justified as contemporaries observed the bloody excesses of the so-called “people’s justice” during the French Revolution. The fourth Convention which was to have been held in England did not take place and the period of the Conventions was thus concluded.

186 MORI, p. 98.

EDINBURGH CONVENTIONS OF THE DELEGATES AS ONE EXAMPLE OF BRITISH RADICALISM IN THE 1790S

ABSTRACT

From the 1760s, the question of parliamentary reform in Britain concerning the amendment and extension of suffrage was an important topic of differing intensity. It was a so-called extra-parliamentary movement which endeavoured to reach its objective by means of petitions. The right to petition was an important part of British basic rights contained in the Bill of Rights of 1689. However, the radical reformers of the 1790s who demanded parliamentary reform differed in objectives from their predecessors. The aims of the new radicals were annual parliamentary elections and universal suffrage. Their objective was to achieve parliamentary reform by legal and constitutional means, while openly rejecting violent revolutionary methods. Membership consisted mainly of the working class, with unlimited entry to these strictly organised societies. These societies were so unique precisely because they rejected political exclusivity. The topic of my work is focused on the period of the Edinburgh Conventions which were held three times between 1792 and 1793. Their aim was not to replace the British Parliament with a new legislature according to the French example, but an endeavour to act together on a plan of reform and then to draw up a petition to Parliament. Nevertheless, the last Convention was forcibly dissolved by local authorities and their leading members were brought before a court and sentenced to fourteen years' transportation in the subsequent political process.

KEYWORDS

Edinburgh Convention; Radicals; Parliamentary Reform; Radical Society; Delegate

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