

***The Independent Man: Citizenship and Gender Politics in Georgian England.* By Matthew McCormack.** Manchester University Press. 2005. ix + 222pp. £55.00.

This is a very thoughtful and thought-provoking study of the meaning of the term ‘independent’ in Georgian England. As John Barrell’s *Imagining the King’s Death* (2000) did with the word ‘imagine’, so this book shows that a rich study of the usage of a single word can shed a generous quantity of light, in this case on the political mindset of England throughout the long eighteenth century. McCormack demonstrates that independence was not simply a relational term, but one which implied a condition or status, connoting manners, masculinity, personal virtue, national character, and, crucially, one which bestowed the qualification for political citizenship. None of this, perhaps, is absolutely novel, but he moves beyond high politics and social history to combine the two in a fascinating discussion of electoral history. He charts the shift from the emergence of a neo-classical political creed based on the independent citizen during the English Civil War to a definition of ‘the independent man’ by 1832 which allowed the electorate to be substantially widened. He argues that the Great Reform Act was not a triumph in which power was wrested from the upper classes, but rather the result of a change over the previous decades in the scope of the definition of ‘the independent man’, the ‘legitimate political participant’ (p.10).

McCormack has many useful things to say about gender politics along the way, although the subtitle of the book correctly places gender politics after citizenship as the minor theme. For instance, it has now frequently been argued that the ideology of separate spheres was not a description of social reality, but McCormack’s contention in chapter 1 that it could be used as a political idiom is illuminating: ‘reformers emphasised the independence and domestic mastery of humble men in order to make a moral case for wider male access to political rights’ (p.21). Indeed, this book is dense with stimulating material to be pondered: to take just one example, McCormack’s unpicking of the common conflation of the terms ‘loyalism’ and ‘patriotism’ by historians of the 1790s, to show that they were two different commitments (p.141) which might be held together or not by the same people at different times, is very helpful, as is his further comment that ‘conservatism’, ‘reaction’, and ‘counter-revolutionary’ are also often lazily used as synonyms of the same phenomenon. Although the book is slightly inaccessibly written at some points, and rather censorious at others, it greatly repays the effort of reading it.

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