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Parliament and the London Corresponding Society

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF Reed Joseph Vandehy for the Master of Arts in History presented February 28, 1975.

Title: Parliament and the London Corresponding Society.

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The purpose of this dissertation is to demonstrate how the London Corresponding Society, during the last decade of the 18th Century, sought Parliamentary reform that would end the system of government controlled and corrupted by the rich English landholding gentry. The basic aims of the Society were to abolish the rotten borough system and to gain universal manhood suffrage to all Englishmen.

The London Corresponding Society's background was shaped by the twin factors of the English reform movement of the 1780's and the French Revolution. The combination of the early reform movement's ideas and literature with a successful revolution in a neighboring influential

nation had a profound effect on the English working class. This effect was heightened by the publication in 1790, of Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France, the conservative call to arms which defended the rights of the propertied classes to rule England and condemned the French Revolution. This reactionary outburst was answered by a host of replies, the most famous being Thomas Paine's The Rights of Man, which defended the acts and principles of the French Revolution while declaring that all men possessed certain natural rights. It was in this political climate that Thomas Hardy, a poor self-educated shoemaker, founded the London Corresponding Society in January 1792.

The Society, founded in a time of great political agitation, grew rapidly and by May 1794, it had over 5000 members and maintained correspondence with reform societies throughout Great Britain. With this nationwide correspondence network, the LCS was able to rally the British radical reform movement behind the drive for national reform petitions. These petitions, with thousands of signatures, were presented to Parliament in May 1793, but were ignored by Pitt's Government.

Parliamentary defeat thoroughly disillusioned the London Corresponding Society, and during the summer of 1793, it agitated for a National Convention to unite the various radical reform societies in a common effort to seek Parliamentary reform. A National Convention was held in Edinburgh in November 1793, but was broken up by the authorities. Two LCS leaders were tried and sentenced to Australia. The harsh action of the Government, along with its systematic persecution of the radical reformers by the Home Office and Government sponsored societies, such as the Association, caused the London Corresponding

Society and its allies to pour out a vast amount of anti-Government and pro-reform propaganda. This propaganda campaign coupled with the pro-French sympathies of the reformers caused the Government to arrest twelve leaders of the LCS and their allies in May 1794. Being charged with High Treason, these leaders were tried and acquitted in November 1794.

Though the LCS declined greatly after the arrest of its leaders, it regained popularity in 1795 by concentrating on the nation's social and economic ills, and by proposing solutions before mass meetings, attended by hundreds of thousands. The Government struck back by passing the Two Acts in November 1795, which placed strict limits on the nation's freedom of the press and assembly. The rigid enforcement of the Two Acts caused the eventual extinction of the London Corresponding Society, whose leaders were arrested in April 1797. After this, the Society never met again and was suppressed by a Parliamentary act in June 1798.

The material of this thesis was derived largely from letters, documents and pamphlets obtained from primary sources published during this period (1790-1798) and the following two decades. The most important of these primary sources were the Complete Collection of State Trials, (Howell), the Autobiography of Francis Place, the Trials of Thomas Hardy and Others (Sibly), the Parliamentary History of England (Hansard), the Annual Register and the New Annual Register. The two secondary sources of greatest value were Alfred Cobban's The Debate on the French Revolution and P. A. Brown's classic work The French Revolution in English History, which is unequalled in telling the story of the English

Jacobins.

In conclusion, my efforts in tracing the history of the London Corresponding Society, demonstrates that there is a direct link between the 18th Century reform movement and the Reform Bill of 1832. Many of the radicals, who formed the backbone of the LCS in their youth, continued to speak out and advocate Parliamentary reform during their later years, never giving up their dream. The hopes of the London Corresponding Society, striven and fought for against an often tyrannical British Government in the 1790's were finally realized by the 19th Century reform movement.

PARLIAMENT AND THE LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this dissertation is to demonstrate how the London Corresponding Society, a society of Englishmen workingmen, sought Parliamentary reform that would grant universal suffrage to all Englishmen and end the corrupt, graft-ridden system of government maintained by the rich landholding gentry during the last decade of the 18th century. This society sought these goals at a time when political reform was equated with being sympathetic to the French Revolution and cause; the mortal enemy of England and her monarchy. As a result the British Government branded these reformers as traitors, ready to aid France in seeking a popular revolution in England, and the London Corresponding Society suffered harassment, persecution, arrest, imprisonment, exile, death, proscription and suppression because of their unpopular views. Despite these hardships, the English working class through their political vehicle, the London Corresponding Society, asserted for the first time their right to share the political power of their nation and formed a major link between the early English reform movements and the Reform Bill of 1832.

The two factors, which proved to have the greatest influence upon the background of the London Corresponding Society, were the Reform Movement of the 1780's and the French Revolution. It is by means of these twin movements and their eventual interaction that an ideal climate was established for the birth of radical reform among the English working class.

The Reform Movement of the 1780's consisted of many components, including the Yorkshire Association and the Associated Counties, both under the nominal leadership of the Rev. Christopher Wyvill; the Society for Constitutional Information, founded in 1780 and led by the veteran reformers, Major John Cartwright and John Horne Tooke; Reform partisans in Parliament, such as Charles James Fox and William Pitt, respectively; and several other smaller middle class societies. The characteristic common to all these groups was their desire for moderate reform, legislation that would correct the gross population disparities in Parliamentary representation and eliminate the pocket borough system that enabled a few wealthy men to control a vast number of seats through patronage, bribery and influence, while still maintaining that England's well being depended on the paramount position of the landed gentry.¹

It was hoped by many reformers during the early 1780's that Charles James Fox and William Pitt, whose families were fierce rivals, would, nonetheless, join forces and possibly some day form their own coalition ministry. This was not to be, and in February 1782, Fox joined Lord North, his ideological opposite and the epitome of oligarchic power, in a coalition government. Despite their ideological differences, the Fox-North coalition held an absolute majority in Parliament; Fox, in his anxiety to gain office, sacrificed or laid aside many of his liberal reform principles. This move split the national reform movement in two. While Fox's supporters, most of the Whig Party along with many of the

¹See E. C. Black, The Association, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963, for a good description of English reform activities in the 1780's. The Society for Constitutional Information came to be considered radical reformers after the French Revolution.

London area reformers, saw the coalition as a way of furthering their cause, the Associated Counties and the Yorkshire Association generally agreed with their leader, the Reverend Wyvill, that Fox and his followers, having joined Lord North, the arch-enemy of reform, were traitors to the reform cause. Fox's move caused Wyvill to ally his organization with William Pitt, and in May, 1783, Pitt cemented this new friendship by introducing the essence of the Yorkshire Association reform proposals as a motion for Parliamentary reform. Though the reform motion was soundly defeated, a new political alliance was being forged, readying itself for the elections of 1784. In preparation, Wyvill had purged Fox's supporters from his organization, while similar re-arrangements in London were wreaking havoc with the Society for Constitutional Information. The Society's president, Sir Cecil Wray, ran against Fox in Westminster while many SCI members, such as Richard Brinsley Sheridan and the Earls of Surrey and Derby, were Fox's leading lieutenants in Parliament.²

Pitt won an overwhelming victory over Fox's "Martyrs," and the schism between the two wings of the reform movement never completely healed. Though Pitt initiated many national economic and commercial reforms after assuming office, he, too, failed the reform movement. Once in office Pitt chose to ignore political reform, because he derived much of his power from supporters who held office as a result of the corrupt pocket borough system. The reform movement was weakened by the schism, and the power of Wyvill and his Yorkshire Association, as well as that of the Society for Constitutional Information, never recovered from the exclusion of many able members who were supporters of Fox.

²Ibid., p. 114.

Interest in political reform also declined greatly as a result of the prosperity that existed from 1784 up to the outbreak of the French Revolution.³

The event that revived the sagging fortunes of the Parliamentary reform movement was undoubtedly the French Revolution. Englishmen from all classes hailed its coming. Charles James Fox saw the Revolution as the happiest event the world had ever known. Major John Cartwright, the founder of the Society for Constitutional Information, wrote on 18 August 1789:

Degenerate must be that heart which expands not with sentiments at what is now transacting in the National Assembly of France. The French, Sir, are not only asserting their own rights, but they are also asserting and advancing the general liberties of mankind.⁴

Wordsworth wrote later that "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive / But to be young was very Heaven,"⁵ and William Blake, the radical poet, penned The French Revolution, one of his greatest works, in honor of the event.

In contrast, Edmund Burke, the great Whig author and politician, declared as 9 August 1789 that he would reserve judgement until events revealed their meaning more clearly.

Finally, in October 1790, Burke launched his attack on the French Revolution and its English sympathizers in his Reflections on the Revolution in France, in which he pointed out the differences between the English

³Ibid., p. 116.

⁴Life and Correspondence of Major John Cartwright, (F. D. Cartwright, editor), London. 1826. p. 182.

⁵William Wordsworth, The Prelude, Book XI, lines 108-109.

Revolution of 1688 and the current one in France. He charged that many Englishmen mistakenly saw the two events as being similar in confirming the liberties of their respective nations. In fact, Burke asserted, the English Revolution of 1688 only maintained liberties already established; it was not to be compared to the complete overthrow of a political system.⁶ This book proved to be the conservatives' call to arms. Its publication marked the rapid change of English public opinion. From this point, the schism in the Whig ranks can be traced. Most of the aristocratic, conservative, and landholding Whigs who constituted the majority, abandoned the leadership of Fox, and followed Burke into an alliance with William Pitt. Men such as William Windham, the Duke of Portland, and Henry Dundas, all important Whig leaders, entered Pitt's cabinet, leaving only a corporal's guard of younger, radical Whigs under Fox to serve as His Majesty's Opposition.⁷

Edmund Burke's attack on the French Revolution prompted a flurry of replies from its British sympathizers, the most famous and controversial of which was The Rights of Man by Thomas Paine. Paine, the radical pamphleteer of the American Revolution, demolished Burke's arguments about the English Revolution of 1688, chided Burke for his sympathy for the persecuted French aristocracy and for his indifference to the long-suffering masses of common people, and warmly praised the French experiment to base their new government on reason and the natural rights of man, rather than by

⁶Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France, London. 1790.

⁷Walter Phelps Hall, British Radicalism 1791-1797, New York: Columbia Univ. Press. 1912. p. 46.

absolute power exercised by a hereditary few.⁸

The literary struggle between constitutional rights as defined by Burke and the natural rights of man maintained by Paine created a large public reading audience and started a pamphlet war between their supporters. By early 1792, public opinion had begun to crystallize into two fairly distinct camps as a result of the Burke-Paine controversy. Those favoring Burke generally were the aristocracy, the landed gentry, the middle class, and the Established Church. They were represented politically by the Tories and by the coalition Old Whigs, who made up the parliamentary majority opposed to political reform. The group espousing Paine's doctrines and sympathizing with the French Revolution became the Radical Reformers. They consisted chiefly of the unpropertied classes, Dissenters, educated artisans, laborers of the lower classes, and young intellectuals, along with some wealthy men with professional or commercial backgrounds. This group was represented in Parliament by the Young Whigs and Radicals under the leadership of Charles James Fox. Numerically and politically in the minority, this group claimed to speak for the vast majority of the unpropertied, working class of England. Though most of the laboring classes were illiterate and ignorant of political affairs, it was hoped that, through political education and agitation, they could be induced to support radical reform.

Developing a new political awareness, stimulated by the events of the French Revolution, by the writings of Thomas Paine, and by Parliament's abandonment of moderate reform, many educated laborers and artisans began founding radical reform societies in all the major cities of Great Britain.

⁸See Thomas Paine, The Rights of Man, London. 1791. Part I for the immediate counter-attack to Burke. Part II, published in 1792, contains chiefly political theory relating to government by men's natural rights.

These societies, founded to politically educate the lower classes for radical reform, all had the same general program: "An honest Parliament. An annual Parliament. A Parliament wherein each individual will have his representative." Of these, the most active, the most radical, and the best organized was undoubtedly the London Corresponding Society.⁹

⁹H. N. Brailsford, Shelley, Godwin and their Circle, London: Williams and Norgate. 1913. p. 33.

CHAPTER II

THE FORMATION OF THE LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY

In the autumn of 1791 a group of friends met in central London to discuss the project of a new political society to represent "the unrepresented" and agitate for Parliamentary reform. Their meeting place was the Bell Tavern, in Exeter Street near the Strand, where the landlord was a sympathetic friend. It was here, on the evening of 25 January 1792, that the London Corresponding Society was founded, when eight persons signed the articles of incorporation and received membership tickets. At the first meeting of the Society, Thomas Hardy was elected treasurer and secretary, and a subscription of one penny a week was established. A treasury of eightpence was created before the meeting ended. In the discussions at the initial meeting, it was determined that "gross ignorance and prejudice in the bulk of the nation was the greatest obstacle to obtaining redress" from the "defects and abuses which had crept into the administration of our Government;" therefore, it should be the aim of this new society to dispell "that ignorance and prejudice as far as possible and to instill into /the public/ in a legal and constitutional way by means of the press, a sense of their rights as freemen, and of their duty to themselves and their posterity, as good citizens, and hereditary guardians of the liberties transmitted to them by their forefathers."¹⁰

¹⁰See Appendix A for an account of the founding of the LCS by Thomas Hardy, An Introductory Letter to a Friend (written in 1799 and read to the company present at the Crown and Anchor Tavern, 5 November 1824 on the anniversary of Hardy's acquittal in the Treason Trials of 1794). Cited in Robt. Birley, The English Jacobins from 1789 to 1802, London: Oxford Univ. Press. 1924. Appendix.

To facilitate a better understanding of the origins and composition of the London Corresponding Society, an examination of the background of its leadership is necessary. Among its early leaders, Thomas Hardy, a Scottish bootmaker, is generally credited as being the Society's founder.

Hardy was born on 3 March 1752 in the parish of Larbert, Stirlingshire. In April 1774, Hardy left Scotland to settle in London, establishing a shoemaking business at No. 9 Piccadilly.¹¹ Hardy, was described by contemporaries as a tall, lean, muscular man who was quietly intellectual. His political thought was shaped by various factors. He was a Dissenter, belonging to a congregation near Covent Garden. A study of the pamphlets of Dr. Richard Price, a Unitarian minister and prominent reformer, during the American Revolutionary War convinced Hardy of the justice of the American cause and produced in him a permanent interest in public affairs. His politicization was furthered by a gift to him of the pamphlet library of the Constitutional Society, a declining political reform club.¹²

In the autumn of 1791, re-reading what the reformers of the eighties had written, Hardy came upon the idea of a poor man's reform club. The basis of this new club would be a weekly penny subscription, an idea adopted from the example of the multitude of small, flourishing journeymen's clubs in London which were half benefit and half trade societies. This new club would introduce the reform movement into a new element of society, being open to any working man. As the testimony of Government agents later shows,

¹¹Frank Clune, The Scottish Martyrs, Sydney: Angus and Robertson. 1969. p. 48.

¹²P. A. Brown, The French Revolution in English History, New York: Barnes and Noble. 1918. p. 56.

the Corresponding Society was in fact, a poor man's society.¹³

An indication of Thomas Hardy's political orientation can be inferred from statements he made during the early 1790's. In a letter to his cousin only a few days after the founding of the Corresponding Society, Hardy expressed belief that "the French Revolution was one of the greatest events that had taken place in the history of the world."¹⁴ Regarding the aristocracy, Hardy wrote, "Perhaps there has never been cordial union betwixt the aristocracy and democracy of this country--their interests being so opposite."¹⁵ Hardy felt that this conflict of interest was at the root of England's economic problems; he wrote that:

He knew the country to be productive, and its inhabitants to be industrious, and ingenious; therefore, the distress which he saw every where around him could not arise from the fault of the soil, or of those who occupied it, and the cause must be sought for somewhere else.¹⁶

Among Hardy's early associates was Maurice Margarot, a wine merchant, born in 1745 of French descent, as his name suggests. His father was a wine and general merchant operating in Portugal and France although nominally resident in London, where he participated in reform political activities in 1770's and 1780's. The younger Margarot, who received a classical education at the University of Geneva, was living in France when the Bastille was stormed on 14 July 1789. Margarot's background is obscure

¹³Ibid., p. 56

¹⁴Letter to Mr. Newill, 15 February 1792. Cited in Birley, p. 14.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁶Thomas Hardy, The Memoirs of Thomas Hardy, London. 1832. p. 10.

from the time of the fall of the Bastille until 2 April 1792, when he wrote the First Address to the Nation for the London Corresponding Society.¹⁷

Another early leader of the London Corresponding Society was Joseph Gerrald, a barrister, born 9 February 1763 at St. Christopher in the West Indies, where his father was a planter. Gerrald, who studied under Dr. Samuel Parr, a famous Whig writer, at Stanmore School from 1771 to 1775, was acclaimed by Dr. Parr as his most brilliant student, exceeding even Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the gifted playwright and orator, who was a leader of the Whig Opposition in the House of Commons. Although Gerrald was born wealthy he was by 1784 reduced to poverty;¹⁸ after four years of law practice in Philadelphia, he came to England to prosecute a lawsuit in connection with his property, trying to regain part of his father's estate. From this time Gerrald became active in the agitation for parliamentary reform. He joined the Corresponding Society in 1792 and became a leading advocate of a National Convention.¹⁹

This early group of leaders, though important in establishing the London Corresponding Society, was shortly broken up due to treason charges, imprisonment, and death at the hands of the British Government. They were succeeded by a new group of leaders such as John Thelwall, a poet and public lecturer born in 1764. Thelwall had tried his hand at tailoring, law and medicine before he found his true vocation as a journalist, poet and political orator.

¹⁷Clune, op. cit., p. 30.

¹⁸It seems that Joseph Gerrald went through a period of dissipation; wasting his fortune and injuring his health.

¹⁹Clune, op. cit., p. 40.

He was a close friend of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, although his poetry was never of the quality of theirs.²⁰ He was an acute social commentator who foresaw the Industrial Revolution, observing that the accumulation of industrial capital "was necessary for increased production, for the introduction of machinery, for the furthering of inventions, experiments."²¹ Thelwall also foresaw that labor unionism would result from industrialization:

Whatever presses men together, therefore, though it may generate some vices, is favorable to the diffusion of knowledge, and ultimately of human liberty. Hence every large workshop and manufactory is a sort of political society which no Act of Parliament can silence and no magistrate disperse.²²

To have been aware of the coming Industrial Revolution and labor unionism in 1794, marks Thelwall out from his contemporaries and gives an inkling of intellectual qualities.

Though Thelwall began his public speaking career at meetings of the non-political Coachmakers' Hall where he was a sturdy defender of Church and King George III,²³ he later fell under the influence of John Horne Tooke, a veteran reform politician. In April 1792, Thelwall joined the Friends of the People, a middle class reform society, and by the summer of 1793, he had joined the London Corresponding Society. There he used his speaking talents to raise money to pay the expenses of the LCS delegates to

²⁰Gwyn A. Williams, Artisans and the Sans-Culottes: Popular Movements in France and Great Britain during the French Revolution. New York: Newton. 1969. p. 73.

²¹Charles Cestre, John Thelwall, London. 1906. p. 184.

²²Ibid., p. 185.

²³George Veitch, Genesis of Parliamentary Reform, London: Constable and Co. 1913. p. 231.

the British National Convention to be held at Edinburgh.²⁴

Probably the most prominent of the later London Corresponding Society leaders was Francis Place, a tailor, who was born into a desperately poor family and grew up in the slums of London. His trade was afflicted by low wages and constant unemployment which drove him to lead an abortive breeches-makers' strike in 1793. In time, Place became a journeyman tailor and started to educate himself politically by reading the works of reformers such as William Godwin. Though many of the leading reformers that Place admired were arrested by the Government on 12 May 1794 on charges of High Treason (in reality, for radical political activity) and though the Government's threats of violence frightened away many members of the Reform societies, Place considered it "meritorious and his duty" to join the London Corresponding Society. Soon after joining, he was elected delegate to the General Committee and was on his way towards the leadership of that society in June 1794.²⁵

Also joining the London Corresponding Society at this time, was Francis Place's best friend, John Ashley, a shoemaker who became a longtime Secretary of the Society. He was described as "a serious thinking man... of imposing appearance...six feet two inches high...dark complexion. He was a man of undoubted courage on all trying occasions, was honest and sincere."²⁶ Ashley and Place, along with Alexander Galloway and Anthony Beck, formed the moderate faction of the later Corresponding Society leader-

²⁴Brown, op. cit., p. 59.

²⁵Francis Place, The Autobiography of Francis Place, (Mary Thale, editor) New York: Cambridge Univ. Press. 1972. pp. 131-132.

²⁶Ibid., p. 143.

ship.

Among the later London Corresponding Society leaders, who favored more radical ideas was John Binns, a plumber's laborer and the son of an ironmonger in Dublin, was given a good education considering his background. He was a "well informed man...inexperienced...desirous of increasing his stock of knowledge but at times volatile as most Irishmen are."²⁷ Binns' inexperience is explained by the fact that he was only twenty years old when he joined the LCS. By the age of twenty-two, he was one of the Society's principal leaders and speakers. Associated with Binns, was John Baxter, the Shoreditch silversmith, who wrote an 860 page history of England in order to illustrate the right of armed resistance which he believed had Saxon precedent.²⁸

Another radical leader, John Bone, a bookseller of Holborn, was described as being quite intelligent, honest, and somewhat of a religious fanatic. "A busy man...in his endeavors to make converts."²⁹ This characteristic did not endear him to the Society's more irreligious leaders such as John Baxter, Joseph Burks and Thomas Williams. Bone served as Assistant Secretary in the last years of the London Corresponding Society.

The chief propagandist for the London Corresponding Society was Citizen Richard Lee, a radical writer and publisher, who ran the Tree of Liberty, a publishing house, from which poured out a stream of pamphlets and broadsheets of reformist propaganda.³⁰ Some of the publications issued

²⁷Loc. cit.

²⁸Williams, op. cit., p. 73.

²⁹Place, op. cit., p. 198.

³⁰Williams, op. cit., p. 73.

by Lee, such as The Rights of Swine, The Happy Reign of George the Last and the Address to the Hogdrivers of Europe were quite violent in tone.³¹ Lee's French enthusiasm, his specific references to the "equality of enjoyments," and his sans-culotte fondness for the guillotine were not very wise considering the temper of the times and the likelihood of Government prosecution.

Other noted members of the Corresponding Society were Tom Paine, a well known radical agitator and the author of Common Sense and the Rights of Man;³² William Blake, radical poet of national distinction; Joseph Ritson, noted antiquarian and founder of modern vegetarianism; John Horne Tooke, gentleman veteran reform politician and president of the London Constitutional Society, also known as Society for Constitutional Information;³³ Richard Hodgson, a hatter, writer and a leader of the radical faction of the LCS; and Lord Daer, the son of the Scottish peer Lord Selkirk, who studied in Paris during the French Revolution and served as the London Society's link with the Scottish reform societies, as well as being the Society's token aristocrat.

Despite the middle class origins of some of the Corresponding Society leadership, the most important and influential leaders and the bulk of the membership were of the working class.³⁴ One of the Government's most trust-

³¹The references to swine are from Edmund Burke's quote from the "Reflections on the Revolution in France" (1790) describing the common people as the 'swinish multitude.'

³²Thomas Paine was not an active member despite his prominence.

³³John Horne Tooke was more active in the Constitutional Society due to his leadership role; many LCS members belonged to more than one reform society.

³⁴An estimate taken from a list of members and their occupations of one division lists 70% of its membership being of the working class.

worthy spies, "Citizen" Groves, noted in his report of 12 June 1794 that the number of men "of decent tradesman-like appearance" was small, though they were generally quite valuable members, and the real body of the club was made of "the very lowest order of Society."³⁵ These English Jacobins more closely resembled the menu-people who made the French Revolution that has been recognized. They were similar to those sans-culottes of the Paris sections whose zealous egalitarianism formed the base of Robespierre's revolutionary dictatorship of 1793-1794. Like the sans-culottes, these English artisans took the doctrines of Thomas Paine to their extreme, professing a belief in absolute political democracy; opposing the tyranny and abuses of the monarchy and aristocracy, the state and taxation.³⁶

One of the first acts of the London Corresponding Society was to form a framework for its organization that ideally combined order and efficiency with freedom, while avoiding secret cabals and mass meetings for the conduct of business. It was decided to organize the members into divisions of thirty each, new groups to be established as the old ones reached sixty.³⁷ Each division elected a delegate and sub-delegate to the General Committee. Each delegate served as his division's local chairman and treasurer, keeping the accounts and paying the monthly revenue into a central fund controlled by the body of delegates known as the General

³⁵Birley, op. cit., p. 9.

³⁶E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, New York: Pantheon Books. 1964. pp. 156-157.

³⁷Brown, op. cit., pp. 56-57. Place (p. 31) disagrees with these figures stating "A division was to consist of about thirty members; when the number reached thirty-six, sixteen of the members were to branch off and form a new division."

Committee. In this committee, the sub-delegate had a seat but could neither speak nor vote while the delegate was present. The delegates held weekly meetings on a Thursday to transact business and answer correspondence. The divisions were the final source of authority; they could recall their delegates at will and must be consulted on all questions of principle. Each division also had a secretary and as many tithing men as were tens in the division. All of these officers were elected quarterly. Each division was allowed to retain one shilling a week from the subscription received for current expenses. Every member was allowed a copy of whatever might be printed by the order of the General Committee.³⁸

The General Committee was divided into various subcommittees formed to meet temporary and permanent needs. Of these, the most important and permanent was the Executive Committee formed of five members, (Chairman, Secretary, Assistant Secretary, Treasurer, Assistant Treasurer) who functioned as the Corresponding Society's leadership, though in reality final authority rested with the will of the local divisions.³⁹

Membership was open to anyone proposed by two members, who affirmed a belief in the right of every adult (not incapacitated) to vote for a member of Parliament, and who would promote the reform of Parliament by "all justifiable means." The income of the Society was to be spent on correspondence with other societies, and on the publication of literature to carry out the founders' plan of rousing the nation and linking up with

³⁸Place, op. cit., p. 131.

³⁹Place, op. cit., p. 139.

reform groups all over the realm.⁴⁰

Francis Place described a weekly local division meeting:

We had Sunday evening parties at the residences of those who could accomodate a number of persons. At these meetings, we had readings, conversations and discussions....The usual mode of proceeding at these weekly meetings was this. The Chairman (each man was chairman in rotation) read from some book a chapter or part of a chapter, which as many as could read the chapter at their homes the book passing from one to the other ...and at the next meeting a portion of a chapter was again read and the persons present were invited to make remarks thereon as many as chose did so, but without rising. Then another portion was read and a second invitation was given-- then the remainder was read and a third invitation was given when they who had not before spoken were expected to say something. Then there was a general discussion. No one was permitted to speak more than once during the reading. The same rule was observed in the general discussion, no one could speak a second time until every one who chose had spoken once, then any one might speak again, and so on till the subject was exhausted.⁴¹

Place emphasized the meetings were marked by rigidity of decorum:

"Eating--drinking & smoaking" /sic/ were forbidden either in a division or in committee. No man in liquor was permitted to remain in any division or committee and habitual drunkenness was sufficient cause for expulsion.⁴²

After a framework of organization was established, the first Constitution of the London Corresponding Society was drawn up by Thomas Hardy with the aid of Felix Vaughan, a barrister, on 2 April 1792. The preamble contained the basic beliefs and aims of the Corresponding Society as well

⁴⁰Brown, op. cit., p. 57.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 131. Place differs from most sources in this instance declaring the post of chairmanship rotated from meeting to meeting, making the delegate and chairman two different people. Possibly the difference can be explained in that a permanent chairman of a division was elected along with having a weekly rotating meeting chairman.

⁴²Ibid., pp. 132-133.

as ringing denunciations of specific laws and abuses. Some of the basic beliefs were: the equality of all men, no majority is to deny a minority their civil rights (defined as equality before the law, the freedom of thought, religious worship, and property), all magistrates were held to be personally responsible for their decisions and the House of Commons was named the chief reason why the British people were denied their rights by substituting a system of extortion and monopoly in their place.⁴³

Specific laws and abuses were denounced in the preamble, among them: the Corn Act, by which a subsidy was paid to the landowners that doubled the price of bread for the poor; the Game Laws, by which farmers were subjected to allow game to feed on their crops, disarmed and subject to cruel laws from which there was no appeal; Excise Laws and Stamp Duties which were enforced by spies and informers; the Mutiny Act, by which the military were subjected to corporal punishment and deprivation of civil rights; and the Impress Service, by which a legal shanghaiing of ordinary citizens to serve in the Royal Navy was allowed, that would have been unnecessary if the seamen's pay were increased instead of distributing a large sum to the officers of corporations responsible for impressment.⁴⁴

The main body of the Constitution was divided into nine sections dealing with the framework and organization of the London Corresponding Society. This covered such areas as the form of admission and the duty of a member, the organization and power of a division, the Committee of

⁴³T. S. and T. J. Howell, A Complete Collection of State Trials, London: Longmans. 1818. Vol. XXIV. pp. 575-576.

⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 576-577.

Delegates (the General Committee), the Select Committee and Council (Executive Committee), and the rules for accusation and trial.⁴⁵

In March 1793, the preamble of the Constitution was worked over and changed into the Declaration of Principles of the London Corresponding Society. This document gives the basic beliefs and aims of the Society and served as its credo until the end.⁴⁶

⁴⁵The major portion of the original copy of the Corresponding Society Constitution may be found in Howell's State Trials, Vol. XXIV. pp. 575-583.

⁴⁶See Appendix B for the contents of the Declaration of the Principles of the London Corresponding Society.

CHAPTER III

THE LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY IN ACTION

By the end of January 1792, the first month of the London Corresponding Society's existence, it had about two hundred members.⁴⁷ Despite discrepancies between estimates of its early membership, it was clear that the society immediately experienced a period of rapid growth. There were ten divisions by June 1792, enabling Hardy to boast in a letter to the Sheffield Societies that 'we hope to rival you ere long.'⁴⁸ A good example of the Society's growth was Division 10, which met at the Scotch Arms Tavern in the Strand. Having been formed in June with sixteen members, by August it had inched up to twenty-eight and by October had reached sixty-two members, an unlawful number according to LCS rules. In addition to the members, over one hundred listeners often packed into the crowded, passionate meetings of Division 10. Hardy's own Division 2 met at the Unicorn Tavern in Covent Garden and though only sixty-two members were listed, over two hundred attended the meetings.⁴⁹ Division 3 was still more crowded. In November, Hardy estimated that 300-400 new members signed on every week; the society could not take the names down quickly enough. This statement is corroborated by the report of William Metcalfe, a government spy, stating

⁴⁷This figure is taken from the Privy Council's examination of Thomas Hardy, 12 May 1794. Another figure given by Hardy in his memoirs was 70 in April 1792. This demonstrates the difficulty of determining early membership numbers of the LCS when the founder Thomas Hardy gives conflicting views. See Veitch, p. 216 and Williams, p. 68.

⁴⁸Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 69

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 69.

that on 24 November 1792 there were twenty-six societies (divisions) packed to the doors and that 350 had joined the Corresponding Society in the preceding week. It is perfectly clear that the divisional system (of 30 members per division) broke down completely under the pressure of the society's rapid growth.⁵⁰

To trace the branches or divisions in great detail is difficult if not impossible. The divisions constantly changed their place of meeting or often temporarily disbanded and revived. Hardy explained this sketchiness in part by stating that "sometimes the Landlords of the Houses where they /the divisions/ have met have been threatened to have their licenses taken away if the Meeting is continued there."⁵¹ Despite such threats, the London Corresponding Society probably reached an early high water mark in membership in May 1794. Its largest division recorded over 600 members, and there were approximately 6000 members belonging to the Society.⁵²

When it undertook its first task, that of setting up a defense fund for Thomas Paine, the London Corresponding Society was quite small and insignificant. Besides trying to raise money for Paine from its own divisions, the LCS tried to interest other reform societies in its project, as evidenced from a letter to the Society for Constitutional Information on 14 March 1792. The letter stated that it was the LCS':

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 69.

⁵¹Veitch, op. cit., p. 217.

⁵²Veitch and other modern observers calculate 6000 from information available regarding the actual membership and number of divisions. Hardy estimated there were 20,000 members in November 1792. This is probably an exaggeration or wishful thinking though John Binns estimated there were 18-20,000 LCS members at its peak. See John Binns, Recollections of J. Binns, Philadelphia. 1854. pp. 45-46.

duty to acquaint the Constitutional Society...of the subscription begun amongst several of their divisions for the defense of the prosecution said to be commenced against... Mr. Thomas Paine, in consequence of his valuable publication intituled 'The Rights of Man.'⁵³

Following this successful project, the London Corresponding Society in April 1792 decided to go public on the issue of Parliamentary reform and publish an address to the nation. It adopted the draft written by Maurice Margarot, which because of its moderate tone was rather safe from criticism and ended by disavowing violence. The Corresponding Society was very nervous about this first venture and Margarot even refused to sign his name to the draft, so Hardy did instead. Hardy forwarded the address to Horne Tooke, the head of the Society for Constitutional Information for criticism and correction. Tooke, in turn, sent it to the editor of the Argus, a sympathetic reform newspaper, for publication by its press.⁵⁴

The Address and Resolutions of the London Corresponding Society was published 24 May 1792. The pamphlet proclaimed that every individual had the right to share in the government of his country; that participation can be denied only by incapacitation or offense against the laws; and that it was the citizen's right and duty to prevent the government from lapsing into oppression or substituting private interest for public advantage. The Address also pointed out that the British people were not effectively represented in Parliament and that inadequate representation was responsible for

⁵³Manoah Sibly, The Trials of Thomas Hardy, John Horne Tooke, and John Thelwall, Dublin. 1795. Appendix D, p. 31.

⁵⁴P. A. Brown, op. cit., pp. 57-58.

the present wrongs perpetuated by the government. The only remedy to these evils was fair and equal representation in Parliament. The Society called for the abolition of all special privileges. Stressing an abhorrence of violence, the Address pledged to work by persuasion for reform against the abuse of power.⁵⁵

This LCS Address, and the publication of the second part of Thomas Paine's Rights of Man in February 1792, followed by a cheap edition of both parts, stimulated the rapidly developing lower class interest in constitutional questions, causing hundreds to join the ranks of the Corresponding Society.⁵⁶

During the first half of 1792 the Corresponding Society was nursed along primarily by Horne Tooke, who corrected drafts of its publications, corresponded with Hardy, and supplied him with names and addresses of other sympathetic societies.⁵⁷ After the first Address to the Nation was published and read nationwide, other societies sought out the LCS for advice and heaped praise on its current literary success. Before the end of the year, the London Corresponding Society was in touch with groups in Sheffield, Manchester, Warwick, Stockport, Edinburgh, and with other groups springing up independently in the London area. Though the London Corresponding Society pressed hard in its national campaign for Parliamentary reform, it did so in a spirit of temperance and moderation. It urged fellow reformers to unite "in guarding against all Attempts aiming at the Subversion of

⁵⁵Howell, op. cit., Vol. XXIV, pp. 377-378. The first Address and Resolutions of the London Corresponding Society may be found in its entirety here.

⁵⁶Black, op. cit., p. 226.

⁵⁷Brown, op. cit., pp. 58-59.

wholesome and regular Government and repress to the utmost of their Power all Proceedings tending to produce Riots and Tumults."⁵⁸

On 6 August 1792, the Corresponding Society published its second major address to the nation. It contained more specific Reformist maxims; calling for:

An honest, annual Parliament wherein each individual will have his representative! Only then will liberties be restored, the press free, the laws simplified, the judges unbiased, juries independent...the public better served. Such an honest Parliament assembled /would cause/ corrupt influence to die away and with it all tedious obstinate ministerial opposition to measures calculated for the public good.⁵⁹

The second address made a greater appeal to the working class than the first, yet it was studiously moderate, so moderate as to anger some reform groups, such as the Stockport Society, for not going far enough in pressing for necessary political reforms.⁶⁰

In the fall of 1792, the English reform movement became associated with the French Revolutionary movement, when Dr. Joseph Priestly and Thomas Paine were elected to French National Convention after having previously received French citizenship. Priestly considered the citizenship and his election as deputy "the two greatest honours France could bestow on a foreigner," He did not feel French citizenship incompatible with his loyalty as an Englishman, for he hoped that France and England would be "forever

⁵⁸State Trials, op. cit., Vol. XXV, pp. 155-157.

⁵⁹See State Trials, Vol XXIV, pp. 382-387 for the entire text of the second Address to the Nation.

⁶⁰Letter from the Stockport Society, 27 September 1792. Ibid., p. 388. This letter felt that the LCS address "sentiments hardly rise to that height /expected/ from men sensible of their full claims to absolute and uncontrollable liberty; unaccountable to any power which they have not immediately constituted and appointed."

united in the bonds of fraternity."⁶¹ Thomas Paine also assumed his new role with zest. In his letter to the Convention, he declared, "I come not to enjoy repose...Convinced that the cause of the French is the cause of all mankind and that liberty cannot be purchased by a wish, I gladly share with you the dangers and honours necessary to success."⁶² Paine's letter was printed and distributed gratis by the London Corresponding Society.

For some time, the LCS considered the advisability of sending an address of friendship and encouragement to the French Convention, finally acting on 25 September 1792. The Society's first address to the French denounced the brutality of the German invaders in France, proclaimed solidarity with the French cause, and advocated a "triple alliance of America, France and Britain to give freedom to Europe and peace to the whole world."⁶³ The address to the French was subscribed to by various other reform groups, such as the Society for Constitutional Information, the Manchester Constitutional Society, the Norwich Revolution Society, the London Constitutional Whigs, and the Friends of the People.⁶⁴ This address, though written by the London Corresponding Society, expressed the feelings of radical reform throughout the nation and helped to unify their common efforts. The negative effects of the address appeared three weeks after it was published, when the French issued a decree offering assistance to the peoples of

⁶¹Veitch, op. cit., p. 219.

⁶²State Trials, op. cit., Vol XXIV, pp. 495-497.

⁶³See State Trials for the entire text of the Address to the French National Convention, Vol. XXIV, pp. 522-523.

⁶⁴Annual Register 1792, London: Rivington. Appendix to Chronicles, p. 70.

other nations against their despotic rulers. The French decree caused panic in England, and in consequence, the London Corresponding Society, in particular and radical reform in general, gained ill-repute for their address.⁶⁵ Charges were made that the London Corresponding Society approved of the excesses of the Convention or anticipated future collusion with the French regarding their promise of liberating nations from despotism.

For quite some time, the association of the English Parliamentary reform movement with the Revolution in France had produced a steadily rising tide of opposition to reform. As early as 28 April 1792, the Rev. Christopher Wyvill, a leader of the Yorkshire Reform movement of the early '80's, wrote: "If Mr. Paine should be able to rouse up the lower classes, their interference will probably be marked by wild work, and all we now possess, whether in private property or public liberty, will be at the mercy of a lawless and furious rabble."⁶⁶ Three weeks later (21 May 1792) the Crown issued a Proclamation, warning the people against seditious meetings and political libels. Reaction reached a fever pitch when it became possible for the enemies of reform to portray their opponents as seeking French aid to overthrow the monarchy in England and establish a republic.⁶⁷

Conservative reaction manifested itself in a three-pronged attack on radical reform: by the Association of John Reeves; by Government activities, especially those of the Home Office; and by the Anti-Reform literary campaign.

⁶⁵Veitch, op. cit., p. 221.

⁶⁶H. E. Collins, "The London Corresponding Society" chapter from the Democracy and the Labour Movement, (J. Saville, editor) London: Lawrence and Wishart. 1954. p. 114.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 114.

The Association for preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers was founded at the Crown and Anchor Tavern on 20 November 1792. The resolutions adopted at this first meeting gave the reason for the Association's existence:

Alarmed by the mischievous endeavors, that are now used by wicked men, to lead the uninformed, and to spirit up the discontented by furnishing them with plausible topics, tending to the subversion of the state and incompatible with all government whatsoever....We...form ourselves into an association for the purpose of discouraging in every way that lies in our power, the progress of such nefarious designs as are meditated by the wicked and senseless reformers of the present time.⁶⁸

The Association seemed to serve the purpose of the Government. It came into existence rather mysteriously at an opportune time, when alarm at the radical reform movement was growing. It was founded by John Reeves, a gentleman who had only arrived in England a few weeks before, after serving a term as Chief Justice of Newfoundland. Reeves came from a middle class background, being educated at Eton and Cambridge. He had entered Government service in 1780 as a commissioner of bankruptcy and advanced to positions with the Mint and the Board of Trade. He was author of a legal history of England, which remained standard for almost two generations. In 1791, he was appointed Chief Justice of Newfoundland and the next year became Receiver of the Public Offices, a position which was charged with collecting all fees and fines, and which paid all salaries and expenses of

⁶⁸William T. LaPrade, England and the French Revolution, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press. 1909. p. 76.

the magistrates in the London metropolis.⁶⁹ John Reeves' decision to found the Association seems to have been coordinated in advance with the Government. The ministry had been contemplating a campaign of repression against the radical reformers and was more than delighted to work together with an extra-parliamentary movement. The court case against Thomas Paine's Rights of Man as a seditious libel was the signal for a joint attack by the Association and the Government. Reeves was to marshal public sentiment and direct it toward reaction. His success was striking. Few gentlemen attended the meeting at the Crown and Anchor Tavern on 20 November 1792, yet within two weeks a great wave of reaction swept the realm resulting in the establishment of a multitude of local Associations.⁷⁰

The newly established local Associations were to be supported by parish organizations and were kept under strict control and managed by small committees, "for it should be remembered that these are not open Societies for talk and debate but for private consultation and real business."⁷¹ These small committees consisted exclusively of men representing vested interests--aristocracy, land, rotten boroughs, and the Established Church. The local club's role was to move against seditious meetings and publications,

⁶⁹R. R. Nelson, The Home Office, 1782-1801, Durham, N. C.: Duke Univ. Press. 1969. p. 115. Black, op. cit., pp. 235-236. The Receiver and/or the magistrates also consulted the Home Office about extraordinary purchases and the appointment and removal of clerks and officers responsible for law enforcement. His intimate friendship with Evan Nepean, the Undersecretary of the Home Office assured Reeves' success in his venture into extra-parliamentary activity.

⁷⁰Thomas Hardy asserted there had been no meeting at all and that John Moore, the secretary of the Association, (the signature to the proceedings of the first meeting) was a fictitious name for John Reeves. This allegation seems to ring true for it was almost a week after the first meeting before most of the committeemen were chosen. See Black, p. 237.

⁷¹The responsibilities of the local Association are found in the Association's Papers, Proceedings I, pp. 7-8. Cited in Black, p. 239.

to bring offenders to justice, to stand in readiness to aid the executive power and magistrates in the suppression of any riot or tumults, and to circulate cheap books and papers, which would be provided by Reeves' headquarters.⁷²

A good demonstration of how Government policy and the Association were coordinated to the same end came when Joseph White, the Treasury Solicitor, dispatched a letter to all regional government solicitors on 24 November 1792, only four days after the founding of the Association, instructing them to initiate prosecution against all printers, publishers and distributors of libels. Another example of cooperation between the Association and the government agencies was the order of the General Post Office in London that every postmaster should support Reeves' organization, by reporting the circulation of libelous and seditious matter and aiding in the distribution of loyal tracts. Further, the Victualing Office was delighted to distribute loyalist tracts among the seamen and dockworkers, in coordination with the local Associations, in order to stamp out political radicalism and working class wage demands.⁷³

Though the scope of the Association's anti-reform effort was national, John Reeves' favorite target was the London Corresponding Society. As information on the activities of LCS members, its printers, writers and bill stickers poured into his files, he was galled by the presumption of the London artisanry. Reeves saw to it, in his dual capacity of Receiver of the Public Offices and chairman of the Association, that his magistrates hounded division meetings from public house to public house. He regularly briefed

⁷²Ibid., p. 239.

⁷³Ibid., pp. 239-240

the magistrates "on the points of libel and sedition now so much at work" in order to prod them along.⁷⁴

The Association played a large role in the Anti-Reform literature campaign and in the Government's systematic policy of repression, but John Reeves scored his most unqualified triumph with his program of persecution. As a result of all these Association activities, radical reform was checked and thrown back during 1793 and 1794.

Closely allied and coordinated with the Association, the Home Office was the Government arm chiefly responsible for controlling and checking the activities of the reform societies, in particular those of the London Corresponding Society. This office supervised public order through the nation's magistrates and police and managed the domestic espionage system through the Secret Service.⁷⁵ The post of Receiver of the Public Offices, which John Reeves held, was an adjunct to the Home Office and this made cooperation easy between the leader of the Association and the government agency charged with police supervision and domestic espionage.

The Bow Street police and magistrates' headquarters was chiefly responsible for enforcing the magistrates' orders which forced the Corresponding Society divisions to move from tavern to tavern, for arresting persons accused of seditious activities, and for employing local citizens to join reform societies and serve as police spies.⁷⁶ Besides the police efforts

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 265.

⁷⁵Nelson, op. cit., pp. 72 & 114.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 114. The Bow Street office consisted of three magistrates, assisted by six officers known as 'runners' with a patrol of about sixty men.

to obtain reliable information from local citizens, the Secret Service provided at least two undercover agents, William Metcalfe and "Citizen" Groves, who insinuated themselves into the highest echelons of the London Corresponding Society. Metcalfe wrote:

Mr. Nepean requested that I would attend to the disaffected societies and endeavor to find out their intentions and designs.... I /joined/ the London Corresponding Society...and carried myself so void of Suspicion that I /advanced through the ranks to be/ chosen to the Secret Committee.⁷⁷

This program of espionage directed by the Home Office, in addition to the information on seditious activity secured by the local Associations, enabled the Bow Street constables to know of radical gatherings, whether on the divisional level or on the level of the mass meetings and huge crowds that attended London Corresponding Society rallies well beforehand, and to decide whether to break up the meetings in preparation for a disturbance, or to beef up the local constabulary by calling in the military. The testimony of these espionage agents was to be of paramount importance to the Government's case against the reformers in the State Trials of 1794.⁷⁸

The third prong of the attack on radical reform was the anti-reform literature campaign. The publication of Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France had precipitated a wave of anti-reform literature, but when the Association, founded two years later, entered the fray, it borrowed techniques from its radical opponents. A torrent of tracts, hand-

⁷⁷Letter to the Duke of Portland, 5 January 1795. Cited in Nelson, p. 120. Metcalfe is probably referring to Executive Committee for there is no record of an LCS Secret Committee.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 114.

bills, prints and songs were issued, causing the pace and volume of anti-reform literature to increase rapidly. Everything the reform societies did; the Association attempted to do better. Its literary efforts never rose to the heights of the later and well-known Anti-Jacobin,⁷⁹ but they had learned from the radicals that simple publications in popular culture media, particularly prints and songs, played an important role in agitation. Examples of these attempts to reach the popular imagination were pamphlets like "One Pennyworth of Truth," "Strap Bodkin, Staymaker" and that masterpiece "Village Politics," the most successful single piece of propaganda ever issued by the Association. The author, Hannah More, was a founder of the "Sunday School" movement and one of the "Old Reformers" who now sided with the Government against the Radicals. "Village Politics" sought to disseminate true conservative principles among the lower classes. The English Squirearchy was unanimous in upholding it as an admirable sedative for the growing political consciousness of the common laborer. Largely on this account, the pamphlet was phenomenally popular and had a tremendous sale. It utilized the simple dialogue of the lower class village people to demonstrate the piety and wisdom of conservative ideas. This made such an impression that a whole series of similar dialogues, under the title of "Cheap Repository Tracts," were produced under the patronage of various important men such as William Wilberforce, an "Old Reformer" and a friend

⁷⁹I have examined the Anti-Jacobin to determine the quality of its propaganda efforts; finding it to be at a low level especially in its prose and poetry, the Association's efforts must have been really bad.

of Pitt's.⁸⁰

Some of the loyalist pamphlets were more zealous than wise. One by Reeves was so ultra-partisan that he was accused of libelling the House of Commons and he was prosecuted. Although William Pitt refused to defend Reeves and threw him to the wolves, the partisans of Pitt's administration came to Reeves' rescue, voting for his acquittal with their large Parliamentary majority.⁸¹

The various activities of Reeves' Association, in conjunction with Government support through the city magistrates and the Bow Street runners, had immediate effect on the London Corresponding Society, principally through seeking to suppress the Society's divisions. According to Thelwall, the divisions of the Corresponding Society were hunted from house to house by threats and intrigues and sometimes by the occasional violence of the police officers.⁸² This prompted the London Corresponding Society to issue, as early as ten days after the Association's founding, an Address to other Societies in Great Britain (30 November 1792) an answer to the vehement attacks of the Association. The address expressed regret at the excesses of

⁸⁰Walter Phelps Hall, British Radicalism 1791-1787, New York: Columbia Univ. Press. 1912. pp. 52-53. See also The Debate on the French Revolution, (Alfred Cobban, editor) London: Adam & Charles Black. 1963. pp. 281-282 for extracts from "Village Politics." Other famous reactionary tracts were: "Reasons for Contentment" by Archdeacon William Paley, the Established Church's contribution to the struggle against Radicalism; "The Example of France as a Warning to Britain," by Arthur Young, well known for his published travels and observations of various European countries; and "The Englishman's Political Catechism," distributed by the Association.

⁸¹Hall, op. cit., p. 54

⁸²G. Veitch, Genesis of Parliamentary Reform, London: Constable and Co. 1913. p. 276

the French Revolution, particularly the massacre of royalist prisoners in September 1792, which was blamed on the Manifesto of the Duke of Brunswick that had demanded the restoration of the King of France to his full royal powers and threatened France with dire consequences upon refusal. The LCS address also went on to outline the views of the Society on private property, since its views had been called in question by Reeves' Association. It stated that:

Whoever shall attribute to us (who wish only the restoration of lost liberties of our country) the expressions of No King! No Parliament! or any design invading the Property of other men, is guilty of a wilfull, an impudent and a malicious falsehood.⁸³

The address concluded with the hope that the House of Commons, "the Source of our Calamity," would bring about successful reform in the ensuing session.⁸⁴ This address was issued as a poster and the Government, unwilling to attack its authors, adopted the somewhat less than courageous expedient of prosecuting a harmless billsticker, sentencing him six months in prison.⁸⁵

That the Government was, nonetheless, in a state of thorough alarm over the sudden increase of radical activities was evidenced by the King's Speech to Parliament of 13 December 1792:

⁸³Parliamentary Session Papers and Journals, (A. Erickson, editor) "The Second Report from the Committee of Secrecy of 16 May 1794" Appendix D, pp. 116-119.

⁸⁴The address is signed by Maurice Margarot, the LCS chairman and the signature of the secretary was left blank. H. E. Collins (p. 115) claims that Felix Vaughan wrote the address though only Margarot's signature is present; possibly Vaughan was the secretary of the LCS at this time but that post was supposedly held by Thomas Hardy.

⁸⁵Veitch, op. cit., p. 277.

The seditious practices which had been...checked...have of late been...renewed and with increased activity. /These seditious practices/ appear to proceed from a design to attempt the destruction of our...constitution and the subversion of all order and government: and this design has evidently been pursued in connection and in concert with persons in foreign countries.⁸⁶

Another example of the official atmosphere of fear was the passing, on 4 January 1793, of a government bill regulating the entry and activities of aliens, an act which demonstrated fear of collusion between subversive strangers and local radicals. This atmosphere of fear and suspicion, not only gripped Pitt's Ministry, but Parliament and the nation as a whole. The French were victorious everywhere against Allied armies, while at the same time they were moving toward new extremes of revolutionary excesses inside France. The Convention tried the ex-King, Louis XVI, for crimes against the nation. He was found guilty on 17 January 1793 and four days later executed. These events worked against the English radicals and greatly strengthened the forces of reaction. As a result of events in France in early 1793, radical reform societies could not get their propaganda published in newspapers. Publishers either changed their views relating to the French Revolution or feared possible prosecution by the Government.⁸⁷

The London Corresponding Society in general approved of the execution of Louis XVI, but this was only an ordinary example of human prejudice, scarcely indicating a desire to do likewise in England. Aware of possible interference, the LCS voted down adding to a pamphlet an appendix justify-

⁸⁶New Annual Register 1792, London: Rivington. "Public Papers," pp. 60-61

⁸⁷Carl B. Cone, The English Jacobins, New York: Charles Scribner's 1968. pp. 142-143.

ing Louis XVI's death, because it could be inferred that the LCS hoped for similar event in England.⁸⁸ This was an example of the new course of caution brought upon the London Corresponding Society by pressure emanating from the Government and its appendages, and surprisingly enough from other reform societies. On 15 February 1793, the Friends of the People in a letter to the LCS stated:

It seems scarce necessary to represent to the LCS the peculiar necessity of circumspection and moderation, at a moment when the most venial indiscretion of the friends of reform is remarked with such malignant watchfulness, and converted into an argument against the cause of reform itself.⁸⁹

Under the influence of these outside influences and the necessity of survival, the London Corresponding Society had to moderate its demands and lay low for a time. During this period, the Society lost many members and divisions. According to Hardy, "Many who were great declaimers in the Society now slunk into holes and corners, and were never heard of no more; others of the violent orators deserted and joined the standard of the enemy."⁹⁰ Joseph Ritson, a noted antiquary and Corresponding Society member, summed up this period quite well: "I find it prudent to say as little as possible on political subjects, in order to keep out of Newgate."⁹¹

⁸⁸Birley, op. cit., p. 24.

⁸⁹Letter of Edward Jer. Curteis, Chairman of the Friends of the People, to the LCS, 15 February 1793. Cited in Roland Bartel, Liberty and Terror, Boston: Heath. 1965. pp. 93-94.

⁹⁰Veitch, op. cit., p. 277.

⁹¹Joseph Ritson, Letters of Joseph Ritson, London. 1833. Letter of 16 January 1793, Vol. II, p. 7.

CHAPTER IV

THE LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY'S STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

As a part of their new policy of moderation, the London Corresponding Society decided upon a national campaign among reform societies to send petitions to Parliament as a best means of obtaining necessary reforms. The Society, in a letter to the Sheffield Constitutional Society of 4 March 1793, stated:

We are unanimous in the opinion, that one petition will not produce a reform; yet...if every Society in the Island will send a petition, we shall...gain ground...it will force the present members of the Senate to discuss the subject...and give rise to Debate.⁹²

Not all of the reform societies agreed with the Corresponding Society's national petition efforts. On 5 March 1793, the Norwich Society suggested to the LCS that, in view of the failure of petitions to Parliament and the doubtful policy of addressing the king, a convention of delegates from the reforming societies would be the wisest method of advancing their cause.⁹³ Nevertheless, the Corresponding Society continued to press its national petition effort. In coordination with other radical societies, it was planned to have the petitions presented just before or on the day that Charles Grey, a leading Whig reformer, made his promised motion for Parliamentary reform. The schedule of Parliament determined that day to be

⁹²Manoah Sibly, The Trials of Thomas Hardy, John Horne Tooke, John Thelwall and Others. Dublin. 1795. Appendix E. p. 125.

⁹³Veitch, op. cit., p. 283.

6 May 1793.⁹⁴

The petitions of May 1793 demonstrated the large popular support for the small minority of opposition Whigs and Radicals in Parliament who were seeking reform. Twenty-five petitions, from all over the realm, were presented. Sheffield's petition had 8000 signatures, Birmingham's 2700 signatures, while that of the London Corresponding had over 6000 signatures. The Edinburgh petition was so long that it stretched "the whole length of the floor of the house" of Commons.⁹⁵ After these petitions were presented, Charles Grey opened a two day's reform debate by introducing one of the presented petitions (from the Friends of the People), in the form of a motion for reform. This petition, in the form of a report, was a searching exposure of corrupt electoral politics, the monopoly of borough owners, and the increase of taxation. No specific remedies were suggested but Grey asked the House of Commons for a committee to consider all of the petitions in general.⁹⁶

Lord Mornington (later Marquess Wellesley) and Prime Minister Pitt led the debate against committee consideration of the reformist's petitions.

Lord Mornington pointed out the petitions had proceeded from the diabolical designs of the London Corresponding Society. He stated that at the head of the list of signatures was:

Thomas Hardy, Secretary of the London Corresponding Society, who /sent/ an address to the Convention which breathed so

⁹⁴S. A. Maccoby, English Radicalism 1786-1832, London: N. Kay. 1952. p. 68.

⁹⁵New Annual Register 1793, London. "British and Foreign History," p. 111.

sincere an affection for the cause of the French republic and so warm a zeal for the destruction of the British government, as to obtain the honour of being circulated throughout all the departments and all of the armies of our enemy.⁹⁷

Mornington further noted that the London Corresponding Society had directed the national reform petition efforts and that "this petition /presented by Grey/ was the fabrication of the Corresponding Society." Lord Mornington dismissed the reform efforts by stating: "Can any man, who has observed the proceedings of that society, believe that the deluded persons that compose it will rest satisfied with any temperate reform?"⁹⁸

William Pitt was of the opinion that if this:

...principle of individual suffrage be granted, ...it goes to subvert the peerage, to depose the king and /in the end/ to extinguish every hereditary distinction and every privileged order, and to establish that system of anarchy announced in the code of French legislation, and attested to in the massacres of Paris.⁹⁹

Pitt pointed out his own efforts at reform, which he had proposed in support of the Constitution. He regretted that reform now was in the hands of "wicked persons," who aimed at "subversion." Subversion was the champion bogey of the day and always served to introduce a fresh denunciation of the new order in France.

Charles Grey, in defence of his motion, pointed out that Lord Mornington's attack of Thomas Hardy and the London Corresponding Society was unwarranted, for Hardy did not even subscribe to the Friends of the People petition. Further Mornington was condemned for his insinuating use of

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 864.

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 864.

⁹⁹Ibid., pp. 900-901

supposed bad conduct by Hardy and the London Corresponding Society as a means to discredit the motion at hand. Grey stated that if Hardy had broken any laws of his country, His Majesty's servants were responsible for not having enforced the laws against him. Despite the efforts of Grey and Charles James Fox, the brilliant leader of the Opposition who led his supporters in favor of the motion, the bill for consideration of the Reform petitions was soundly defeated, 282 to 41.¹⁰⁰

This defeat, the most signal which the reformers had yet sustained, showed that reform was dead in the House of Commons and that petitions served to damn it irretrievably. The London Corresponding Society, sensing the futility of further petitioning, decided to seek other methods of obtaining radical reform. One alternative, that of holding a National Convention, had been suggested by the Norwich Society in March 1793. This idea for a British National Convention was not new. Thomas Paine, in his Letter Addressed to the Addressers (1792), outlined a plan for such a convention. Its 1000 delegates were to be elected by all males over twenty-one in the kingdom. Their most urgent task was to rationalize the confusing, antiquated, often conflicting laws that were historically layered upon the English. Only those laws deemed necessary to the present generation would be retained; all others would be dropped. Paine believed that such a review should be periodic, approximately every twenty-one years. In effect, each generation, meeting in national convention would restructure the constitution of the government according to its own needs.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰Ibid., pp. 883-884 and p. 925.

¹⁰¹Thomas Paine, "A Letter Addressed to the Addressors of the Late Proclamation" from Political Works, London. 1817. Vol. II, p. 44.

Initially, the London Corresponding Society was reluctant to use this option and sounded out other reform societies for possible alternatives. A letter to William Skirving, the Secretary of the Friends of the People at Edinburgh, on 17 May 1793, noted that, "Our petitions, have been all of them unsuccessful," and requested that "attention must now therefore be turned to some more effectual means--from your Society we would willingly learn them."¹⁰² Viable alternatives were not readily forthcoming and the London Society's correspondence, throughout the early summer of 1793, indicated a shift towards the proposed organization of a National Convention. In a letter to the Birmingham Constitutional Society on 10 June 1793, the London Corresponding Society felt "the necessity of a general Union of reform societies ...once the Country shall have so united, the Neros of the day will be forced to yield to the just demand of a long oppressed people."¹⁰³ A letter to the Norwich Societies on 25 July, stated the LCS hoped to form "a Junction with all others associated for the same purpose, throughout the Nation."¹⁰⁴

In August 1793, the London Corresponding Society made its views perfectly clear when it published A Convention the Only Means of Saving Us From Ruin, written by Joseph Gerrald, a leading spokesman for the Society. Like Paine, Gerrald despaired of the possibility of achieving parliamentary reform except through a democratically-elected convention. He traced the idea of a convention to the historical precedent for such an assembly:

¹⁰²Parliamentary Session Papers and Journals, (A. Erickson, editor) "Second Report of the Committee of Secrecy of 16 May 1794." Appendix E, p. 131.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 136.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 139.

The Saxons convened every year all the free men of the kingdom who composed an assembly called the...Folkmote or Convention. It was their business and their duty to revise the conduct of the king and witenagemot, or parliament.¹⁰⁵

Joseph Gerrald felt the necessity of re-instituting this assembly or convention as the means to achieve reform and regain the rights lost by free-men.

I see no other resource /he wrote/ than the interposition of the great body of people themselves, electing deputies in whom they can confide and imparting instructions which they must injoin to be executed.¹⁰⁶

In the late summer of 1793 in anticipation of the future convention, the Corresponding Society and other London reform groups organized platform meetings to propagandize cockney crowds. On 24 October 1793, a crowd of 4000 people assembled on a field near Hacney, for the purpose of electing delegates from the London Corresponding Society to the first British National Convention, to be held in Edinburgh as a step towards obtaining equal representation of the people. A hostile newspaper, The Oracle, described this electoral meeting noting that:

In order to convince the people of the erroneous sentiments which they entertained of the designs of the meeting, Mr. Gerrald, Mr. Margarot, and Mr. Jennings harangued /the crowd/ to such effect, that they declared by universal acclamations their approbation of the views of the Society....The members now proceeded to the election of the two Delegates: Joseph Gerrald and Maurice Margarot, were unanimously elected.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵Joseph Gerrald, A Convention the Only Means of Saving Us From Ruin, London. 1793. pp. 91-92.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., pp. 105-106.

¹⁰⁷The Oracle, London. 26 October 1793. Cited in Lucyle Werkmeister, A Newspaper History of England, Lincoln, Neb.: Univ. of Nebraska Press. 1967. p. 432.

The delegates chosen were given specific instructions on what issues to support in the National Convention. To raise money for their travel expenses and their three guineas a week allotment, the Corresponding Society had to appeal for help from the public. John Thelwall hired rooms in which he began a course of lectures to raise money for the delegates. Fund raising proved difficult and those who aided the Corresponding Society in any way were often severely punished by the government. Thomas Briollat, a pumpmaker, who lent his field in Hackney Road to the LCS for their October electoral meeting was charged with sedition and sentenced to twelve months imprisonment and a fine of £100.¹⁰⁸

Among other delegates elected from around England to the British National Convention were Matthew Brown, an actor representing Sheffield and Leeds, and Henry Yorke and Charles Sinclair, a young friend of the London Corresponding Society's token aristocrat, Lord Daer, representing the Society for Constitutional Information. In addition to being a delegate for the LCS, Joseph Gerrald also represented the Society for Constitutional Information, while Maurice Margarot additionally represented the Norwich Societies.¹⁰⁹ Probably various other English reform societies would have participated, but did not because of the comparatively short notice given of the assembling of the Convention.¹¹⁰

The London Corresponding Society held high hopes regarding this first British National Convention. As indicated in a letter to the Norwich

¹⁰⁸Veitch, op. cit., pp. 286-287.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., pp. 285-286.

¹¹⁰See Sibly, op. cit., Appendix E, p. 147 for a letter from the Sheffield Constitutional Society to the LCS, 1 November 1793.

Societies in November 1793, the Society saw the Convention as being the best means:

that can be devised for the recovery of our rights and the complete renovation of the Liberties and Happiness, which as men we are entitled, and as Britons, we have been taught to expect.¹¹¹

Though the London Corresponding Society organized support for the British Convention from reform societies throughout England, it must be remembered that before October 1793 that previously reform societies in Scotland had held two Scottish Conventions and were indeed preparing for a third.¹¹² The Scottish reform movement was better organized and more widespread than their English Counterparts and the Scottish Conventions were all held for the same purpose, to unite the multitude of Scottish reform societies in their common long-term efforts at seeking universal suffrage and annual Parliaments.

The Third Scottish Convention convened on 29 October and lasted four days. This meeting was attended by 160 delegates, the majority being from the Edinburgh and Glasgow districts. On the second day, the assembly declared for universal suffrage and annual Parliaments and required that individual societies insert this common declaration in their various constitutions. It was further resolved to petition Parliament for the removal of grievances and to address the Crown against the war with France. The Scottish Convention knew from correspondence that the English Reform societies

¹¹¹Ibid., pp. 150-151

¹¹²December 1792 and April 1793. For further information on the earlier Scottish Conventions, see E. Hughs, The Scottish Reform Movement and Charles Grey, 1792-94: Some Fresh Evidence, "Scottish Historical Review." Vol. XXXV. (1956) pp. 26-41.

planned to join them at Edinburgh, forming thus a British Convention, but when the English deputation did not show, the Scottish Convention adjourned until the following April.¹¹³

Not long after the Scottish Convention broke up, the English delegates did arrive in Edinburgh, and soon prevailed on William Skirving and the Edinburgh Organizing Committee to recall the adjourned convention. The Scottish reform societies, "informed that England meant to be a serious part in the great cause, sent back all their former delegates" and several societies not previously represented in the Scottish Convention, especially the United Irishmen, also sent delegates. On 19 November 1793, the British Convention opened with 180 delegates representing over 50 societies. According to Margarot, the English delegates received a very warm and flattering reception.¹¹⁴

The Convention began "by establishing a Set of Rules for the Organization of the present and even future Conventions." Next a "Committee of Union between Two Nations, a Committee of Finance and a Committee establishing a Patriotic Newspaper" was set up. On 23 November, a Decree of Union was added and the whole Convention solemnly pledged to remove all "National Distinctions" and to stand firmly by each other in their common efforts for reform.¹¹⁵

The proceedings of the Convention imitated the new French Revolutionary manner to such a great extent that the authorities felt considerable

¹¹³H. W. Meikle, Scotland and the French Revolution, Glasgow: J. Maclehose. 1912. p. 139.

¹¹⁴See Sibly, Appendix E, pp. 168-169 for M. Margarot's letter to the Norwich Societies, 24 November 1793.

¹¹⁵Ibid., p. 169.

alarm on hearing their spies' reports. The delegates called each other "citizen," divided themselves into "sections," their reports were headed "Vive la Convention" and ended with "Ca ira." They had also appointed committees of organization, of instruction, of finance and of secrecy, designated their meetings as "sittings," granted "honors of sittings," dated their minutes the "First Year of the British Convention" and made "honorable mention" of patriotic donations.¹¹⁶ All this was done in direct imitation of the French style; this mimicry detracted from their avowed purpose of seeking Parliamentary reform and gave credence to the Lord Advocate's later contentions that, since the French Convention had led to a regicide rebellion, to "scenes of anarchy, rapine, bloodshed, cruelty, and barbarity, hitherto unknown to the world," the British Convention, "by showing a wish to adopt this model" was aiming at the same results.¹¹⁷

Thomas Hardy, possibly forewarned of the danger and harm resulting to the London Corresponding Society delegates if they remained in Scotland much longer, instructed Margarot and Gerrald to leave with all haste as soon as the Convention adjourned.¹¹⁸ In a reply dated 2 December 1793, the LCS delegates stated that "our immediate return to London will be attended with very bad consequences" since the local reform societies look up to the London Corresponding Society "to encourage, to convince them by our presence...that the time is near at hand when such Reform must take place."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶State Trials, op. cit., Vol. XXIII, p. 815.

¹¹⁷Meikle, op. cit., p. 144.

¹¹⁸State Trials, op. cit., Vol. XXXIV, p. 427.

¹¹⁹Ibid., pp. 428-429. See also Sibly, Appendix E, pp. 169-170.

Noticing that Hardy seemed pleased in his letter over the prospect of uniting the London Corresponding Society with the entire Scottish reform movement, the LCS delegates pleaded to stay in Scotland, in order to visit the various local societies and serve as propagandists for radical reform, thus cementing this new Decree of Union. The delegates also reported that any attempt by "the Government for the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Bill, the introduction of a Convention Bill or the landing of foreign troops in Great Britain" would signal the meeting of a new Convention consisting of the same delegates meeting in a secret place.¹²⁰

Unfortunately for the LCS, Hardy's instructions to return to London were not obeyed. At 7 A.M. on 5 December 1793, a Sheriff's officer with five men entered the bedroom of Margarot and Gerrald, informed the LCS delegates of his warrant for their arrest and seized their private papers. Margarot and Gerrald were confined, then examined and later admitted to bail, each in the sum of 2000 Merks.¹²¹ William Skirving, who was arrested the same day as Gerrald and Margarot, was dismissed after being told that no such meeting as the Convention would be permitted again. The magistrate ordered Skirving not to attempt to reconvene it. On 12 December at noon, Skirving and Matthew Brown, the Sheffield reform delegate, spoke at the Cockpit Tavern to a vast crowd of people anxious to learn of the fate of the Convention. As Brown tried to read the magistrates' orders prohibiting the meeting (along with a protest against this prohibition), the local

¹²⁰Loc. cit.

¹²¹Sibley, op. cit., Appendix E, p. 172. See letter of M. Margarot to the LCS of 8 December 1793 for the entire account of the arrests and breakup of the Convention. A "Merk" seems to be the Scottish term for the currency unit, the Mark.

¹²²The Oracle, 12 December 1793. See Werkmeister, op. cit., p. 460.

constabulary arrested the pair and carried them off to confinement.¹²²

According to The Oracle of 12 December 1793, ten persons were arrested and confined in the magistrates' attempt to disperse the British National Convention. It seems that of this group, only three were tried, William Skirving, Maurice Margarot and Joseph Gerrald. Possibly the authorities figured a conviction for sedition would be easier to obtain against two English radical trouble makers and the principal organizer and leader of the Scottish Conventions rather than against a group of poor Scottish artisans of minor political significance.

To the extreme misfortune of the defendants, the presiding judge in the Scottish Trials was Robert Macqueen, Lord Braxfield, a man who "gloried in the prejudices that could make a travesty of justice. He was not a Jeffries [an English judge noted for bloodthirstiness]; he was coarse rather than wanton, revealing the rough side of civilization in the 18th Century."¹²³ In addition to Lord Braxfield, the Lord Advocate (the government prosecutor) was Robert Dundas, nephew of Lord Henry Dundas, who served as Home Office Secretary in Pitt's Ministry. An indication of the government's interest in the trials was Henry Dundas' letter to his nephew on 11 December 1793: "You get great credit for your attack on the Convention. I desire Nepean to send you a perusal of the King's note to me on the subject."¹²⁴

William Skirving, the originator and prime mover of the Convention was the first to be tried. Though educated for the ministry at Edinburgh

¹²³Geoffrey Treasure, Who's Who in History, England 1714-1789, New York: Barnes and Noble. 1969. p. 188.

¹²⁴Meikle, op. cit., p. 145.

University, he chose to be a farmer. The theory of farming interested Skirving as much as the practice, a fact indicated by his published works on the subject, and by his application as a candidate for the Chair of Agriculture at Edinburgh University. When reform activity started to politicize the Edinburgh area, Skirving became one of the leading reformers. According to government spies, his actions in his organizing activities were marked by extreme moderation and good behavior, but this did not prevent his being guilty of being the central figure of the Scottish Reform movement.¹²⁵

Skirving's accusers made a legal mistake, formally charging him with sedition while imputing to him treason. Although this error ought to have secured his acquittal, his fate was sealed. His judges assumed from the first that parliamentary reform and universal suffrage were treasonable objects; that the Convention was meant as a literal imitation of the French Convention; and that it was designed as a rival of the British Parliament. If the jury could be persuaded to take the same view, the same verdict would easily result. Certain conviction was no problem because the jury had been carefully chosen; it was composed exclusively of government placemen, people who owed their livings to those in power.¹²⁶ Skirving was sentenced to fourteen years transportation to Botany Bay; he remarked as he left the bar, "My Lords, I know that what has been done these two days will be rejudged--that is my comfort and all of my hope."¹²⁷

¹²⁵Veitch, op. cit., pp. 288-289.

¹²⁶Ibid., p. 289.

¹²⁷E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, New York: Pantheon. 1964. p. 127.

In the meanwhile, the London Corresponding Society was raising funds for Maurice Margarot, whose trial, immediately following Skirving's came in early January 1794. Margarot was charged with moving a resolution to persist in the consideration of ways and means of securing reform "until compelled to desist by a superior force."¹²⁸ Lord Braxfield defined to the jury that sedition could be committed even if one did not harbor the ambition to overthrow the government. Braxfield stated that:

in order to constitute...sedition, it is not necessary that the meeting...had in view to overturn the constitution by mobs and by violence to overturn the king and parliament. I apprehend... sedition consists in poisoning the minds of lieges, which may... have a tendency to promote violence against the state...and... end in overt rebellion.¹²⁹

In his defense, Margarot asserted Lord Braxfield had already prejudged his case by declaring at a private dinner-party that the members of the British Convention deserved a public whipping as well as transportation, and that "the mob would be the better for the spilling of a little blood."¹³⁰ Margarot's general attitude towards his trial was one of insolence, as was demonstrated by having his friends accompanying him to the court room in a procession, holding a "Tree of Liberty" over his head in the shape of a letter M with a scroll inscribed "Liberty, Virtue, Reason, Justice and Truth." Margarot became the hero of the populace and overplayed his hand, being much too eager for the crown of martyrdom. The trial ended in Braxfield telling Margarot that his defense was nothing but sedition from beginning to end. He received fourteen years transportation to Australia for his efforts.¹³¹

¹²⁸Veitch, op. cit., p. 290.

¹²⁹State Trials, op. cit., Vol. XXXIII, p. 766.

¹³⁰Thompson, op. cit., p. 127.

¹³¹Ibid., p. 127.

Joseph Gerrald had friends who posted bail, enabling him to return to London without ever having to stand trial in Scotland. Gerrald was aware of the mockeries of justice in the trials of Skirving and Margarot. Despite the advice and entreaties of his friends (especially his old tutor Dr. Samuel Parr), Gerrald felt it would be a "violation of honour" not to go back and face his accusers. His decision was encouraged by William Godwin, a well-known radical essayist, in a letter of 23 January 1794:

I cannot recollect the situation in which you are in a few days to be placed without emotions of respect, and I almost said envy....Your trial...may be a day such as England, and I believe the world, never saw. It may be the means of converting thousands and, progressively millions to the cause of reason and public justice.¹³²

As it turned out to be, Godwin's letter was only an exercise in wishful thinking. Joseph Gerrald returned to Edinburgh in early March 1794. He made an eloquent defense for his case and being of a scriptural mind noted that Christ himself was a reformer. Braxfield laughed, "Muckle he made o'that he was hanget."¹³³ The presiding judge further declared that Gerrald was "a very dangerous member of society," with "eloquence enough to persuade the people to rise up in arms."¹³⁴ Like his fellow comrades, he was exiled to Botany Bay for fourteen years. Thomas Campbell, the poet, heard Gerrald's defense and was stirred by his moving speeches.

¹³²G. Kegan Paul, William Godwin: His Friends and Contemporaries, London. 1876. Vol. I, p. 85.

¹³³Brown, op. cit., p. 207.

¹³⁴State Trials, op. cit., Vol. XXIII, p. 803.

Campbell turned around to a stranger standing next to him, and exclaimed, "By Heaven, sir, that is a great man!" "Yes, sir," answered the stranger, "he is not only a great man, but he makes every other man feel great who listens to him."¹³⁵

The immediate effect of the Scottish Trials was the near extinction of the entire Scottish Reform movement because they "assured every man that if he dared to show his thoughts, either by speaking or writing in favour of good government, or of any approximation thereto--Botany Bay would be his future residence."¹³⁶

The London Corresponding Society reacted to the savagery of the Scottish Trials by issuing a new Address to the Nation on 20 January 1794. The address noted that:

our ancestors did establish wise and wholesome laws; but we... find, that of the venerable Constitution of our ancestors, hardly a vestige remains. Can you believe that those who send virtuous Irishmen and Scotchmen to Botany Bay, do not meditate and will not attempt to seize the first moment to send us after them?....We must have redress from our own laws and not from the laws of our plunders, enemies, and oppressors. There is no redress for a nation circumstanced as we are, but in a fair, free and full representation of the People.¹³⁷

At the January meeting where the address was issued, a resolution calling for a new General Convention was also passed unanimously, conditional upon the Government's landing of foreign troops or suspension of Habeas Corpus.

¹³⁵J. Beattie, Life and Letters of Thomas Campbell, London. 1840. Vol. I, p. 88.

¹³⁶Letter of Francis Place to Thomas Harrison of 15 February 1842. Cited in Veitch, op. cit., p. 294.

¹³⁷See State Trials, op. cit., Vol. XXV, pp. 640-644 for the entire address.

Even the usually discreet Thomas Hardy was moved by the events in Scotland to write: "I think our opponents are cutting their own throats as fast as they can--now is the time to do something worthy of Men."¹³⁸ The Society for Constitutional Information, in January 1794, passed even stronger resolutions, stating "That the law ceases to be an object of obedience whenever it becomes an instrument of oppression" and "the liberties of Britons must depend not upon their reason...but on their...resolution to oppose tyranny by the same means, by which it is executed."¹³⁹ On 28 February, the Sheffield Fast Day Meeting was called by the local reform societies and was attended by thousands of the townspeople. In Sheffield, resolutions were passed unanimously denouncing the injustice meted out to the Scottish martyrs, the monarchs of Europe for trying to destroy the French people's liberty, the absence of parliamentary consent for the landing of Hessian troops "a ferocious and unprincipled horde of Butchers" in England to keep public order, and the prostitution of religion (the Established Church) for its support of the State policy of shedding French blood. These Sheffield resolutions were the most strongly worded yet against the Government, and on 20 March 1794 the London Corresponding Society adopted them and added a few of their own of a similar nature.¹⁴⁰ In addition to the gathering in Sheffield, there were other mass meetings in the provinces, protesting the

¹³⁸Letter of Thomas Hardy to Charles Cordrel, 11 January 1794. Cited in T. M. Parsinnen, Association, Convention, and Anti-Parliament in British Radical Politics 1771-1841, "English Historical Review." July 1973. pp. 511- 512.

¹³⁹State Trials, op. cit., Vol. XXIV, p. 559.

¹⁴⁰See State Trials, Vol XXIV, pp. 636-638 for the entire text of the Sheffield Fast Day Resolutions.

results of the Scottish Trials and demanding Parliamentary reform. One meeting, at Halifax in Yorkshire, called for a meeting of delegates to be held at Bristol to organize a new National Convention. Meanwhile the London Corresponding Society's membership shot up to 48 divisions with over 5000 members; it was said "even the rich came to sit among the honest men in leathern aprons." Encouraged by this new national upsurge for reform, the London Corresponding Society sent out a circular in late March 1794, calling for a new British Convention.¹⁴¹

The responses to the call for another Convention were generally favorable. Especially strong support came from the Sheffield Societies, from Halifax, Bristol, Newcastle, and from the LCS's old ally, the Society for Constitutional Information. The chief opponents of a new Convention were the Friends of the People, who feared that it would "furnish the enemies of reform with the means of calumniating its advocates, and so far from forwarding the cause, will deter many from countenancing that which they approve."¹⁴²

To rally popular support for their upcoming Convention, the London Corresponding Society, with the cooperation of various other London reform societies, called a General Meeting at Chalk Farm near Primrose Hill on the outskirts of the city on 14 April 1794. The meeting, over 5000 in attendance, discussed the Convention, chided the Friends of the People for their non-cooperation, denounced the actions of the Government for dispersing a peaceable assembly and exiling its leaders to Botany Bay, and called for the usual Parliamentary reforms. There is no real proof that the London

¹⁴¹Williams, op. cit., p. 78.

¹⁴²State Trials, op. cit., Vol. XXIV, p. 737.

Corresponding Society ever contemplated a resort to illegal measures, as the Government later tried to demonstrate. In fact, the last resolution adopted at the Chalk Farm meeting makes it clear the reformers still placed reason over force:

Whatever may be the interested opinions of hereditary senators or packed majorities of pretended representatives...truth and liberty, in an age so enlightened as the present, must be invincible and omnipotent.¹⁴³

¹⁴³Ibid., Vol. XXIV, p. 739.

CHAPTER V

PARLIAMENT'S ATTACK ON RADICALISM

From the time of the Scottish Trials, the Government was in a thorough state of alarm over the increased tempo of Radical activities. The vast amount of propaganda poured out by the London Corresponding Society and the Society for Constitutional Information denouncing the dispersal of the Convention and results of the Scottish Trials;¹⁴⁴ the mass meetings in the provinces, especially at Sheffield, voicing the rising political sympathy for radical reform; the call for a new Convention; and the Chalk Farm meeting which drew thousands of Londoners to listen to the advocates of reform, caused the Government intense worry. The Government further discovered evidence that the radicals were actually arming themselves. A few unnamed members of the London Corresponding Society had formed the Loyal Lambeth Association, a group that gathered to learn the use of firearms. According to Frederick Polydore Nodder, "Botanic painter to His Majesty" and Government spy, this group practiced twice a week in secret and possessed eighteen stand of arms. It was the avowed purpose of the Loyal Lambeth Association to have recourse to arms if parliamentary reform was not secured. One of the supposed schemes of this group was to seize all the arms in the shops of London gunsmiths and distribute them

¹⁴⁴The Address to the Nation of 20 January 1794, from the LCS at the Globe Tavern had over 40,000 copies printed.

among the London Corresponding Society.¹⁴⁵ Yet another arms plot was discovered when the Government got wind of a letter from the Sheffield Society to the London Corresponding Society, dated 24 April 1794, advertising the sale of pikes by which radicals could defend themselves against attack. The letter described how the pikes were made, their quality, and their cost. In the letter, the Sheffield Society defended their policy of making and selling pikes, declaring that:

The barefaced aristocracy of the present administration has made it necessary that we should be prepared to act on the defensive, against any attack they may command their newly armed minions to make upon us.¹⁴⁶

The number of pikes ordered (130), suggest a defensive rather than an offensive motive, but the Government viewed any possession of arms by the radicals as a serious matter.

The event that probably decided the Government to strike against the reformers was the annual dinner party of the Society of Constitutional Information, held on 2 May 1794. The meeting, at which over three hundred persons were present, was chaired by John Wharton, M. P. for Beverley. It was attended by various important figures in the reform movement such as Horne Tooke, John Cartwright and several M. P.'s from the Opposition. Indiscreet toasts were made to "the armies contending for Liberty," to "the hope that the abettors of the war might be its victims" and to "the persecuted Patriots of England." These toasts and others, together with much

¹⁴⁵The Parliamentary History of England, (T. Hansard, editor) London: Longmans. 1818. Vol. XXXI, pp. 692-694. It seems that Nodder was somewhat prone to exaggeration or falsehood in his claims regarding the Loyal Lambeth Association, for there exists little evidence on their purposes outside his testimony.

¹⁴⁶Parliamentary Session Papers and Journals, op. cit., "Second Report from the Committee of Secrecy of 1794," p. 2.

unwise and loose talk circulating at this annual dinner, were enough to spur the Government into action.¹⁴⁷

At six o'clock in the morning of 12 May 1794, Thomas Hardy was arrested and his house and shop were turned upside down, as the police searched for incriminating documents. According to Hardy:

They ransacked trunks, boxes, drawers and desk. Hundreds of letters and manuscript papers belonging to the London Corresponding Society were seized, which they carried away in four silk handkerchiefs....They were not satisfied with letters and papers only, but they took books and pamphlets which nearly filled a corn sack. Not a single article did they mark.¹⁴⁸

Though Hardy's wife was confined to bed because of illness, the crown officers searched every nook and cranny of the bedroom, completely oblivious to her condition. "When they had ransacked every place in our bedroom that they saw fit, they then went into the shop," wrote Hardy, "expecting, no doubt, to find Treason hatching among the Boots and Shoes."¹⁴⁹ The journal of the London Corresponding Society escaped the hands of the crown officers, since by merest chance, Hardy had given it the evening before to the assistant secretary of the LCS, in order that certain entries be made.

On the same morning, shortly after the seizure of Hardy, Daniel Adams, the secretary of the Society for Constitutional Information, was arrested by the king's messengers and all of the books and papers of the SCI were seized. Adams "produced the Keys and unlocked the Boxes himself."

¹⁴⁷State Trials, op. cit., Vol. XXIV, pp. 571-572. See also Veitch, op. cit., pp. 302-303.

¹⁴⁸Thomas Hardy, Memoirs of Thomas Hardy, London. 1832. pp. 31-32

¹⁴⁹Ibid., p. 32.

He told the Privy Council at his examination that he had no interest in disorder and nothing to conceal. He was perfectly frank and gave all the information he could to the Council.¹⁵⁰

The Radical reformers' reaction to the arrests was one of disbelief and alarm. Major John Cartwright, the old veteran reformer, wrote to his wife on 15 May 1794:

I saw this morning, by the newspaper, that Hardy and Daniel Adams are apprehended for high treason, and that the papers belonging to their societies are to be laid before the House of Commons. How these men can have been guilty of treason to anything but corruption, I do not at present comprehend.¹⁵¹

The Rev. Jeremiah Joyce, an active member of the Society for Constitutional Information and tutor to Lord Stanhope's children, wrote the following letter to Horne Tooke:

This morning, at six o'clock, citizen Hardy was taken away, by order from the secretary of state's office: they seized every thing they could lay their hands on. Query is it possible to get ready by Thursday?¹⁵²

This note was intercepted by the Government and the query was interpreted as a signal for an insurrection. Pitt's Ministry immediately determined to anticipate that event by keeping an intense watch over homes and activities of Horne Tooke and the Rev. Jeremiah Joyce, and by stationing a troop of light horse cavalry along with detachment of soldiers in their immediate

¹⁵⁰Veitch, op. cit., pp. 305-306. See the New Annual Register 1794, London. "British and Foreign History," pp. 188-189 for a further account of the Government roundup of radical leaders.

¹⁵¹Life and Correspondence of Major John Cartwright, (F. D. Cartwright, editor) New York: Burt Franklin. 1826. (1971 reprint) Vol. I, pp. 202-203.

¹⁵²Memoirs of John Horne Tooke, (Alexander Stephens, editor) London: J. Johnson and Co. 1813. p. 119.

vicinity.¹⁵³

No revolution was forthcoming, but the crown officers proceeded to seize Horne Tooke on 16 May 1794. The Government had let some time elapse after the arrest of Hardy and Adams in the hope that there would be some compromising attempts of escape by some of the radicals. Since the leaders of the London Corresponding Society and the Society for Constitutional Information showed no fear and intended to hold their ground, the Government had twelve others arrested to share the fate of Hardy and Adams.¹⁵⁴ Among the twelve were John Lovett, a hairdresser and chairman of the Chalk Farm meeting; Richard Hodgson, a Westminster hatter; John Baxter, a laborer; John Richter, John Augustus Bonney, Matthew Moore, Thomas Wardle, all gentlemen; Jeremiah Joyce, a Unitarian minister and tutor; Stewart Kyd, a barrister of the Middle Temple and noted for his defense of the publisher of Paine's Age of Reason; Thomas Holcroft, a popular playwright of the day; and John Thelwall, the popular writer, lecturer and poet. Of this group, only Daniel Adams and John Lovett were admitted to bail, Adams having apparently struck a bargain with his prosecutors. In exchange for being released on bail and not having to stand trial, he swore in July 1794 that the books of the Society for Constitutional Information were authentic. Lovett, though remaining in jail until October 1794, was admitted to bail before the other prisoners were brought to trial because no bill of indictment was returned against him by the Grand Jury.¹⁵⁵ The remaining prisoners

¹⁵³ Ibid., pp. 119-120.

¹⁵⁴ Veitch, op. cit., p. 307.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 307-308. As far as I can ascertain, the LCS members among the prisoners were Hardy, Lovett, Thelwall, Hodgson, Baxter, Kud and Wardle.

received the epithet "the Twelve Apostles" in the popular literature of the day.

In concert with the Government's roundup of the radical reform leadership, the Pitt Ministry undertook to report on the radical reform societies' subversive activities and on the dangers they posed to national security. On 12 May 1794, the King's Message on Seditious Practices was presented to Parliament:

...H. M. received information that the seditious practices... carried on by certain societies in different parts of the country...have lately increased activity and boldness... directed to assembling a pretended general convention of the people, in contempt and defiance...of Parliament and...the existing laws and constitution. H. M. has given directions for seizing the books and papers of the said societies in London and...laying them before the House of Commons...to consider...and to take such measures...guarding against the prosecution of these dangerous designs.¹⁵⁶

The next day, Henry Dundas, Secretary of State, brought the seized material from the London Corresponding Society and the Society for Constitutional Information under seal to Parliament. After the discussion of the King's Message, the House of Commons, at the urging of the Government, appointed a Committee of Secrecy to examine the seized books and papers and make a report. The Committee, consisting of twenty-one members, was chosen by ballot on 15 May and was filled by outspoken anti-reformers and reactionaries such as Prime Minister Pitt, Attorney General Windham, Secretary of State Dundas, Charles Townshend and Edmund Burke.¹⁵⁷

On 16 May 1794, the Committee gave their report, stating in its

¹⁵⁶Parliamentary History, op. cit., p. 471.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 471-474.

preface that "...proceedings of these Societies appear to become every day more likely to affect the internal peace and security of these kingdoms, and to require in the most urgent manner, the immediate and vigilant attention of Parliament." The London Corresponding Society figured prominently in the report, which stated that "the two Societies of the greatest importance are, the London Corresponding Society and the assembly which called itself the British Convention at Edinburgh."¹⁵⁸ The history of the London Corresponding Society and its relationships with other reform societies were demonstrated in detail supplied by the contents of the seized letters and pamphlets of the report.

In view of his fears of the danger resulting to the realm from conspiracy, the report led Pitt to move the suspension of the Writ of Habeas Corpus. He felt the papers disclosed a conspiracy and immediately implicated the Corresponding Society. Pitt charged that:

the London Society had...a deliberate and deep concerted plan for actually assembling a convention for all England...to be representative of the whole body of the people of England;... to exercise legislative and judicial capacities, to overturn the established system of government, and wrest from the Parliament that power which the people and the constitution lodged in their hands.¹⁵⁹

Despite the spirited debate from the Opposition, the Habeas Corpus Suspension bill passed in the House of Commons by 146 to 28, on 17 May 1794.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., pp. 475 & 478. This statement is a bit misleading since the British Convention was an assembly of delegates from all over Great Britain (though chiefly Scotland), representing even the LCS. The Convention was not a single society like the LCS.

¹⁵⁹State Trials, op. cit., pp. 498-502.

In view of the urgent need of procuring the Habeas Corpus Suspension Act, not all of the letters and papers of the radical reform societies which had been seized were read during the First Report. Accordingly, a Second Report of the Committee of Secrecy was issued on 7 June 1794, confirming the previous feelings of the Committee. It seemed to include almost everything the Corresponding Society had ever written and made further accusation that some of the divisions were procuring arms to be used "upon any emergency, in case the government should attempt to disperse their meetings," and darkly hinted these arms were also to be used to overthrow the state.¹⁶⁰

The roundup of the radical leadership and ensuing Parliamentary actions caused wild rumors; there was speculation that 800 more warrants for arrest were in preparation. Many of the Opposition members, especially Charles James Fox, came to fear the Tower of London would be their future home. The Society for Constitutional Information collapsed completely after the arrests, and eighteen divisions of the London Corresponding Society closed down while many of the provincial societies dissolved, never to meet again. In Liverpool in the summer of 1794, this panic caused a minor stam-

¹⁶⁰Ibid., p. 608. See also the "Appendix to the Second Report of the Committee of Secrecy," (House of Lords) in the Trials of Thomas Hardy, John Horne Tooke, etc., (Manoah Sibly, editor) Dublin. 1795 for the drawings and dimensions of arms seized from the radicals. This report accused the members of the British Convention of arming themselves for the next Convention to be held in England.

pede for boats to America.¹⁶¹

The actions of the Government and their supporters caused a wave of sympathy for the radicals throughout the nation. Many concurred with Major John Cartwright's assessment of such reformers as John Horne Tooke as a highly respected statesman:

I can by no means imagine that Mr. Horne Tooke has been guilty of the crimes which have been imputed to him, to have placed him in his present situation.¹⁶²

Others agreed with Charles James Fox's description of the radical prisoners, that "they appeared to be men who might co-operate in a revolution, but would never produce one."¹⁶³ According to Francis Place:

Many persons, of whom I was one, considered it meritorious, and the performance of a duty to become members /of the London Corresponding Society/, now that it was threatened with violence, and its founder and secretary was persecuted. This improved the character of the society as most who joined it were men of decided character, sober, thinking men, not likely to be easily put from their purpose.¹⁶⁴

Some of the moderate press, not usually sympathetic to the radical cause, started to question the Government's motives and actions in persecuting the

¹⁶¹Williams, op. cit., p. 80. A tragic example, which made many of the radicals fear for their homes and families, was the British Naval victory celebration of the Glorious First of June 1794; a drunken Tory and Loyalist mob went on the rampage in London, stopping in front of Thomas Hardy's shop they tried to loot and destroy the establishment. A group of Corresponding Society members came to rescue Mrs. Hardy, who was frightened half out of her mind, with no means of escape from the mob. A riot ensued and these events resulted in Mrs. Hardy's death in child birth shortly thereafter.

¹⁶²Letter to Duke of Portland, 20 July 1794. Cited in Cartwright, op. cit., p. 203.

¹⁶³Collins, op. cit., p. 123.

¹⁶⁴Place, op. cit., p. 130.

leaders of reform. The Critical Review of August 1794 felt the Committee of Secrecy had found nothing secret at all, only "a repetition of what they had before seen in almost every newspaper, notices for meetings of the respective societies, their transactions, resolutions and toasts, which were generally ordered to be published by the societies themselves."¹⁶⁵ The article wondered how the 20,000 members of these radical societies were to accomplish a revolution with only eighteen stands of arms. Further it was declared that no person, due to the suspension of Habeas Corpus, was "safe from false pretexts, suspicions and malice of their opponents." One could be jailed upon the most frivolous suspicion.¹⁶⁶

Noticing the large amount of popular sympathy for the imprisoned radical leaders, the Government took alarm and made an attempt to prejudice the case of the prisoners through a ruse christened the "Popgun Plot" in September 1794. According to the New Annual Register:

A more ridiculous, inconsistent and improbable tale never was invented...The charge, supported by Upton /a police spy/, was to the following effect: An instrument was to have been constructed by the informer Upton, in the form of a walking-stick, in which was to have been inserted a brass tube of two feet long; through this tube a poison dart or arrow was to have been blown...at his majesty, either on the terrace at Windsor or in the playhouse.¹⁶⁷

Several people were taken into custody for their share in the plot and an unsuccessful attempt was made to trace its origin to the London Corresponding Society. Robert Crossfield, a member of the LCS, was the only one

¹⁶⁵The Critical Review, (August 1794) "Review of Public Affairs," p. 580. Cited in Bartel, op. cit., p. 91.

¹⁶⁶Ibid., pp. 581-582.

brought to trial; he was acquitted while the rest were discharged without trial.¹⁶⁸

The suspension of Habeas Corpus in May enabled the Government to detain the prisoners almost indefinitely. It was not until 2 October 1794, when Lord Chief Justice Sir James Eyre delivered the charge of high treason against the prisoners to the Middlesex Grand Jury, that the Government proceeded with its case. Eyre alleged that:

If we suppose bad men to have once gained an ascendancy in an assembly of this description /a convention/, popular in its constitution, and having popular objects; how easy is it for such men to plunge such an assembly into the most criminal excesses? Thus...men who assemble in order to procure a reform of parliament may involve themselves in the guilt of high treason.¹⁶⁹

Eyre's charges were refuted by a popular pamphlet by William Godwin, which condemned the Government's advocacy of the new formula of constructive treason, a formula that made words, expressions, intentions, or speculations equal to any willful act of treason as a means of conviction. Godwin's pamphlet convinced many citizens of London of the injustice of the charges brought against the radical leaders. Even before the trials began, the people of London "began to perceive that a design to reform Parliament was not treasonable, and that however wrongheaded, and even reprehensible it might be, this was no cause why men, otherwise innocent, should themselves and their families be subjected to the frightful pains and penalties

¹⁶⁸Veitch, op. cit., pp. 312-313.

¹⁶⁹State Trials, op. cit., Vol XXIV, p. 206.

of treason."¹⁷⁰

On 25 October 1794, the first Bill of Indictment was returned against nine prisoners. On that day, Thomas Hardy, John Horne Tooke, John Augustus Bonney, Stewart Kydd, Jeremiah Joyce, Thomas Holcroft, John Richter, John Thelwall and John Baxter were brought to the bar to plead their guilt or innocence. In their indictments it was stated that Bonney and Thelwall lived in areas other than where they actually resided. Though they could have avoided trial because they had never lived where their crimes of treason were supposedly committed, both chose to stand trial in order to clear their names. Curiously enough, William Wardle, Matthew Moore and Richard Hodgson were not named in the indictment. There is much conjecture as to whether these three were ever imprisoned or eluded the pursuit of justice completely. It is possible the Government was holding them for a second Bill of Indictment, though the State Trials do not reveal their fate. Their comrades, with whom they shared the title "the Twelve Apostles," all pleaded not guilty to the charges. It was announced to the Court that their lawyers would be Thomas Erskine, Joseph Gibbs and Felix Vaughan.¹⁷¹

Thomas Hardy was the first to be tried, his trial began 28 October and lasted until 5 November 1794. Sir John Scott, Lord Eldon, the State prosecutor and a symbol of arch-conservatism, opened with a nine hour speech attacking Hardy and defining treason:

¹⁷⁰William Godwin or Felix Vaughan, Cursory Strictures on the Charge delivered by Lord Chief Justice Eyre to the Grand Jury, cited in State Trials, op. cit., Vol XXIV, p. 219 and in Kegan Paul, op. cit., Vol I, pp. 129-134. Cobban and the State Trials give Vaughan as the author while Clune, Veitch and Kegan Paul state that Godwin wrote the pamphlet.

¹⁷¹State Trials, op. cit., Vol. XXIV, pp. 1403-1405.

...the evidence /shows/ that the convention, which the persons charged conspired to form, was...to alter the whole form of the sovereign power of this country, that it was to form, or to devise the means of forming, a representative government--to vest in a body, founded upon universal suffrage, and the alleged unalienable...rights of man, all the legislative and executive government of the country; that conspiracy to this end would be an overt action of treason, I presume cannot be disputed; it deposes the king in the destruction of the regal office in the constitution of the state.¹⁷²

The Crown, following the prosecutor's speech, introduced as evidence the First and Second Reports from the Committee of Secrecy. All the correspondence and papers were publicly read with the hope the jury would detect the treason concealed in their texts. Next came the examination of witnesses, whom consisted chiefly of people affirming the good character of Thomas Hardy. A few people, possibly in government pay, were hostile witnesses, but nothing could definitely be proved from their statements. Carefully building its case, the Crown now produced the star witnesses for the prosecution, George Lynam and "Citizen" Groves, agent provocateurs for the Government.¹⁷³

George Lynam, an ironmonger from Walbrook, spied for the Government from October 1792 to February 1794. In October 1793, Division 12 of the London Corresponding Society elected Lynam as its chairman and delegate. Up to that date, information he obtained for the Government concerned only his division; after being elected delegate, a full account of the General Committee of Delegates' activities reached the Government's ears. Though his testimony contained evidence more believable than the speculations and

¹⁷²Ibid., pp. 264-265.

¹⁷³See State Trials, Vol XXIV for the account of events in the trial of Thomas Hardy.

suspicious of previous Government witnesses, it did not contain any solid proof of Hardy's guilt.¹⁷⁴

"Citizen" Groves, also had wormed his into the highest echelons of the Corresponding Society. His reports to the Government were fairly trustworthy, but he proved an alarmist on the stand. In his eagerness to convict Hardy, he told a great story of some special knives which Hardy had in his possession at the Chalk Farm meeting. The bottom fell out of this part of the Crown's case when one witness stated he had often seen such knives in shops on the Strand, largely discrediting Groves' testimony.¹⁷⁴

The defense, led by Thomas Erskine, built its case first upon the large group of witnesses testifying in favor of Thomas Hardy and then proceeded to discredit, quash, or otherwise dispose of the Government's evidence and testimony. After this was done, Erskine went on to a final attack on the Crown's theory of constructive treason and why it could not stand. Regarding Hardy's conduct, Erskine remarked:

I am not driven to defend every expression; some of them are undoubtedly improper, rash and inflammatory; but I see nothing in the whole taken together, even if it were connected to the prisoner, that goes at all to an evil purpose in the writer.¹⁷⁵

Erskine further charged that his client had been accused of conspiring "to hold a Convention in England" and "to hold it for the purpose alleged, of assuming all the authority of the state, and in fulfillment of the main

¹⁷⁴Ibid., pp. 807-810. Lynam was accused by various members of the LCS as being a spy and was tried before the Committee of Delegates, but by a stroke of luck, he was acquitted.

¹⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 743-745 & p. 835.

¹⁷⁶Ibid., p. 924.

intention against the life of the king." The first charge was self-evident, for Hardy did intend a Convention to be held, but Erskine maintained the double intention must be proved from the evidence before the indictment of Thomas Hardy for treason could stand.¹⁷⁷

On the eight day of the trial, 5 November 1794, the Lord Chief Justice concluded his summing up of the evidence and made his charge to the jury. After retiring for about two hours, the jury returned a verdict of Not Guilty. According to Hardy:

The Sessions House, where the court sat, was rent with shouts of applause. A vast multitude caught the joyful sound, and like an electric shock, the glad tidings spread through London, and were conveyed quicker than the regular post could travel, to the most distant parts of England, where all anxiously awaited the result of the trial.¹⁷⁸

Hardy tried to slip out the door of the Old Bailey to catch a coach to his brother-in-law's house, but the crowd recognized him in the coach, turned loose the horses, and drew him in triumph through the streets of London. The crowd stopped at No. 9 Piccadilly, his former home (now in ruins), and observed a moment of silence. After leaving there, Hardy gave the crowd a short speech, "after which they gave three cheers and quietly dispersed."¹⁷⁹

There was great national rejoicing over Hardy's acquittal. The Annual Register, generally hostile to the radical reform movement, reported that:

¹⁷⁷Ibid., p. 911.

¹⁷⁸Clune, op. cit., p. 56.

¹⁷⁹Loc. cit.

the anxiety of the people was highly visible. In London, and throughout the kingdom, there was much concern about how the trial would terminate. The acquittal...caused great public satisfaction, which was expressed without restraint. Many, who felt their own sense of security threatened by the government's attack on civil liberties, felt a sense of relief.¹⁸⁰

Major John Cartwright wrote: "I need not tell you the heartfelt joy which the words 'not guilty' gave me. Time will show the iniquity of the great."¹⁸¹ Francis Place recalled that "...the bare mention of the State Trials of 1794 sends me back to Old Bailey...never can I forget the emotions or joy felt... hearing Not Guilty pronounced on my friend Thomas Hardy."¹⁸²

The next of the radical reform leaders to be tried was John Horne Tooke, whose trial began on 17 November 1794. Since Tooke was a politician of national prominence, many of the aristocracy and the important men of the realm, such as the Duke of Richmond, the Duke of Portland, Pitt, Fox, Sheridan and Grey were in attendance. It became one of the social events of the year for high society. Charles Grey wrote: "I believe I shall attend it to learn how to conduct myself when it comes to my turn...I am not, however, very ambitious of being classed...with Algernon Sydney."¹⁸³ Lord Granville Leveson Gower, a young aristocrat, reported that, "I am at this instant arrived from the trial of Horne Tooke which the examination of...Fox, Pitt and other national leaders, caused to be extremely entertaining."¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰Annual Register 1794, London: Rivington. "Principal Occurrences" p. 279.

¹⁸¹Cartwright, op. cit., pp. 207-208.

¹⁸²Place, op. cit., p. 132.

¹⁸³Edward Lascelles, Life of Charles James Fox, New York: Octagon Books. 1970. pp. 264-265. Sydney was a Whig leader executed for his supposed complicity in the Rye House Plot.

¹⁸⁴Lord Granville Leveson Gower: Private Correspondence, (Castilia Countess Granville, editor) London: John Murray. 1917. p. 105.

It was the examination of Prime Minister Pitt that gave Horne Tooke and his attorneys the opportunity to tear the Government's case to shreds. Pitt and Tooke, both long political foes of the Fox family, were earlier involved together in seeking Parliamentary reform legislation, during Lord North's Ministry. Though the Prime Minister affected to forget having been a part of a Convention of Reform delegates in 1782, exact details were supplied by Richard Brinsley Sheridan's testimony and reluctant admission was secured. This admission embarrassed the Ministry; it looked extremely foolish to prosecute men for holding conventions to seek Parliamentary reform, when the Prime Minister himself had participated in such proceedings in the 1780's.¹⁸⁵

It took the jury merely six minutes of deliberation to find Tooke not guilty. After the joyful shouting subsided, Tooke addressed the Court, saying, "I hope Mr. Attorney General that this verdict will be a warning to you not to attempt to shed men's blood upon lame suspicions and doubtful inferences."¹⁸⁶ He then turned around and thanked the men of the jury for his life. According to the New Annual Register:

The jury on the return from Old Biley, after their verdict on the trial of Mr. Tooke, had a lane formed for them all the way to the London coffee-house. On their arrival there, the company, who amounted to about five hundred gentlemen, immediately arose and took off their hats, ranged themselves on each side as they passed through, saluting them with the most animated and expressive tokens of applause.¹⁸⁷

The popular joy over Horne Tooke's acquittal had barely subsided as

¹⁸⁵See State Trials, Vol. XXV, pp. 36-321 for the proceedings of John Horne Tooke's Trial.

¹⁸⁶Cartwright, op. cit., p. 209.

¹⁸⁷New Annual Register 1794, op. cit., "British and Foreign History," p. 284.

John Thelwall came to trial on 1 December 1794. The Government, after two glaring failures, was determined to convict at least one of the remaining prisoners and Thelwall seemed to be the likely one. Besides being accused of the same charges as Hardy and Tooke, Thelwall's speeches and lectures laid him more open to charges of treasonable utterances and indiscretions. An informer, John Taylor, told of Thelwall's talk of attempting a rescue of the victims of the Scottish Trials. This information, along with many other details, was supposedly remembered by Taylor for three or four months, since he took no notes and only prior to the trial wrote a recollection of events. This greatly strained the credibility of the star witness. Some of the tales told by Taylor were so improbable as to suggest that someone wrote faked memoranda for him to read as his testimony. Though every effort was made to blacken Thelwall's character, all the dirty tricks the Government could improvise failed. Thelwall was acquitted of all charges on 5 December 1794.¹⁸⁸

Joseph Gibbs and Thomas Erskine were ready to undertake the defense of the remaining prisoners when the Government decided to cease prosecution and set the rest of the "Twelve Apostles" free. This action was prompted not only by their legal setbacks, but by the great change of popular opinion during the State Trials. As a result of the trials, many partisans of the Ministry, who had hoped the arrested radicals would get their just deserts, now perceived the dangerous consequences to themselves of constructive treason. It has been stated that if the prisoners were tried for seditious libel instead of high treason, their convictions would have been se-

¹⁸⁸Veitch, op. cit., pp. 316-317. Even Thelwall's attorney's clerk was tampered with, and knowledge was obtained of his plan of defense.

cure; being sentenced to a few years and a fine was quite different than forfeiting a man's life for possessing unpopular ideas or expressing seditious indiscretions.¹⁸⁹ Robert Burns, the poet and radical sympathizer, summed up popular feeling after the State Trials quite nicely, when he wrote:

Thank God, these London trials have given us a little more breath and I imagine that the time is not far distant when a man may freely blame Billy Pitt, without being called an enemy to his country.¹⁹⁰

But a sober warning was sounded by Major John Cartwright:

A system of proscription and terror like that of Robespierre has been for some time growing in this country, and had these trials been otherwise decided than they have been, it would have been completed and written in innocent and virtuous blood.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹See F. K. Prochaska, English State Trials: A Case Study, "The Journal of British Studies," (Nov. 1973), Vol. XII, No. 1, pp. 63-69 for further information on the formula of constructive treason.

¹⁹⁰Letters of Robert Burns, (J. de L. Ferguson) London. 1931. Vol. II, p. 282.

¹⁹¹Cartwright, op. cit., p. 210.

CHAPTER VI

THE REVIVAL OF THE LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY

After the State Trials of 1794, the London Corresponding Society continued to function, though less openly and on a diminished scale. Despite its declining membership, the Society was still quite vigorous in the publishing field, for example, issuing A Seasonable Caution by Anthony Beck, the current LCS chairman on 28 November 1794. Beck urged moderation in seeking radical reform and warned his readers to be wary of agents provocateurs, about whose activities he gave examples. A Vindication of the London Corresponding Society, appearing in early December, replied to the various allegations, particularly regarding their arms plot, made against the London Corresponding Society during the State Trials. On 13 December 1794, the Corresponding Society brought out the first number of a journal, The Politician, though it did not prove successful and was abandoned early in the following year.¹⁹²

Despite its flurry of literary activity, the Society was on the verge of extinction. The Society for Constitutional Information had become defunct after the May 1794 arrests, though many of its members, such as Tooke and Cartwright, individually continued to advocate reform. The Friends of the People dissolved in the early months of 1794, and the London Corresponding Society, the only major reform society left, faced the same fate. The expenses of the State Trials had drained the Society's

¹⁹²Collins, op. cit., pp. 124-125

financial resources, while dissensions and secessions were rife in the winter of 1794-1795. Many of the secessions stemmed from a quarrel between John Bone's Division 12 and Joseph Burks' Division 16.¹⁹³ Both divisions had broken off to form new societies. Bone's division became the London Reforming Society, strong on book clubs and education; Burks, along with Thomas Williams and John Baxter, established the Friends of Liberty, noted for imitating French political clubs, opposition to landed property and radical, possibly anarchist, political leanings.¹⁹⁴

Along with political hard times, the reform cause was affected by an economic recession, probably the worst for England in the eighteenth century. A poor harvest in 1794 almost doubled the price of wheat and bread the next year. High food prices caused many of the working class to lose their jobs, especially in the building trades. As a result, much unrest was stirred up by the lower classes; a wave of food riots, seizures of grain from hoarders, and price-fixing actions spread throughout England. Millers and corn merchants were attacked and crowds in the countryside stopped grain shipments to the towns and cities. Every district fought for their own food supplies: for example, it was feared that Birmingham would sack its rural neighbor Burford.¹⁹⁵

Despite the bad times, and at the very time that the Society reached

¹⁹³Burks' division charged that many members of Division 12 were Government spies thus precipitating the dispute. It seems possible this quarrel was caused by the philosophical differences between John Bone, a religious moderate and the more extreme radical, Joseph Burks rather than by espionage.

¹⁹⁴Williams, op. cit., p. 98.

¹⁹⁵Ibid., p. 99. See also the New Annual Register 1795, "Events of April 18th" for military actions taken during the food crisis.

its lowest ebb, the London Corresponding Society's regeneration became possible. Revival began in January and February 1795, as the LCS turned its attention to social grievances and economic hardships, rather than parliamentary reform. It was a tactic that paid off well. By the end of May 1795 the ranks of the LCS had swelled to over 2000 members, meeting in 70 divisions and its nationwide correspondence network was re-established. The London Corresponding Society, at the urging of its more radical leaders, John Binns and John Gale Jones, called for a great radical reform display of strength and support to be held on 29 June 1795 at St. George's Fields. This meeting, chaired by the young apothecary, John Gale Jones, was attended by a crowd estimated at 100,000 people. It was probably the largest reform meeting held up to that time. This mass meeting resulted in a new LCS Address to the Nation and another Address to the King. The nation was reassured that the Society would continue to agitate for universal suffrage and annual parliaments as the "natural and undoubted Rights" of the British people. The address to the King gave his majesty some trenchant advice on the dishonesty and lies of his Ministers, the immorality of the French war, and pointed out that his personal security depended only upon the happiness of the people.¹⁹⁶

The threatening temper of these addresses was only one sign of popular unrest. About two weeks later, after the meeting at St. George's Fields, a large crowd formed near Charing Cross and rampaged through London, destroying Army recruiting offices in the "Crimping-house Riots." The mob was enraged at the various ways the Government employed to shanghai men into the Army for use in the unpopular war against France. The Government

¹⁹⁶S. A. Maccoby, English Radicalism 1786-1832, London: N. Kay. 1952. pp. 90-91.

had to send several military units into London to bring the mobs under control and restore order.¹⁹⁷

During these times of popular unrest, new leaders began to rise in the London Corresponding Society. The State Trials of 1794 had left a large void in the LCS leadership, even worse than had occurred after the Scottish Trials sent Margarot and Gerrald to Botany Bay. Succeeding the exiled LCS leaders were men such as John Ashley, who became Secretary, Anthony Beck, the new Treasurer, and Francis Place, who, having served as temporary Chairman during the summer, became permanent Chairman of the LCS in September 1795. These men, who joined the LCS only after the May 1794 arrests, were comparative latecomers to the radical reform movement and, with Alexander Galloway, the Assistant Secretary, made up the moderate faction of the Society's leadership. Led by Place, the moderates opposed holding large mass meetings to agitate for political reform. Place wrote, "I...advised that the society should proceed as quietly and privately as possible," that he believed that reform would come gradually through political education and that inevitably the Government would see the advantages of popular representation. The majority of the London Corresponding Society, led by John Binns, John Gale Jones and Richard Hodgson felt otherwise, believing that "the House of Commons would be induced to consent to radical reform" only through large public meetings, a view that prevailed over the moderates' minority views.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷New Annual Register 1795, op. cit., "Principal Occurrences under July 15th."

¹⁹⁸Place, op. cit., pp. 141 & 144.

The revival of the LCS was further augmented by the renewal of the food crisis. Despite the ample harvest of 1795, the rural areas of England were reluctant to give up their grain especially when it has been recently so scarce. This factor, along with the slow distribution of the surplus grain that was sold willingly, caused an extreme dearth of food in English cities and stirred up new unrest among the lower classes.¹⁹⁹ This new unrest, coupled with the anticipated opening of Parliament caused the Society to hold another mass meeting on 26 October 1795, in the fields adjoining Copenhagen House. This meeting, chaired by John Binns, was attended by 150,000 to 200,000 people. To enable the crowd to hear the speeches and resolutions, three platforms were set up. Besides Binns, who delivered another Address to the Nation and the Remonstrance to the King, John Thelwall, Richard Hodgson and John Gale Jones were the other featured speakers. Binns' address warned that:

once the Citizens of Britain...become careless and indifferent about the preservation of their Rights, or the choice of their Representatives, from that moment arbitrary power...is introduced, and the utter extinction of individual liberty, and the establishment of general despotism are inevitable and certain.²⁰⁰

Binns also demanded to know why "in the midst of plenty are we thus compelled to starve?--Why, when we incessantly toil and labour, must we pine in misery and want?"²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹The rioting and unrest concerning the food shortage crisis probably had temporarily abated due to the summer produce sold in season. In the autumn, the lower classes' dependence on bread was resumed, thus the grain shortage again caused much hardship.

²⁰⁰Account of the Proceedings of a Meeting of the London Corresponding Society, Held in a Field near Copenhagen House, (26 October 1795) London: Citizen Lee. p. 7.

²⁰¹Ibid., p. 9.

The Remonstrance reminded the King that the British people expelled the House of Stuart for their tyranny and chose the poverty-stricken and obscure House of Hanover to be their "Chief Magistrates." Accordingly, it was George III's duty to listen to the grievances of his people and to dispense justice, which could only be accomplished through "removal of his present Ministers," "Reform in the Representation," and a speedy Peace."²⁰² In addition to the Address and Remonstrance, fifteen resolutions were passed, calling for basic radical reforms, among which were peace with France, and urging the dispatch of deputies from the London Corresponding Society to propagandize and coordinate reform efforts throughout the kingdom. Other resolutions voiced disapproval over the heavy war taxes and expressed no confidence in the present government. All of the addresses and resolutions were passed by acclamation and loud applause.²⁰³

Though the Parliamentary Committee of Secrecy of 1799 spoke of the Copenhagen House meeting as "so exactly resembling that which fifteen years ago had nearly led to the destruction of the Metropolis,"²⁰⁴ this was a gross distortion. Even the hostile Annual Register complimented the London Corresponding Society for the "proper precautions that had been previously taken /so that/ the multitude dispersed in the utmost quietness."²⁰⁵ According to Place:

²⁰²Ibid., pp. 11-12

²⁰³Ibid., pp. 13-14

²⁰⁴Parl. History, op. cit., Vol. XXXIV, p. 592. This statement compares the Copenhagen House meeting with the London mob in the 'days of Wilkes and Liberty' in 1784.

²⁰⁵Annual Register 1795, op. cit., "Chronicle under October 26."

More order than was observed at this meeting was never observed at any meeting either within or without doors. I remained on one of the platforms after the business was concluded and saw the people disperse in the most orderly and quiet manner, in half an hour not one was to be seen in any of the surrounding fields.²⁰⁶

The orderly meeting at Copenhagen House was in great contrast with the conduct of the crowds gathered along the King's route as he rode to open Parliament on 29 October 1795. Over 200,000 people choked the streets, angrily hissing and jeering at the King, screaming "No Pitt! No War! Peace! Peace! Bread! Bread!" Someone threw a rock or a missile and broke one of the windows of the royal coach, giving rise to the Government's charge that a bullet had been fired at the King in a plot against his life. As the King descended from his carriage and entered the House of Lords, the crowds seized and destroyed the royal coach. After opening Parliament, the King got into a secret private carriage for security reasons, but on his way from St. James Palace to Buckingham House, the mob recognized him. Many started to shout slogans and surrounded the coach, bringing it to a stop. One man supposedly tried to open the door of the coach and seize the King, but the Horse Guards came to the rescue and escorted George III safely back to Buckingham House.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶Place, op. cit., pp. 144-145. There is a good caricature by James Gillray, the reactionary Tory illustrator of the period, found in the Works of James Gillray, New York. 1959, depicting the Copenhagen House meeting.

²⁰⁷Annual Register, op. cit., "Chronicle under October 29th" and Place, op. cit., pp. 146-147. Place, being an eyewitness, maintained the Government and the press grossly distorted and exaggerated the attack on the King. He claims only a small number of people pursued the royal coach on its way from Parliament and the man, who supposedly tried to open the coach door, was John Ridley, an LCS member by chance, who had slipped on the street before the carriage of the King and pushed himself back to escape its wheels.

In a royal proclamation of 4 November 1795, the Government attributed the seditious temper of the mob and the attack on the King to the proceedings of the Copenhagen House meeting, held three days before, and enjoined magistrates to "discourage and suppress" seditious and unlawful assemblies and apprehend their ringleaders.²⁰⁸ This proclamation served as a preliminary to the introduction of the Two Acts. On 6 November, Lord Grenville introduced, in the House of Lords a Treasonable and Seditious Practices Act, which stated that:

any person /that/...shall intend death to or harm the King; levy war...or use force to change measures against His Majesty; or...express...by printing or writing or by any overt act or deed /to do the same/, shall be legally convicted upon the oaths of two witnesses. Such person...shall be declared...to be a traitor and suffer the pains of death.²⁰⁹

This new law would establish the theory of constructive treason by which mere words, expressions or intentions could be construed as treasonable; the very same theory used by the Government unsuccessfully in the State Trials of 1794. The second act, the Seditious Meetings Act, was introduced by Prime Minister Pitt on 10 November 1795. This act stated:

that no meeting...exceeding...fifty shall be held for the purpose...of considering or preparing any petition...or any other address to the King, or /Parliament/; or...deliberating upon any grievance in church or state, unless notice of the intention to hold such meetings...shall be given...by seven persons to the magistrates...All meetings held without previous notice shall be deemed...unlawful assemblies.²¹⁰

²⁰⁸For the Royal Proclamation of 4 November 1795, see Parl. History, op. cit., Vol. XXXII, p. 243.

²⁰⁹36 Geo. III, cap. 7.

²¹⁰36 Geo. III, cap. 8.

This law, upon enactment, would put all public meetings under heavy restraints and strict controls for three years. Capital punishment was decreed against all stiff resistance to these restraints.

Francis Place recalled the witch-hunt atmosphere of this period:

No adequate idea can now be formed of the actual state of the country...while the bills were pending. The affair was made the most of by the ministers and the exclusively loyal all over the country. The newspapers hurled treason...Loyal addresses were got up in any way...meetings were held to support the ministers and to encourage them to establish if possible a perfect despotism...Threats, intimidation, persecution were all resorted to...complaint was useless, redress in any way was hopeless, the Loyal talked and acted as they pleased.²¹¹

Faced with these new examples of oppression, the London Corresponding Society organized two huge protest meetings, attracting even greater crowds than before. The first meeting was held on 12 November 1795, again at the Copenhagen House fields, with over 300,000 present. The Annual Register reported:

The /London Corresponding Society at this meeting/ solemnly denied all intentions of raising commotions, and disproved, by the strongest arguments...the charge brought against them by the ministry, of being concerned in the outrages committed against the king. They framed three petitions, one to the king, the two others to the lords and commons...They supplicated...the king to exert his royal authority /against/...the two bills and...requested the two houses to interfere...against the ministerial attempt to procure their passing.²¹²

²¹¹Place, op. cit., pp. 147-148.

²¹²Annual Register 1796, op. cit., p. 40. A hostile critic of the radical reformers, Alderman Adams stated in Parliament that only 30,000 people gathered on 12 November 1795 at Copenhagen House "for the purpose of seditious communication." His information was based on estimates given by a local turnpike gate-keeper. Cited from the Speeches of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, (anon. editor) New York: Russell and Russell. 1969. (1842 orig.) Vol. II, p. 527.

The second meeting was held at Mary-le-bone Fields (now Regents Park) on 7 December 1795. The chief speakers at this meeting were John Thelwall and John Gale Jones. The New Annual Register states that:

an address to the people, and a petition to the king, were read and unanimously approved of, together with a number of resolutions. The conduct of the multitude was temperate and orderly. They signed the papers /the petitions against the Two Acts/ in great numbers and separated in good order without the least tumult.²¹³

Joseph Farington, a gentleman observer of this period, remarked in his diary concerning the Mary-le-bone Fields meeting:

Many respectable people were in various parts of the field but they all appeared like myself, spectators of the proceedings of the day. No tumult took place nor any offence given to such as did not hold up hands or join in the plaudit.²¹⁴

The London Corresponding Society was not alone in fighting the Two Acts; according to the Annual Register:

Meetings and consultations, both private and public were held everywhere...Never had there appeared, in the memory of the oldest man, so firm and decided a plurality of adversaries to the ministerial measures.²¹⁵

In Parliament, the Opposition, especially Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the gifted playwright and orator, fiercely debated the Two Acts for over a month, trying to prevent this new reign of terror. Sheridan attacked the

²¹³New Annual Register 1796, op. cit., "Principal Occurrences," p. 65.

²¹⁴Joseph Farington, The Farington Diary, (James Greig, editor) New York: George Doran Co. 1923. Vol. I, p. 119. Farington gives a private glimpse of a LCS mass meeting; how it looked to an outsider. His description of the personal appearances and speaking ability of the LCS leaders is quite interesting. Surprisingly, John Thelwall is held in low estimation.

²¹⁵Annual Register 1796, op. cit., "History of Europe," p. 39.

Treasonable and Seditious Practices bill, declaring that "he could not credit /the bill/ to be the production of a sane man; but much less of any man who dare to impute improper motives to the meeting at Copenhagen House."²¹⁶ In the House of Lords, Lord Thurlow, an advocate of reform, pointed out the severity of the Seditious Meetings bill, observing that:

By the present bill, if an assembly met for the mere discussion of public topics, continued peaceably to the number of twelve or more for one hour after the proclamation was made, commanding them to disperse, they were guilty of a felony, and the magistrate was ordered to put them to death...without benefit of clergy.²¹⁷

In support of the Opposition's efforts, ninety-four petitions bearing 131,284 signatures (including a petition from the LCS with over 12,000 signatures) were presented in opposition to the Two Acts, while only sixty-five petitions, bearing 29,922 names, were presented in support. Despite the formidable coalition of the London Corresponding Society, the English radical reform movement, the large industrial towns, the Parliamentary Opposition and a large segment of popular opinion in array against the Two Acts, the Government remained determined.²¹⁸ The Seditious Meetings Act was passed on 3 December 1795 by a vote of 266 to 51 and seven days later, the Government completed its rout of the radical reform movement by steam-rolling through the Treasonable and Seditious Practices Act by a vote of

²¹⁶Sheridan, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 524.

²¹⁷New Annual Register 1796, op. cit., "British and Foreign History," pp. 52-53.

²¹⁸Charles Cone, The English Jacobins, New York: C. Scribner's. 1968. p. 220. Opposition was especially strong against the Two Acts in Birmingham, its petition contained over 8000 signatures.

226 to 45.²¹⁹ These acts were signed into law on 18 December 1795, by the King, marking the beginning of the 'reign of the beast.' The Two Acts were destined to bring about the demise of the London Corresponding Society.²²⁰

²¹⁹Parl. History, op. cit., Vol. XXXII, p. 470.

²²⁰Francis Place differs with many accounts on the popularity of the Two Acts. In a letter to Thomas Harrison on 15 February 1842, Place writes:

Infamous as these laws were, they were popular measures. The people, ay, the mass of the shopkeepers and working people... approved them without understanding them. Such was the terror of the French regicides and democrats, such the fear that 'the throne and altar' would be destroyed, and that we should be 'deprived of our holy religion.'

Cited from Graham Wallas, Life of Francis Place, London: G. Allen & Unwin. 1918. p. 25.

It also must be stated the London Corresponding Society had reached the peak of its power at the time of its large protest meetings and agitation against the Two Acts in the late autumn of 1795 with over 10,000 members (an estimated 2000 were active) in 70 divisions besides drawing hundreds of thousands to its mass meetings.

CHAPTER VII

DECLINE AND SUPPRESSION

After the oppressive Two Acts passed into law, the London Corresponding Society was forced to reorganize both its constitution and meetings to avoid prosecution. In December 1795, the Society was divided into four districts, no one of which was to have more than 45 divisions. There were to be district committees, but only one delegate from each division could attend. The four district committees were to elect members to a General Committee, there being one member for every five divisions. Under this constitution, the district committees possessed no other function than to elect the General Committee; accordingly many members ceased to attend their meetings. The overall result of the reorganization and the consequent poor attendance at district meetings was that "many divisions got reports from other delegates or remained in ignorance of what was going on, these things could not fail to produce dissertations /sic/ and to drive away some of the best members."²²¹ Deputations were sent out by the General Committee to revive the shrinking number of divisions. Francis Place recalled, "I remember having to attend in this way as many as three divisions on one evening, having to harangue each of them on their neglect and to urge them to a state of greater activity."²²²

²²¹Place, op. cit., p. 148.

²²²Ibid., p. 148.

Besides the mass confusion caused by the London Corresponding Society's reorganization, many new petty rules were introduced as elaborate precautions against government spies or ideological undesirables. Order was to be strictly maintained and even applause was to be expressed only by raising the hand. Members were warned:

Persons attempting to trespass on order, under the pretence of showing zeal, courage, or any other motive, are to be suspected. A noisy disposition is seldom a sign of courage, and extreme zeal is a cloak of treachery.²²³

To emphasize this point there was inscribed over the LCS president's chair the motto, "Beware of Orators." All of this strictness, pettiness and stifling of free expression tended to disgust even the most enthusiastic members of the London Corresponding Society, and membership fell down to about a thousand active members by February 1796.²²⁴

The Two Acts had the same effect on the provincial reform societies. According to Place:

The consequences were the same all over the country, the reformers were disappointed in their expectation that no reform was obtained, some thought it dangerous others thought it was useless to meet again and the whole matter fell rapidly to decay.²²⁵

The London Corresponding Society tackled the problem of declining nationwide interest and membership in the same way that it fought its own extinction: by sending out deputations on missionary tours to drum up popular support. As early as the Copenhagen House Fields meeting of 26 October 1795,

²²³See State Trials, Vol XXIV, pp. 575-583 for the constitutional changes and other measures taken by the LCS as a result of the Two Acts.

²²⁴Williams, op. cit., p. 102.

²²⁵Place, op. cit., p. 149.

the LCS had resolved to send political emissaries out into the country to coordinate and unite national reform efforts.²²⁶ In February 1796, in wake of the new oppression made possible by the Two Acts, the LCS decided to send John Gale Jones and John Binns on tour to encourage the formation of new popular societies and to advise reformers of the best means of operating in conformity with the Two Acts. Jones travelled to Kent with the instructions to "state precisely" that the sole object of the Society was "a reform in the Commons House of Parliament." He was further instructed to be:

the example of sobriety, both of conversation and manners....
/You are/ to invite the society to guard against all persons
who would introduce violent propositions or any illegal measures....
You are...to call upon our fellow citizens to be ready to pursue
our common object, if it must be to the scaffold or rather to
the field, at the hazard of extermination; convinced that no
temper less decided than this will suffice to regain liberty
from a bold and usurping faction.²²⁷

Jones' tour circuit included Rochester, Chatham, Gravesend and Maidstone. His tour was completely successful as a political propaganda mission, though somewhat of a failure financially in that the London Corresponding Society's hopes for monetary contributions was not realized. John Binns was sent to Portsmouth on a similar mission in February 1796, but was recalled by the LCS upon the discovery that he was being watched by the Government.²²⁸

In early March 1796, Jones and Binns were sent together to Birmingham to continue their missionary tour. After they had addressed several

²²⁶Account of...a Meeting...near Copenhagen House, op. cit., p. 14.

²²⁷Parl. History, op. cit., Vol. XXXIV, pp. 632-635.

²²⁸Veitch, op. cit., pp. 329-330.

meetings, they were apprehended on Government warrants and sent to jail. On 18 March 1796, the London Corresponding Society sent Place to Birmingham to extricate the pair from their difficulty. By raising the necessary bail funds, Place was able to free the deputies from custody, but Jones and Binns were charged with using seditious expressions, and their trials took place a year later. On 9 April 1797, John Gale Jones was found guilty, though strangely enough no sentence was passed on him; John Binns was acquitted on 15 August 1797, some seventeen months after his arrest.²²⁹ Francis Place speculated that:

Had the Government brought them to trial at once, there is no doubt both would have been convicted, but by delaying it till the next year they missed their point.²³⁰

The missionary tour to propagandize the nation proved, on the whole, to be a failure. Summing up the tour, Place stated that:

the plan to establish stronger communication with other parts of the country would have been prudent if the society had been large and growing, but was useless in the changed conditions. It happened however that we cajoled ourselves and each other with delusive expectations which proves us to have been very silly people.²³¹

²²⁹See State Trials, op. cit., Vol. XXVI, pp. 595-652 for the trial of John Binns.

²³⁰Place, op. cit., p. 150. See also Veitch, op. cit., p. 330 for extract of the LCS letter thanking John Binns' jurors.

²³¹Place, op. cit., p. 149. In fact, the only reason why Francis Place and John Ashley stayed in the LCS until early 1797 was to raise funds for Binns and Jones' defense since they felt partly responsible for the ill-fated missionary trip. See p. 154. Besides the Place faction's efforts, John Thelwall went on a lecture tour through East Anglia, the Midlands and the North of England, trying to raise funds for Jones and Binns. Everywhere he spoke, he seemed to cause riots and he suffered much physical abuse. At Yarmouth, 90 sailors attacked with cutlasses a crowd of artisans listening to Thelwall. Eventually he broke down from the strain and retired to Llys-Wen, Wales, in July 1797. What seemed especially disheartening, was that much of the money Thelwall raised, was not used to pay trial expenses but to keep the London Corresponding Society's magazine afloat. See Williams, p. 105.

Among other problems faced by the London Corresponding Society were its growing debts, caused chiefly by expenses related to Binns and Jones' trials, and its declining membership down to only 500 members by June 1796. In an effort to increase its appeal, in July the London Corresponding Society decided to publish a magazine called The Moral and Political Magazine of the London Corresponding Society. Place, among others, fiercely opposed the project, on the grounds that whatever the literary merit of the magazine, publication would only increase the Society's debt. The Place faction proved to be right; by the end of 1796, the debts of the LCS had consumed all of the weekly dues, in addition to £170 contributed for the defense of Binns and Jones, leaving a total deficit of £185 for the last two quarters of the year. The dispute over the magazine grew so heated that Place resigned all of his offices on the Executive Committee and became only a delegate from his division.²³²

The issues of the magazine and monetary policies were not the only causes of friction among the London Corresponding Society members during the summer and autumn of 1796. Along with Place, many members, particularly Ashley, the Secretary, and Colonel Despard, an Irish soldier, felt that the movement was falling under the influence of a sinister character, the wealthy money lender John "Jew" King. For some time, King had been making friends with various important reformers, especially the leaders of the London Corresponding Society. King bought his shoes from Hardy and Ashley, his hats from Richard Hodgson, his clothes from Place, and many other LCS members were patronized in the same manner. "Jew" King came to their shops frequently and discussed politics while often inviting them to sumptuous dinners in his great house on Manchester Square. What alarmed

²³²Place, op. cit., p. 151.

many of Place's friends was King's double talk regarding the imminent threat of a French invasion. He urged many reformers to arm themselves to help the Government repel a possible invasion, but others, especially many LCS members, he urged the purchase of weapons for possible use in case the invasion succeeded. Place felt that "Jew" King, by having a number of armed men under his control, would wield a position of power and influence by which he might possibly try to seize control of the Government during a French invasion. There was also the possibility that King was a Government spy, who sought through his loose talk to slip the fatal noose around the neck of the London Corresponding Society by associating it with a French invasion. Many LCS members, particularly Richard Hodgson, felt that "Jew" King was sincere and sought only to aid the Society. The differences of opinion led to fierce dispute between Hodgson, Place and their friends, in which much bad feeling resulted.²³³

The London Corresponding Society membership declined to only 200 members in the early months of 1797, and it was still deeply mired in debt, when the Place-Ashley faction proposed a number of reforms, designed to revitalize the movement. It was suggested that:

- I. That no money beyond mere current expenses should on any account be expended until all debts were paid.
- II. That every member should be requested to increase his subscription and that as many as could be induced to collect money from others, should be officially authorized to do so.²³⁴

²³³Ibid., pp. 236-237. It seems that John King's nickname ("Jew") was derived from his swarthy appearance and from his occupation as a money-lender.

²³⁴Place, op. cit., p. 153.

These propositions were to be facilitated by ceasing publication of the LCS magazine, which was a losing concern, and by increasing the weekly dues from one penny to a shilling. Place maintained that the Society's huge debt drove away many members and prevented others from joining; he believed that if reforms were adopted, the LCS would again flourish. The majority of the Society rejected out of hand the Place faction's reforms and decided instead to hold another mass meeting, in defiance of the law, as the best means of attracting new members and raising the necessary funds to pay off the Society's debts. The decision for an illegal mass meeting completely alienated the moderate faction led by Place and Ashley. The moderates had always opposed public meetings and favored gradual reform through political education; the rejection of their position led Place and Ashley to resign from the General Committee of Delegates in March 1797. After finishing the fund raising for the trials of Binns and Jones, they dropped out of the London Corresponding Society completely in June 1797, a severe blow to the Society's strength.²³⁵

In April and May 1797, the "Great Mutiny" of the British Navy broke out. The Government fostered much suspicion that the London Corresponding Society was responsible for these out-breaks, to which the Society gave plausibility by sending its missionaries, Binns and Jones, to such naval towns as Portsmouth and Chatham to speak. As Thomas Grenville, a friend of Fox in Parliament, wrote, "I cannot help fearing the evil is deeply rooted in the influence of Jacobin emissaries and the Corresponding Society."²³⁶ The Duke of Portland, the Home Office Secretary, ordered Magistrate Aaron

²³⁵Ibid., pp. 153-154.

²³⁶James Dugan, The Great Mutiny, New York: Signet. 1967. p. 149.

Graham to Sheerness to investigate the collusion charge, stating that "the government is well informed that some members of the London Corresponding Society, particularly /Alexander/ Galloway and /Anthony/ Beck have had intercourse with the mutineers at the Nore."²³⁷ In his final report, issued on 24 June 1797, Graham completely exonerated the London Corresponding Society, declaring that:

we have unremittingly endeavoured to trace if there was any Connexion or correspondence carried on between the Mutineers and any private person, or any society, on shore, and...we think we may with the greatest safety pronounce that no such connexion or correspondence ever did exist.²³⁸

Being cleared of the charge of helping foment the "Great Mutiny," on 14 July 1797, the London Corresponding Society advertised that the long awaited public mass meeting would be held at St. Pancras Church Fields on 31 July. Publishing this early notice in the newspapers proved to be unwise. It gave the magistrates plenty of time to organize the force of 2000 constables to be present at the meeting, and an additional 6000-8000 troops near at hand. Despite public warnings against the meeting and the appearance of several military units, thousands of people swarmed to St. Pancras Fields to hear the Society's message of reform. Sir William Addington, a magistrate, marshalled 2000 constables around the main rostrum, informed the LCS speakers that the meeting had been illegally convoked, and declared his intention of reading the Riot Act. Alexander Galloway asked Addington to point out why the meeting was illegal. Instead of answering,

²³⁷ Ibid., p. 319.

²³⁸ Letter of Aaron Graham to the Duke of Portland, 24 June 1797. Cited in Veitch, op. cit., p. 331.

Addington proceeded to read the Riot Act, wherefore Galloway proceeded on with the business of the meeting. As the remonstrance and petition to the King was being read, Sir William Addington proclaimed the Riot Act had been read, but the vast multitude cried out, "We didn't hear it!" Addington, turned to the audience, and pronounced:

Then my fellow citizens, we are bound to disperse in peace within an hour, I conjure you to depart, and believe that it will be shortly be seen, whether Bow-street magistrates are to be the interpreters of the laws of England.²³⁹

Upon hearing this, the crowds began to retire from the grounds while Addington ordered the arrest of the London Corresponding Society leaders on the speaking rostrums. The military was ordered into the field and galloped about for over an hour, driving out the crowds. Among the LCS leaders taken into custody were Richard Hodgson, Robert Fergusson, Thomas Tuckey,²⁴⁰ Alexander Galloway, Richard Barrow and Benjamin Binns, the brother of John Binns. After they were admitted to bail and released, they were drawn in their coaches in triumph through the streets of London by the cheering populace.²⁴¹ Even so, according to Francis Place:

After this meeting the Society declined rapidly and by the end of the year was in a very low state....What now remained of the society was its refuse, with the exception of Galloway, Hodgson,

²³⁹New Annual Register 1797, op. cit., "Principal Occurrences under July 31st" pp. 120-121.

²⁴⁰Place lists his name as Stuckey.

²⁴¹See the New Annual Register 1797, pp. 120-121; Dugan, op. cit., pp. 378-380 and Place, op. cit., pp. 154-155 for the best accounts of the St. Pancras Church Fields meeting. The arrested LCS leaders, surprisingly, due to some legal technicality never did have to stand trial.

Le Maitre and a few others who from what they consider conscientious motives still adhered to it.²⁴²

Taking the places of Place and Ashley in the leadership of the London Corresponding Society were men of radical fringe views and generally poor judgement. John Bone, the new Secretary who once seceded from the LCS over a spying dispute, was a religious fanatic and a poor leader of men. He was succeeded, after a brief tenure, by Thomas Evans, described by Place as "ignorant, conceited and remarkably obstinate....a strange creature with very contemptible reasoning powers, a sort of absurd fanatic, continually acting on impulses and capable of the undertaking of any folly." Presiding over the London Corresponding Society in its last days were Benjamin Binns, "a man of much meaner understanding than his brother /John/," and Thomas Crossfield, characterized as a "man of learning and talents, both miserably misplaced;" he was, as his tombstone in Hendon Church Yard describes him, "a drunken harum-scarum fellow." With such men leading the Society, it would not take long before it disintegrated.²⁴³ Thus the Anti-Jacobin, a pro-Government newspaper founded in late 1797, in judging the remnants of the LCS, was not too far off in its appraisals of French and English Jacobins:

There is a striking difference between the French Jacobin and the mischievous variety...in this Country. The French Jacobin... keeps in view the aggrandizement of France and the depression of every other Kingdom. The nature and habits of the English Jacobin are totally opposite. He appears to have a rooted antipathy to his Native Land; but to the despotic Anarchy of France his love is ardent and sincere, and his exertions in favour of that despotic Anarchy are boundless and unceasing.²⁴⁴

²⁴²Place, op. cit., p. 155.

²⁴³Ibid., pp. 151-152 & p. 177.

²⁴⁴The Anti-Jacobin, 19 December 1797, p. 47.

Proof of the impulsiveness, delusions and folly of the last group of LCS leaders was their fatal association with the United Irishmen, whose acknowledged aim was to set up a republic in their country with French aid. In January 1798, the Rev. James O'Coigley (Quigley), a Catholic priest and member of the United Irishmen, came to London on business, though in reality he was on his way to France on a secret mission for his society, whose delegate to the French Directory he was. Place characterized O'Coigley as a "tall, stout, good looking man of remarkably mild manners, kind and benevolent, he was supposed to be a man of property and there was therefore nothing remarkable in his being in London."²⁴⁵ While in London, O'Coigley met many members of the London Corresponding Society and some of the more impulsive leaders were profoundly impressed with the organization, militancy and activities of the United Irishmen. Under the influence of O'Coigley, John Bone, John Binns, Benjamin Binns, Thomas Evans, Arthur O'Connor and Colonel Despard organized the United Englishmen in direct imitation of the United Irishmen and set out collecting adherents and preparing manifestoes.²⁴⁶ There are two conflicting views regarding the nature and strength of the United Englishmen. John Tunbridge, an informer who gave the Government much of its information regarding the United Englishmen, said they intended to rise in revolt at the same time as an insurrection took place in Ireland, so as to keep back Government troops.²⁴⁷ The Government claimed, in its Report of Secrecy of 1799, that forty divisions of United Englishmen were

²⁴⁵Place, op. cit., p.177.

²⁴⁶Veitch, op. cit., p. 338.

²⁴⁷Birley, op. cit., p. 34.

formed in London and "most of the societies throughout England, which had used to correspond with the London Corresponding Society, had...adopted the same plan of forming societies of United Englishmen."²⁴⁸ Francis Place claimed the United Englishmen were a weak, harmless group and wrote in derision, that "the formidable and terrible society of the United Englishmen could not have exceeded ten including Powell /a spy/."²⁴⁹

Nevertheless, since many of the organizers of the United Englishmen were also leaders in the London Corresponding Society, the accounts of these two groups are intertwined and entangled until the final demise of both. Even the Government could not distinguish between the two. Though the London Corresponding Society certainly had many members who had no truck with the United Englishmen, the confusion between the two societies must be partly blamed on the LCS. On 30 January 1798, the London Corresponding Society issued an Address to the United Irishmen, declaring that "If to Unite in the Cause of Reform upon the Broadest Basis be Treason....We, with you, are Traitors."²⁵⁰ This statement was made while an Irish rebellion was in the making. On 2 March 1798, the Rev. O'Coigley was arrested, along with John Binns and Arthur O'Connor, and held, according to the Annual Register:

on suspicion of holding a treasonable correspondence with the French government, and of having an intention to obtain passage from Margate to the nearest port in France....a paper was found purporting to be an Address from a Secret Committee in Ireland

²⁴⁸Parl. History, op. cit., "Committee of Secrecy Report of 1799" Vol. XXXIV, p. 600.

²⁴⁹Place, op. cit., p. 180.

²⁵⁰Parl. History, op. cit., Vol. XXXIV, pp. 642-645.

to the Executive Directory of France.²⁵¹

O'Coigley was tried for high treason and was hung in June 1798 in Maidstone jail. Arthur O'Connor and John Binns were acquitted; Binns claimed he was not fleeing England but only arranging transport for O'Coigley.²⁵²

The conspiracies of the United Irishmen and their English counterparts, along with the evidence seized from O'Coigley, seemed to produce in the Government a fear of a new French invasion. Accordingly, Lord Henry Dundas, the Secretary of State for War, introduced a Defense Bill on 27 March 1798. Dundas stated that:

the object of the bill, is to have the power of knowing in case of emergency, who are ready to appear in arms in order to cooperate with the existing power of the country, and to enable them who were so inclined to be put into that situation which may be most answerable to their inclination.²⁵³

The bill, acted upon immediately, enabled the Government to encourage the "general arming.../that was/...going on," by which "people in all ranks, all over the country, were offering their services to the Government."²⁵⁴

On 5 April 1798 upon a recommendation of two divisions, the London Corresponding Society discussed the propriety of arming itself in preparation for a French invasion, which they would oppose, being for the most part loyal Englishmen. Many objections were made to the proposal and it was tabled

²⁵¹Annual Register 1798, op. cit., "Chronicle under March 2cd."

²⁵²See State Trials, op. cit., Vol. XXVIII, pp. 141-254 for the trial of O'Coigley.

²⁵³Parl. History, op. cit., Vol. XXXIII, p. 1357.

²⁵⁴Place, op. cit., p. 176.

until the 12 April meeting, when no decision was made. On 19 April 1798, the General Committee of Delegates decided that there was no real threat of a French invasion; it was believed to be only a scare tactic used by the Government to control its internal opponents. Therefore there was no need to arm the LCS membership or to offer their services to the Government. If there were really an invasion, the delegates recommended that the LCS members should join their local neighborhood defense corps. Just after this resolution was passed, the Bow-street constables broke in, arrested all the members present and seized all of the books and papers in the committee room, an action which reflected the Government's paranoia about the supposed arms and secret conspiracies of the radicals. Prior to the arrest of the London Corresponding Society leadership, the United Englishmen were rounded up, being surprised at a secret meeting place in the cellar of Furnivall's Inn.²⁵⁵

Though Francis Place and many of his friends had already left the London Corresponding Society, they continued to dissuade their old comrades from embarking on the schemes of the United Englishmen. Since they were unsuccessful, it was agreed by Place and his friends to end the United Englishmen's activities, since this group was tainting the good names of the London Corresponding Society and the Reform Movement as a whole. According to Place:

I was for doing this by sending for Evans, B. Binns, and a foolish fellow...James Powell, and frankly telling them we would take means to stop their proceedings by communicating to Mr. Ford, the Magistrate at the Treasury, who and what they were and what they intended, so that unless they at once desisted, they should be prevented from involving others in mischief and

²⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 176-177

disgrace, and bringing punishment upon them.²⁵⁶

Unfortunately, Place's threat was not carried out, and the Government went ahead and seized plotting United Englishmen and innocent London Corresponding Society leaders alike, meting out the same punishment to both regardless of their actions. In all, twenty-eight persons were arrested; the most prominent LCS members were Thomas Evans, Colonel Despard, John Bone, Benjamin Binns, Paul Le Maitre, Richard Hodgson and Alexander Galloway.²⁵⁷ Instead of trying the prisoners, the Government suspended the Habeas Corpus Act again, thus keeping the prisoners in jail without charges for three long years (1798-1801). According to Place:

This stroke extinguished the Society, which never made any attempt to meet again, not even in any division, the members dispersed and wholly abandoned their delegates.²⁵⁸

On 12 July 1799, over a year after the inglorious end to its leadership, the Society was officially banned by the Government by means of an Act for the more effectual Suppression of Societies established for Treasonable Purposes; and for better preventing Treasonable and Seditious Practices, which specifically and legally "suppressed...the London Corresponding Society."²⁵⁹

²⁵⁶Graham Wallas, The Life of Francis Place, London: G. Allen and Unwin. 1918. p. 27.

²⁵⁷Place, op. cit., pp. 180-181.

²⁵⁸Ibid., p. 177.

²⁵⁹39 George III, ca. 79.

CHAPTER VIII

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

A final analysis of the London Corresponding Society must consider the Society's effect upon its members' later lives; its influence on the English Constitution; and its relationship to subsequent reform movements, culminating in the Reform Bill of 1832.

The effects of the London Corresponding Society upon its members was aptly described by Francis Place, who wrote that, "I never heard of any one man who was ever made worse in consequence of his having been a member of the society."²⁶⁰ This judgement seems well borne out, in view of the later lives of the Corresponding Society's leaders. Many of them were to advance from their lower class origins to become men of great wealth, intellectual status, social prominence, and influence. John Binns, for example, immigrated to America in 1803, settled in Philadelphia and founded the Democratic Press, which became the most widely read newspaper in Pennsylvania. He was involved in American politics and served as a Philadelphia Alderman for 46 years, being a strong opponent of Andrew Jackson. Binns was credited for re-naming Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party as the Democratic Party.²⁶¹ One of the London Corresponding Society's greatest luminaries, Francis Place, made

²⁶⁰Place, op. cit., p. 200. The possible exceptions to this statement were the fates of Gerrald and Margarot, the victims of the Scottish Trials. Gerrald died shortly after arriving at Botany Bay while Margarot survived his long exile in Australia and returned to England, only to soon die (1814) in abject poverty.

²⁶¹Dugan, op. cit., p. 458.

a modest fortune in his tailoring business, retired early in 1822 and entered Parliament. In 1824, Place and Joseph Hume, a philosophic radical, headed a Select Committee which influenced Parliament to repeal the Combination Acts of 1800, which suppressed trade unionism. Place, aided by John Thelwall, founded the National Political Union among the London artisans in 1828, branches of which spread to most major English cities. The National Political Union became the most influential national society pressing for Parliamentary reform, culminating in the Reform Bill of 1832. In the Reform Bill struggle, Place was responsible for issuing the economic threat which caused the Duke of Wellington to resign as Prime Minister, therefore paving the way for the Reform Bill's passage.²⁶² He further had a hand in founding the Chartist movement, when in August 1838 the London Working Men's Association, in consultation with Place and several Radical MP's, drew up the basic document called the Charter, detailing workers' rights.²⁶³ John Thelwall, established a clinic to cure speech impediments; he had so much success with incurables that he became quite wealthy. He used this wealth to establish his own radical newspaper The Champion and to further the cause of Parliamentary reform.²⁶⁴ Other LCS leaders such as Alexander Galloway, who became the largest engineering employer in London, and John Gale Jones, the nationally known radical agitator, continued to speak and

²⁶²Place's role in causing the public to make a "run on the banks" to withdraw their gold to bring down the Government will be discussed later in the chapter.

²⁶³Asa Briggs, The Making of Modern England, New York: Harper and Row. 1965. p. 252 and p. 304.

²⁶⁴E. Tangye Lean, The Napoleonists, London: Oxford Univ. Press. 1970. p. 255.

campaign for Parliamentary reform.²⁶⁵

Though there were many more success stories among the later lives of the London Corresponding Society leaders, the Society's effect on its average, obscure members is harder to ascertain. A general description of the later condition of the ordinary London Corresponding Society membership was given by Francis Place, in a description of the anniversary celebration of the acquittal of Thomas Hardy, held at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in London on 5 November 1822:

at the dinner about two hundred persons were present...I was recognized by no less than twenty four persons who had been delegates...and members of the General Committee...when I was chairman. I had not seen more than one or two of them for upwards of twenty years...of these twenty four men, twenty at least were Journeymen or shopmen...when they were delegates...they were now all in business all flourishing men. Some of them were rich.... That so many persons from among the delegates alone should be still alive, in good health and circumstances...is very extraordinary....But if twenty four such men were found in one room at one time, how many more such men must there be in the whole country.²⁶⁶

The best explanation why the London Corresponding Society had such a positive, uplifting influence on its members' later careers is also discussed by Francis Place, who felt that:

The moral effects of the Society were considerable. It induced men to read books, instead of wasting time in public houses, it taught them to respect themselves, and to desire to educate their children. It elevated them in their own opinions....The discussions in the divisions, in the sunday evenings readings, and in the small debating meetings, opened to them views which they had never before taken. They were compelled by these discussions to find reasons for their opinions and to tolerate others. It gave a new stimulus to a great number of men who had been...

²⁶⁵Dugan, op. cit., p. 458.

²⁶⁶Place, op. cit., p. 199.

incapable of any but the grossest pursuits and seeking nothing beyond mere sensual enjoyments. It elevated them in society.²⁶⁷

In final analysis, Place firmly believed the London Corresponding Society did more than improve its members; it was, Place held, largely responsible for improvement of the lot of the English lower classes as a whole. He wrote, "I may I am sure safely affirm that the London Corresponding Society was a great moral cause of the improvement which has since taken place among the People."²⁶⁸

Related to the London Corresponding Society's effects on society was its effect on the English Constitution. As previously described, the Scottish Trials and the State Trials of 1794 made the London Corresponding Society feel the brunt of the negative aspects of English law. The Scottish Trials, in a sense, did not really reflect any questionable points of the law itself, for the jury was packed with Government placemen and the verdict was determined before the trials ever began. The State Trials of 1794, began on a different note. Though the Government secured the suspension of Habeas Corpus and held twelve prisoners for six long months without specific charges, it proceeded to operate within constitutional means by allowing the jury to be selected freely, while hoping the body would be swept away by the popular hysteria against Jacobinism to convict the radical reformers of High Treason. This proved to be a fatal mistake for the Government could not prove that any overt act of treason was committed. The Government, therefore, had to resort to the theory of Constructive Treason, which established that thought, speech, or writing could be construed as treason-

²⁶⁷Ibid., p. 198.

²⁶⁸Ibid., p.200.

able. This was rejected by the jury since it was an attempt to alter the existing law defining treason. It has been stated that the Government could have convicted almost all of the prisoners for sedition and sentenced them to long prison terms, since many of their statements were, by definition, rash, inflammable, libellous and unpatriotic, at least so far as popular feelings of England at the time were concerned. Instead the Ministry wanted to destroy the radical reform movement by executing its leaders, which could only be done through a conviction for High Treason. It was only through the Herculean efforts of the brilliant defense attorney, Thomas Erskine, that the London Corresponding Society and its radical allies:

re-inscribed upon the Constitution of England the obliterated principle, that Englishmen may freely speak and publish their opinions concerning the Government of their country without being guilty of treason--a principle, under whose protecting shield they now utter their complaints, their denunciations even, in the very ear of Majesty itself.²⁶⁹

This was to be the last victory for English civil liberties for over thirty years. The Two Acts of 1795 and a whole trail of acts of repression which followed, largely undid or overshadowed the results of the 1794 State Trials, but the legal truth established at the trials still remain a part of the English Constitution until the present day.

Many members of the London Corresponding Society, despite the Government's continual attacks upon civil liberties, never gave up the struggle for Parliamentary reform. Men like Alexander Galloway, John Gale Jones, Thomas Hardy, John Thelwall and especially Francis Place, provided a direct tie to the Reform Bill of 1832. During the long, lonely period of

²⁶⁹Henry B. Stanton, Sketches of Reforms and Reformers, New York: John Wiley. 1949. p. 40.

the Napoleonic Wars, these men, aided by other old reformers, such as Major John Cartwright and John Horne Tooke and by many new and younger men, such as William Cobbett and Joseph Hume, continued to seek reform.²⁷⁰ The death of William Pitt in 1806 and the end of the Wars in 1815 removed two major obstacles to the reformers; now they could proceed without the opposition of a great national leader or being tagged as Jacobins and English traitors. Public opinion by 1832 had swung heavily to the side of Parliamentary reform and a Reform Bill was passed in the House of Commons. Francis Place was one of the principle managers of the bill, which abolished 56 pocket boroughs, reduced other bogus constituencies to one member, and gave seats to cities and counties not previously represented at all in Parliament. It also gave the franchise to all male leaseholders and tenants. Passage of the Reform Bill having been stubbornly blocked by the Duke of Wellington, the Prime Minister, Francis Place initiated a national run on banks with the slogan, "To stop the Duke, go for gold." Wellington was forced to resign and was unable to form a new Government. Though Wellington again tried to stop the bill in the House of Lords, public furor grew so heated that he and over a hundred peers abstained from voting on the measure, allowing it to pass into law.²⁷¹

By 1832 the London Corresponding Society had been extinct for 35 years, but its principles of Parliamentary reform were not. The same principles were nurtured and kept alive by its old members, and when the idea

²⁷⁰See Briggs, op. cit., p. 252 for Place and Thelwall's role in founding the National Political Union, the leading reform society and major force behind the Reform Bill of 1832.

²⁷¹A good concise account of the Reform Bill of 1832 controversy may be found in Briggs, pp. 251-268.

came into its own, backed finally by the vast majority of the nation,
the dreams of the London Corresponding Society became a reality.

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APPENDIX A

ACCOUNT OF THE BIRTH OF THE LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY, TAKEN FROM AN INTRODUCTORY LETTER TO A FRIEND, BY THOMAS HARDY.²⁷²

The first meeting of the Society took place on the evening of the 25th January 1792, at the Sign of the Bell, Exeter Street, Strand. Eight persons signed the articles, then I gave each a ticket on which was written the name of the Society, with the number, 1, 2, 3, etc., and the member's name written on the back. The next thing these eight persons considered was to appoint from among themselves, some trusty servants to conduct the business of that friendly and well-meaning company. They appointed me treasurer and secretary. There they stumbled at the threshold. Two very important offices filled by one person. The amount of cash in the treasurer's hand the first meeting was eightpence. Although we were at first but few in number, and humble in situation, and circumstances, yet we wished to consider how to remedy the many defects, and abuses which had crept into the administration of our Government. And in prosecuting our inquiries we soon discovered, that gross ignorance, and prejudice in the bulk of the nation, was the greatest obstacle to the obtaining of redress. Therefore our honest aim was to have a well regulated, and orderly society formed, for the express purpose of dispelling that ignorance, and prejudice, as far as possible, and to instil into their minds in a legal and constitutional way by means of the press, sense of their rights as freemen, and of their duty to themselves and their posterity, as good citizens, and

²⁷²Birley, op. cit., Appendix III, p. 51. This letter was written in 1799 and read to the Company present at the Crown and Anchor Tavern, London, on 5 November 1824.

hereditary guardians of the liberties transmitted to them by their forefathers. On the Monday following which was the first of February there were eight more added to the number, and increased the funds of the Society to two shillings. The third meeting, nine more were added, which increased the number to twenty-five, and the sum in the treasury to four shillings and one penny. A mighty sum! They increased in numbers, in knowledge, and in information every week. And on the 2nd April 1792, the first Address and Resolutions were printed, in which these principles, and design were clearly stated to the public, and published in the newspapers. And new societies starting up in various parts of the country publishing Addresses and Resolutions declarative of their principles.

APPENDIX B

THE LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY'S DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES (MARCH 1793).²⁷³

1st. That all men are by nature free, equal and independent of each other.

2nd. That to enjoy all the advantages of civil society, individuals need not relinquish any more of their natural independence than is necessary to preserve the weak against the oppressions of the strong, and to enable the whole body to act with union and concert for the procuration of the general good and the resistance of common enemies.

3rd. That all Government, abstractedly considered, being in itself an evil and no farther to be approved in practice, than as it may tend to prevent other evils of a more serious nature, the experiment in every country ought to be, not how much the people will bear, but with how little

²⁷³Ibid., Appendix I, p. 49.

the grand object of general happiness can be secured.

4th. That all public burthens (whether of taxation or personal service) ought to be impartially levied upon the whole body of the people, according to the capability of the respective individuals; without the exclusive protection of particular privileges on the one hand, or the interference (as in the case of impressing sea-men and soldiers) exercised against a particular class, on the other.

5th That every additional burthen or assessment being an abridgement of the enjoyments of the people and inevitably producing of much calamity to a great majority; no such burthen or assessment ought to be laid for any purposes of ambition and aggrandizement (from which a few individuals can only receive any benefit); but for such objects of necessity along, as may tend to secure the peace, prosperity, and happiness of the whole.

6th. That the civil rights of any individual are:

- 1st. Equality of protection for his liberty, life, and property and the means of obtaining the redress of injuries.
- 2nd. Equality in the exercise and enjoyment of such bodily and mental faculties as nature may have conferred upon him.
- 3rd. Equality of encouragement for the exercise of his talents, and consequently the free enjoyment of the advantages obtained.
- 4th. Freedom to publish his opinion and to exercise his religious worship without molestation, restriction, or civil impediment.

5th. and lastly, the unrestrained exercise of his own private judgement in every action that does not trespass upon the equal rights of his fellow Citizens.

7th. That the best methods of securing these rights yet invented by the ingenuity of men appears to be:

1st. By giving an equality of voice to every member of the community who is of adult years and not incapacitated by crimes or insanity, in the choice of representatives delegated to make laws and watch over the public happiness and security; and

2nd. By rendering every officer and magistrate, entrusted with any power or authority, responsible to the great body of the people, for the faithful discharge of the trusts delegated for the public advantage.

The total departure from the principles of equality in the election of the legislative body, commonly called the Commons's House of Parliament, appears to this Society the chief cause why the people of Britain are deprived of the foregoing principles, and it is therefore that we have associated, and that we may better correct and strengthen each other's opinions on the subject of liberty, and eventually abash the tools of corrupt influence and lawless power: effects which are not to be expected from the vague and desultory exertions of individual opinions.