

Introduction

A New Era

In response to the French Revolution, a wave of enthusiasm for and optimism about social and political change swept Britain. The Dissenting minister Richard Price famously provoked Edmund Burke's ire in 1789 by preaching that, having shared in the benefits of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and seen two other revolutions (American and French) he could see 'the ardour for liberty catching and spreading, a general amendment beginning in human affairs, the dominion of kings, changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience.'¹ Other members of the middling and professional orders, especially those concentrated around the arts, literature and professions of London, also saw these events as heralding wider changes in the European order: from war to peace; from competition to harmonious and productive exchange; from force and fraud to a rational grounding of authority. Tom Paine felt sufficient confidence that the age of European wars was over that he designed a whole welfare system on the assumption that the taxation collected to fight wars could safely be repurposed to promote a better society.²

People brought to these expectations a legacy of enlightenment critiques of luxury and the waste and decadence of fashionable society, a scepticism about the legitimacy of monarchy, aristocracy and priest-craft and a set of aspirations for a more egalitarian and open world that would be based on talent and contribution. Above all, they wanted to think for themselves, to read about events and ideas, to discuss them with their associates and to be in the vanguard of change. And they acted: they met and talked; they established societies; they wrote tracts and texts; they

¹ Richard Price, 'A Discourse on the Love of our Country', in *Price, Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 194.

² Thomas Paine, 'Rights of Man: Part the Second' (1792), in Mark Philp (ed.), *Rights of Man, Common Sense, and other Political Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), chapter 4.

abjured aristocratic manners and excess; they cut their hair and changed their clothes; they preached and practiced the improbability of human capacities; and they sought to practice equality. Theirs was not a passive response to events overseas, but an active attempt to be involved with, to embody, and thereby to further the changes they saw as immanent in the world unfolding around them. With the benefit of hindsight, Wordsworth's description of their French compatriots captured their ambition and his anxiety about their hubris.

The inert
 Were roused, and lively natures rapt away!
 They who had fed their childhood upon dreams,
 The playfellows of fancy, who had made
 All powers of swiftness, subtilty, and strength
 Their ministers, – who in lordly wise had stirred
 Among the grandest objects of the sense,
 And dealt with whatsoever they found there
 As if they had within some lurking right
 To wield it; – they, too, who, of gentle mood,
 Had watched all gentle motions, and to these
 Had fitted their own thoughts, schemers more wild,
 And in the region of their peaceful selves; –
 Now was it that both found, the meek and lofty
 Did both find, helpers to their heart's desire,
 And stuff at hand, plastic as they could wish;
 Were called upon to exercise their skill,
 Not in Utopia, subterranean fields,
 Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!
 But in the very world, which is the world
 Of all of us, – the place where in the end
 We find our happiness, or not at all!³

This is a book about these members of the middling orders who championed reform, who believed in the importance of reason as a basis for equality and an authoritative guide for their own behaviour, and who challenged the conventions and practices of society. This includes Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Mary Hays, Thomas Holcroft, Elizabeth Inchbald, Amelia Alderson and many of their associates.⁴

³ Wordsworth, 'The Prelude' (1805) Bk X, l. 711–731. In Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth*, Oxford Authors series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 550.

⁴ Something needs to be said about the terminology of 'middle class' and the middling sort. There is evidence of the emergence of people engaged in a broad range of occupations and activities that involved little menial labour, that relied on some skills and some education and that generated an income that allowed people to maintain their families in a moderate style, with a developing range of entertainments, consumption patterns,

In the title, and in what follows, I emphasise ‘conduct’ because I am concerned less with what people said or wrote and more with how they conducted themselves. That is, with how they acted, what principles and aspirations they sought to embody, how they measured themselves in relation to those around them and how they read and responded to the conduct of others. Their conduct was for them a work in progress. They practised it through their relationships, in their writing and in their actions. Indeed, their lives were conducted through a range of activities or ‘practices’ – where that term denotes a combination of components that have an internal logic that delimits and enables agency and through that produces and reproduces the person’s world of experience. Their conduct and commitments have to be understood in relation to the shared practices, networks and discourses that operated in their circles and in the wider society. And we can appreciate the distinctive character of some of their more radical relationships only by locating their conduct within the set of more widely shared conventions and activities that they partly took for granted. At the same time, it is clear that those involved often underestimated the influence that these wider conventions exerted on their individual choices and commitments.

Most of those on whom I focus welcomed the French Revolution and supported the cause of parliamentary reform in Britain in the following decade. William Godwin plays a key role, in part because of the resource that his diary offers to historians,⁵ and in part because he epitomises

activities, etc. that they participated in and that partly emulated but were also often distinct from those of the aristocracy. Drawing objective boundaries for such a class is unlikely to be successful in this period, as would be searching for evidence of a strong subjective unitary identification as a class. There was a good deal of awareness of position, but it was on a complex, gradated ladder. As I argue in Chapter 8, we have to ask different questions about how particular groups and communities might come to have a sense of shared identity and commitments. With the people I examine here, I do not claim that middle class identity was what they fixed on, so much as that writers, professionals and those connected with arts and entertainment in London began to have a sense of themselves as something like a universal class – in the sense of it being in the vanguard of thinking and progress. They were not on the edge of precarity, nor working wholly at the behest of others, nor were they part of a wealthy and idle élite, and they came to see themselves as in some sense holding the balance and ensuring that society would be progressive – although these two impulses parted company in the 1790s under the pressure of political polarisation. Dror Wahrman makes a case for that emerging identity to be fundamentally about politics and ideas. If I disagree, it is because I think those are not ‘natural kinds’ and we are better looking at sets of shared and developing practices. But in either case – I want to argue that, seen from the inside of the group I am interested in exploring – there was a strong sense that in some respects their time had come. See Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain 1780–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁵ A digital edition which I edited with Victoria Myers and David O’Shaughnessy in 2012 with a grant from the Leverhulme Trust: *The Diary of William Godwin*, edited by

some of the distinctive features of this group of intellectuals of the middling and professional orders and their hopes and expectations. But, while some sections of the book are particularly devoted to Godwin and his immediate circles, my aim throughout is to draw on a wide range of primary resources so as to more fully understand the context for people's thinking and acting. I am also especially concerned to understand the ways in which women in these circles conducted themselves, the challenges and pitfalls they faced and the extent to which their actions were similar to or distinct from those of men and women of similar social status who did not share their political aspirations. More widely, I examine how the agency and understandings of this group fared as the world they inhabited faced the challenges of the developing war with France and the escalation of government repression. Dealing with often dramatic changes and sometimes traumatic experiences, how did people whose hopes and ideals were so positive cope with an increasingly dispiriting and oppressive reality? How did they explain these changes to themselves and how far did they adjust their actions to the more straitened circumstances in which they found themselves?

I have written previously about the political ideas of the period, about both loyalist and reform movements and about areas of literary activity, but this book tries to think more systematically about a range of practical and discursive tensions that emerged in the period between what these men and women aspired to and what they were able to achieve. It focuses in particular on the way that, for all their aspirations, their lives remained embedded in and profoundly shaped by often very conventional social expectations, practices and forms that often undermined or challenged their hopes and ambitions. There are ironies here, and in some cases tragedies, and many were not solely of their own making. But change brings challenges, and this book is an attempt to examine how the rhetoric and the ambitions for change, particularly in relation to inequality, were formulated and practised within a society of deeply engrained customs and conventions.

The multiple dimensions of people's lives and worlds, how they knitted together and with what degree of individual agency demands attention. There was for my subjects what we might think of as a 'Neurath's boat' problem.⁶ Otto Neurath drew an analogy between how we make

Victoria Myers, David O'Shaughnessy and Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford Digital Library, 2010), <http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>.

⁶ In his *Anti-Spengler* (München: Georg D. W. Callwey, Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1921): 'we are like sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom'.

critical progress in relation to knowledge and how we might repair a boat at sea. We can take up any given plank, scrutinise and replace it or repair it; but we cannot take them all up simultaneously without drowning. So too my subjects conducted themselves and lived their lives through sets of practices replete with assumptions and categories, principles of exchange and equivalence, and forms of engagement with a material world that invoked categories of salience and value, permanence and instability. Some of this they took largely for granted; some they were acutely aware of and critically reflective about. In any context, trying to focus on all the moving parts simultaneously produces disorientation and confusion. For my subjects, their enthusiasm for France, their sense that they were participating in a new age, their beliefs in the remediability of the present and their optimism about the changes they saw as prefigured in events around them were accompanied by much that they barely attended to or assumed to be natural, inevitable or a task for the future.⁷

The period 1789–1815 has been the focus of extensive scholarly work because of the drama of events, the belief that it represents a turning point in the development of popular politics, and the wealth of literary and cultural material relating to the politics of the period.⁸ This attention

⁷ One question I cannot deal with here concerns the complex relationships between the reforming literary culture of the 1790s and the advocates for ending the slave trade. My sense is that here too there was considerable inattention and unexamined assumptions both of their own superiority and of the eventual emancipation from nature for those in chains. But serious questions as to the capital's dependence on slavery, how deeply the trade ran through its commercial and intellectual veins and the way in this inflected the lives and attitudes of those so connected seem rarely to have been asked. Slaves were used as a poignant image – but their embodied reality and their contribution to the wealth of the country and to the racial distortion of its culture was rarely the subject of sustained reflection. In Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), edited by Eleanor Ty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), for example (as in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*), it is clear that our heroine's family is steeped in the trade. This raises questions for the modern reader about how far Emma's own disordered emotional world is in part an inflection of that deeper corruption and how far Mary Hays intended this or was relying on a commonplace understanding of the hazards of the trade. But these are not issues that the literary radicals dealt with directly for the most part – and if we look, for example, at women using the analogy between slavery and the position of women at the end of the eighteenth century, we do not find ourselves in contact with their most progressive thinking.

⁸ There is a voluminous literature, detailed extremely well in Boyd Hilton's text and the bibliographical essay in his *A Mad, Bad, & Dangerous People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), which should be accompanied by Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes, *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press/Past and Present, 2003), especially the essays by Burns and Innes. In relation to the rise of popular radicalism and the government response, see: John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793–1796* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic*

is coupled with a powerful sense that this quarter of a century represents a peak of enlightenment optimism alongside the dawn of romanticism with its recognition of more subterranean forces in the human and natural world. And in that combination it includes an acknowledgement of the impact on men and women in Britain of wider events: the traumas of war; the mixed horror and intoxication of the Revolutionary Terror in France; the re-ordering of Europe under Napoleon; the challenge to Britain's trade and colonial activity following the American Revolution and subsequently the Napoleonic blockade; and the growing movement against the slave trade on which so much British wealth rested. Professional and literary men and women and more generally people of the middling sort were trying to exercise agency and realise their hopes in a world that was rapidly changing, both promising much and at times seeming on the brink of disaster.

London

In the 1790s the population of London stood at about one million people. It was then the biggest city in the world. Heinrich Heine wrote to his friend Friedrich Merckel, while visiting London in April 1827, 'London has surpassed all my expectations in respect of its vastness; but

Movement in the Age of the French Revolution (London: Hutchinson, 1979); Jenny Graham, *The Nation, the Law and the King: Reform Politics in England, 1789–1799* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000); J. Ann Hone, *For the Cause of Truth: Radicalism in London 1796–1821* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); Mark Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution 1789–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963) and *Customs in Common* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1993). For print culture and the related literary world see: Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), *Writing against Revolution: Literary Conservatism in Britain, 1790–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Harriet Guest, *Unbounded Attachment: Sentiment and Politics in the Age of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and *Small Change: Women Learning, Patriotism, 1750–1810* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2000); Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) and *Print, Publicity, and Popular Radicalism in the 1790s: the Laurel of Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language 1791–1819* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). For war and its impact, see: John Cookson, *The British Armed Nation 1793–1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Jenny Uglow, *In These Times: Living in Britain through Napoleon's Wars, 1793–1815* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014). And for the wider cultural and social changes of the period, see: Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth Century England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006) and his *Imagining the Middle Class*.

I have lost myself – nicely capturing the spatial *and* personal disorientation produced by the sheer size, and, implicitly, the sense that one maintains one's orientation only in more constrained circles.⁹ The city grew significantly in the first half of the century, but it is still plausible to think that something of that experience would have been shared by visitors thirty years earlier. Despite this, there is a tendency to think of 1789–1815 as a period in which everyone knew everyone else (or at least, 'anyone who is anyone' would have done so). I previously thought something like this in relation to William Godwin, since his diary is such a cornucopia of reference for London between 1788 and 1836. Over time, however, I have become increasingly convinced that while he met a lot of people in his lifetime, we need to avoid overstating his and other people's connectedness and we need to reflect carefully on what this apparently dense sociability in fact meant to those involved. We should also not assume that his experience was a common one. Accordingly, I have tried to look much more closely at the bases on which people's core circles were formed and to assess the extent to which a relatively small group of associates played a dominant role in most people's sociability.¹⁰

The groups of reformers and literary radicals that I focus on are a particular slice of London's life. In exploring this world I also examine some of the assumptions often made about the period: that people were all equally in the know about scandals, fashions, literary disputes, and so on; that caricatures spoke to a wide general audience; that those in government understood a good deal about the nature or ambitions of the reform societies; and that the deliberative equality to which reformers aspired was widely reciprocated by those with whom they interacted in bookshops, at dinners or in meetings. To take one example, much of the extensive literature on the period sees the literary and political culture of London as a relatively unified domain, in which people knew each other and in which there was extensive engagement, often across gender boundaries and those of social class. In contrast, I argue that the worlds people inhabited may have been much more fractured and divided and that what held those worlds together might have varied considerably between men and women and between areas of cultural activity and profession. I suggest we might usefully think of a range of ways in which

⁹ Celina Fox, *London: World City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 12.

¹⁰ I have also been influenced (if not wholly persuaded) by the suggestion of the anthropologist Robin Dunbar that there might be an upper limit to the number of people we can know. R. I. M. Dunbar, 'Neocortex Size as a Constraint on Group Size in Primates', *Journal of Human Evolution* 22(6) (1992), 469–493.

people were known to each other: friendship, acquaintance and ties based on family and locality; and that we should reflect on the way that people's aspirations for certain types of exchange influenced the relationships they formed. To take one instance, it is clear that the egalitarian aspirations that fuelled many male relationships often raised substantially greater difficulties when people sought to extend them across gender boundaries.

The literary and political radicalism of the period was the culmination of decades of relative stability coupled with a growing optimism about the possibilities of progress and the development of knowledge. This did not equip people well to handle the pressures introduced by government repression and loyalist reaction during the long and exhausting war with France or to appreciate and develop responses to the stubborn resistances of their political and social worlds. Their eventual fragmentation under the pressures of repression involved some degree of failure to recognise the deep embeddedness of many of their contemporaries (and themselves) in an order and ways of seeing the world that undercut their aspirations. That most people fell back on older ways does not mean that things remained wholly unchanged – but their experience testifies to the fragility of their deliberative ambitions and conduct when these came into conflict with the conventional practices of the social world. This is not a story of radical hubris, nor it is one only of government repression, although there are elements of both. It offers instead an account of the complex world of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century London in which people developed aspirations for a different sort of future and sometimes experimented with approximations to that future, but found their pasts and their present encroaching in ways that further alienated the wider community they had hoped to take with them.

My concern here is to try and tell a more subtle and convincing story about how men and women of the middling orders, arts and professions of the 1790s and 1800s (predominantly in London, but drawing on other evidence where relevant) sought to live their lives and to assess the obstacles and opportunities they faced or could create and to set this analysis in the context of increasing government repression and intolerance towards unorthodox political views.

The Structure of the Book

The book is structured in three parts. The first two chapters explore people's understanding of 'politics' and the changes this undergoes in the first thirty years of the nineteenth century. This involves recognising that for most people politics was matter for discussion, but it was not thought

about as something in which they were practically involved. This was partly because it was largely seen as a matter of private deliberation. In the 1790s, as John Barrell has shown, the traditional distinction between public and private was increasingly encroached on by government.¹¹ Over time the lines were re-drawn and a new understanding of political activity emerged. As part of this discussion I also contrast the idea that many radicals held, that deliberation would produce convergence with their ongoing experience of disagreement. Using Godwin, I examine how that played out, especially in cases in which the disagreement seemed to him to involve the apostasy of and betrayal by his friends. And I consider other dimensions of his radical conduct that generated further conflicts, especially in relation to debt, but also in relation to his relationship to Wollstonecraft and the publication of his *Memoirs* ... of her.

The middle section of the book (Chapters 3–7) turns to questions of sociability, friendship and acquaintance, particularly with respect to gender. In such relationships people argued and debated and did so in the belief that it was through deliberation that knowledge would expand and the world would change. As such, sociability was both the medium for their practice and the essential vehicle for societal change. The models we have of this world of sociability are often based on elite sources. In contrast I explore relatively middle class and professional circles and do so partly quantitatively, looking especially at differences between male and female circles and practices. To do that I begin by examining the diaries of Marianne Ayrton and Elizabeth Soane, before moving to look at the evidence for the existence of a radical sociability among some of the leading female proponents of reform. I will argue that male social circles were largely driven by ideas of disinterested friendship; female circles much less so. That leads me to a discussion of the problems that arose from attempts to practice that egalitarian model across the gender divide. In the final parts of this section I examine the changing character of Godwin's deliberative practice in relation to women and especially in relation to Amelia Alderson, Mary Wollstonecraft and Sarah Elwes. Here too, the conventional practices he encountered consistently complicated his attempts to establish more egalitarian and intellectually productive relationships.

In the final section (Chapter 8), I turn to examine music, dance and song, areas of activities that the more literary radicals were often resistant to and critical of. These practices deserve attention for the ways in which they embedded their participants in a particular narrative of the world,

¹¹ See Barrell, *The Spirit of Despotism*, chapter 2.

which consistently undercut the more rationalist aspirations of the radicals. This area should also encourage us to recognise that many of the earlier components of discussion, including ideas of public and private, the place of loyalist intervention in communities and the conventions of male/female conduct, were implicated in and reproduced in part through these more emotional and bodily practices.

Tools, Methods and Materials

This book is a work of history that draws on historical and literary materials and on the methods and the ideas of the social sciences. In that spirit, it is a set of inquiries that uses a range of ideas and tools from the social sciences to examine this particular historical period and to raise a series of issues that are historical – what happened?, how did this work?, why did this change? and in what way? – and methodological – how could we assess this?, what does it mean when people use particular words in certain ways?, how are what people say and what they mean related to what they would do?, what resources might we need from other disciplines to think about issues that strike us as surprising or discomfiting in certain ways? and how far might our picture of this world be too directed by our own certainties about what makes sense and what doesn't?

In making my case I rely on a number of tools and ideas that it is useful to set out briefly here. The first concerns the concept of politics; the second concerns sociability and the nature of acquaintance and friendship; and the third explores forms of talk that are not deliberative, but serve other functions, and here I am principally interested in practices of talking *about* others.

In considering 'politics' we need to consider the difference between, on the one hand, the exact character and local understanding of what was or was not 'political' in this period and, on the other, whether there are not components of this 'domain' that are invariable in various ways. The latter view sees a certain structure to the field of politics, involving attempts to establish authority and legitimacy in a context of conflict. It does not presume that every society has politics; but it does see politics as a domain that exists in many societies to order conflict through the exercise of authority and power that requires a degree of legitimation. Furthermore, political disagreement operates in at least two different dimensions – the substance of the differences and their claims and questions about the norms, rules and practices by which that difference is to be contested, negotiated and settled. Under what we might call 'normal politics' the second dimension is largely taken for granted; in less settled times, it too becomes a focus for contention. In so far as it does,

government may begin to lose its grip on political authority and may resort increasingly to force and violence. In the period covered in this book, this latter dimension can be seen to be increasingly contested in and through conceptions of loyal opposition, patriotism, justified resistance, sedition and repression, with people developing and further challenging what was within and what was beyond the pale and for whom. It was also in evidence in the government resorting to increasingly blunt forms of repression that sought effectively to deny its accountability to a wider public and its responsibility to protect the liberty and interests of all its citizens. On the account I give, many radicals did not start the last decade of the eighteenth century thinking that they were participating in politics and many might have been uncertain as to how they might do that. Forty years later, I shall suggest, that situation had changed radically.

In the 1790s, however, people deliberated about both ideas and matters of substance: they discussed how they should think and argue and they sought to identify (often to stipulate) lines between public and private and political and non-political. They did this in company, as well as in print, in settings of domestic sociability as well as in public meetings or dinners for reform. Their conduct was shaped by the social settings in which these deliberations took place and by the reactions they encountered there. While the chapters separately discuss issues of language and disagreement from matters of sociability, I do want to emphasise that these are dimensions of the same worlds and, because it is not possible to say everything at once, I have focused on different elements in different parts.

My second area of concern is with sociability and involves networks and numbers. The mapping of people's networks has become widespread but I argue that it is worth doing some more qualitative thinking about the basis, structure and significance of social networks.¹² I explore how people's relationships actually operated, examining the tensions between theory and practice and assessing how far their deliberative ambitions were often undermined and challenged by the deep inequalities that existed in the period. This is especially salient for conduct in relations between the sexes where the use of both qualitative and quantitative sources for people's conduct helps map this complex terrain on which emotion, rationality and the conventions and norms in the wider

¹² See the critical review by Kate Davison, 'Early Modern Social Networks: Antecedents, Opportunities, and Challenges', *American Historical Review* 124(2) (April 2019), 456–482; and Joanna Innes, 'Networks in British History', *East Asian Journal of British History* 5 (2016), 51–72.

society collided. Many of these personal relationships had wider significance, especially for those who sought to promote or to question and challenge traditional conceptions of the social world and of sexual relationships, in which deep structured inequality was a potent denominator. This was a period of a slowly declining elite libertine culture, together with the bordellos and bagnios that served it, which saw the rise of a more moralistic and prudish culture in respect of sexual conduct. At the same time, there were members of the more middling and professional orders who engaged in a degree of sexual experimentation as a form of resistance to the more customary and restrictive norms of their social milieu. In the process of this experimentation, many discovered anew quite how powerful wider expectations of behaviour were and how difficult they were to challenge successfully.

One dimension of people's networks concerns whom they know; another concerns whom they know about. In our own time we know a lot about a lot of people whom we don't know – a common feature of celebrity culture. In this earlier period there was a degree of name recognition and some narrative about, for example, kings and queens, murderers and adulterers and performers and entertainers. These people had a public reputation, relayed in part through the press, prints and caricatures and through second-hand (or third or even less direct) information, whose circulation was a common feature of social interaction and more general public gossip.¹³ Something of this sort clearly existed to a degree in this period – perhaps especially around the Royal Family, politicians, military heroes and particularly egregious criminals or scandalous conduct. Nonetheless, we should not overstate the size and spread of this particular universe or the degree of familiarity that most people had with the details of the lives they in some sense felt they were cognizant of. It is especially important to reflect on exactly what kind of information actually achieved wide circulation. The reporting of particularly grotesque murders and trials was commonplace; but a lot of scandal circulated much less widely.¹⁴ This was partly because at least some newspapers were still in the business of being willing to sell their silence

¹³ One area for reflection concerns how far prints and caricatures were often representing people who were known in only relatively restricted circles. From our overwhelmingly visual world, it can be difficult to grasp how complex a process identification of the subjects of caricatures might be.

¹⁴ The coverage of the case of Lady Worsley is an interesting example of the restraint shown in the newspaper press – which would reach a wide audience (and may have had concerns about losing readers of a puritanical bent) – in comparison to the caricatures that circulated amongst the elite and the pamphlets, whose pricing would also have restricted their circulation. See Hallie Rubenhold, *Lady Worsley's Whim* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2008).

rather than print a story; but it was also because most scandals and indiscretions were practically salient for only a relatively small group of people. To take an élite example: Lady Bessborough was deeply distressed by a series of reports in the press about her and her sister Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, and the conduct of their friends – the reporting ‘sometimes cuts at a display of melancholy, but usually [gives] accounts of violent dissipation and gaiety’.¹⁵ More tellingly, the paragraphs being submitted to the paper were in a hand that Lady Bessborough thought she recognised. She managed to get Dr Foster not to print them in the *Morning Post* and they did not appear elsewhere. This suggests that this was a very internal affair, relevant to a restricted group of people (possibly with a degree of blackmail from the editor). The stories were embarrassing for their victims, because they were hurtful and shaming within their circles rather than because they were subjected to wide public perceptions of frivolity and misconduct.

Similarly, with respect to ‘public celebrity’, exactly what was known by whom about Sir William Hamilton, Emma Hamilton (and her past) and Lord Nelson is a complex question. In relation to Hamilton’s infatuation with Emma, there was much reluctance to acknowledge her among Hamilton’s own family and in court circles, in part because of Sir William’s formal position as Ambassador. Most newspaper stories were extremely discrete (by modern standards) and it is entirely possible that relatively few people had much sense of her past or of the character of the relationship that developed subsequently with Nelson. Certainly some knew, but they were primarily concerned after the trio’s return to Britain with the injury to Lady Nelson. Emma’s reception in London was widely spoken of in élite letters and there were some characteristically sharp prints drawn by Gillray and others, but there is little sense of a scandal very widely shared. The caricatures of Hamilton and the couple are best read as speaking to a restricted audience ‘in the know’.¹⁶ The trio’s tour round the country was very successful and does not seem to have raised problems for people in the provinces about how to respond to her – and

¹⁵ Lord Granville Leveson Gower (first earl Granville). *Private Correspondence, 1781 to 1821*, edited by Castalia, countess Granville (London: J. Murray, 1916), vol. ii, pp. 7–8.

¹⁶ See for example George Cruikshank’s *A Mansion House Treat – or Smoking Attitudes* (S. Fores, 1800, BMS 9550); Gillray’s *Dido in Despair* (H. Humphrey, 1801, BMS 9752) and *A Cognocenti contemplating the Beauties of ye Antique* (H. Humphrey, 1801, BMS 9753); and Thomas Rowlandson’s *Modern Antiques* (T. Tegg, 1811, BMS 11819). See Vic Gattrell, *City of Laughter, Sex and Satire in Eighteenth Century London* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006), pp. 318–322; and my ‘Politics and Memory: Nelson and Popular Song’ in my *Reforming Ideas in Britain*, pp. 322–359.

most people would simply not have faced the problem of how to receive her.

We also need to consider the exact nature of the ties that people had in their networks. For many people family remained an extremely important set of relationship; and families remained normative for the vast majority of young people. Certainly they sought to do so, especially with respect to their daughters and to their eldest sons through the control of their inheritance. Also, while many commercial and professional relationships look very like the transactional relationships that we associate with a free-market economy, if we scratch the surface of these we can often identify underlying structures of family connections and embeddedness in localities, suggesting that many such activities remained underpinned by strong ties.

By contrast, there were the kinds of relationships that Godwin sought to develop in his interaction with others. His diary demonstrates that he saw an immense number of people. At the same time, he had his own concerns about the superficiality of many social relationships (and in this he was deeply influenced by Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*). Moreover, his correspondence and his behaviour towards a number of key individuals make unequivocally clear that he was especially concerned with developing deep, deliberative relationships with particular others. These relationships rested wholly on the disinterested evaluation of the worth of the other involved and were based essentially on mutual esteem and the ongoing practise of intensive debate and discussion.

One way of clarifying some of these differences is to consider Mark Granovetter's distinction between strong and weak ties. 'Strong ties' involve relations of duration, emotional intensity, intimacy and reciprocal services. They are distinguished from 'weak ties', which are contingent, rely on balanced reciprocity (across the whole of a social network) and are superficial and transient.¹⁷ Granovetter's claim is that whereas strong ties serve to absorb information and rumour and tend to form silos, weak ties provide means by which information can flow freely across a large population. His account should encourage us to focus on exactly what types of relationship operated in London in our period. Above all, it should underline the distinctiveness of the kind of relationship that Godwin was seeking out in his circles. While these were not weak ties (which the proliferation of names in the diary might suggest), nor were they the traditional form of strong tie arising out of family or

¹⁷ See Mark Granovetter, 'The Strength of Weak Ties', *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (1973), 1360–1380, and his subsequent *Society and Economy: Framework and Principles* (Cambridge MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2017).

locality, although they shared some of the features of these ties – such as duration, intensity, intimacy and reciprocal services.

In ‘Friendship in Commercial Society’, Allan Silver identifies a line of thinking in writers of the Scottish Enlightenment that saw commerce as helping to set people free from familial, embedded and unchosen sets of relationships (i.e., traditional ‘strong ties’) by which one’s interests were defined and in which friendship and interest were both very closely connected but also potentially fragile. They were fragile because, where friendship was entangled in interest, it had sometimes to give way to it. Thus Adam Ferguson mused on the maxim ‘Live with your friend as with one who may become your enemy’.¹⁸ The Scots saw the paradoxical development of an interested commercial society serving to free friendships from interest, thereby enabling the formation of friendships based on mutual sympathy and one’s judgment of people’s virtues and talents – and the development of wider aspirations for an openness to universal sociability, benevolence and the free communication between persons.

This sense of a space emerging for disinterested friendships, unconnected to family or patronage networks, seems especially pertinent in the 1790s when activity and debate around the French Revolution and the reform of Parliament brought people together in a range of venues to discuss political and more widely philosophical issues. Many of the relationships among supporters of reform and those who saw themselves as a part of a literary and philosophical vanguard were understood as disinterested and mutual. Indeed, in addition to their more general sense of the character of their friendship and acquaintance, there was also, for many radicals, a sense that this very disinterestedness was key to the development of a culture in which progress was to be made through the circulation and further development of ideas.

Granovetter and Silver’s distinctions are certainly suggestive for aspects of the period 1790–1815.¹⁹ There is a tendency among commentators of the period to assume that this is a period of the blossoming of the public sphere and the engagement of more and more members of the middling orders with that sphere, meeting each other as equals, forming friendships based on their perceptions of other people’s qualities and displacing concerns with interests and practicing a benevolence rooted in mutual sympathy, while relying implicitly on a balanced reciprocity over

¹⁸ Allan Silver, ‘Friendship in Commercial Society: Eighteenth-Century Social Theory and Modern Sociology’, *American Journal of Sociology* 95(6) (May 1990), 1486.

¹⁹ Granovetter’s later discussion of Silver’s piece in his *Society and Economy* (2017), pp. 83–84, rightly raises some doubts about the sharpness of the separation of commercial interests and non-market relations.

time. On this picture, strong ties, based on family and relationships that locked together interests and friendship, were displaced or set aside (for many in London, these were literally 'left with their relations' in the provinces) by a wider acquaintance made up of weak ties. Nonetheless, some of these 'weak ties' were relationships that developed into much more intensive if untraditional forms of strong ties, through the practice of deliberation and the exchange of ideas.

One key historical question is what it was that enabled these disinterested friendships and relationships among the radicals to emerge and survive. That is, what material and social preconditions were required and under what conditions might these relationships flourish or founder? We might also ask about the level of independence these ties actually had from people's interests: if the routing of interests into commercial relationships left men (and it was men that Ferguson was discussing) free to develop relationships with others independent from those interests, were those friendships wholly severed from more interested ties and from ties of family or did those more traditional ties provide an underpinning security that then left them free to develop other (non-commercial) interests? How far could those disinterested friendships serve as a bulwark against intrusive forms of government and loyalist pressures? And at what point might interests come back into play to condition people's sense of where their loyalties lay?

The disinterested benevolence that Godwin and his associates preached and their aspirations for a deliberative culture focused around the exercise of private judgement and the pursuit of truth and justice looks like a particularly demanding form of disinterested friendship. It clearly was one such form, not tied to interests, interpolating others as equals and exploring together beliefs and ideas to the end of social progress and enlightenment. As such, it clearly resonates with the idea of an emergent public sphere that has had a deep influence on eighteenth century historiography, although it is a particular and especially demanding conception of the nature of authentic public communication. It also suggests that, rather than there being a single public sphere, there were a variety of intensive friendship groups operating on a variety of bases, which nurtured various deliberative practices.²⁰ With others, my sense is that we need to look at what kinds of relations people aspired to

²⁰ See Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. T. Berger and F. Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989); his 'The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article', *New German Critique* 3 (1974, orig. 1964), 49–55; and 'Further Reflections on the Public Sphere', in C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992). There has been a veritable industry responding to the idea in communication studies and history more widely – see especially Gillian

construct through their conversations and meetings with each other and how far these might have shared similar standards and expectations with groups from across different sectors in society. There is also something to be said about exactly how people conceived of and practiced deliberation and conversation, and about how those in power interpreted this activity. Moreover, as I will argue, even if Godwin and his compatriots thought of their deliberative friendship as a form of free-standing philosophical discourse, that did not necessarily make it so. It was a discourse anchored in and enabled by a particular social setting and, as people reacted to the pressures of events and the incursions of public scrutiny and intervention in these private relations, so too did tensions develop between these relations and people's other stronger ties and between them and their more particular interests

Male friendships might well look like (and sometimes be) a case of 'disinterested relations', linked by a general sympathy and not dominated by calculation or seeking advantage and taking place across class and status divisions. But they might also mask differences that, under other circumstances, might become salient and could undermine their independence from instrumental concerns, professional connections and familial relations. Where Ferguson seems to have thought of this as a relatively robust realm of disinterested sociability, we can see that in the form in which Godwin and his associates pursued it, it might be vulnerable to political pressure, to disillusion and betrayal, to disagreements about the requirements for a secure and progressive society and to rumbling social and status differentials which could be triggered into effect when lesser men demonstrated too much presumption. Disinterested friendship might work in a relatively egalitarian society, even when placed under various forms of duress, but this was not an egalitarian society. It was strongly marked by class and status divisions, and these had powerful effects on the extent to which relationships were really equal or entirely disinterested.

A third area of sociability concerns the way that people's social circles functioned in a variety of implicit ways to respond to and attempt to mould the conduct of others. To understand how that worked we need some sense of the nature of the relationship between sociability and talk in London in this period. The ideal form of Godwinian discourse was

Russell and Clara Tuite's edited collection *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain 1770–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Jane Rendall's 'Women and the Public Sphere', *Gender & History* 11 (1999), 475–488; and Amanda Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronologies of English Women's History', *Historical Journal* 36 (1993), 383–414.

disinterested, orientated to truth and concerned to explore exhaustively a topic and appropriate principles, which makes it seem very much like a Habermasian form of free communicative action. But it is also clear that talk within Godwin's circles, as in all others, also included the exchange of information about the behaviour of others.

This sort of talk is much more obvious in the detailed discursive diaries of men like Joseph Farington and Henry Crabbe Robinson. Some talk might have served purely instrumental purposes: Farington, for example, was an information gatherer, a mapper of the wider world and in some cases it seems clear he was using his sources to influence decisions about membership of the Royal Academy. But in most instances his recording of information about other men (and often about women) seems to have had few implications for his behaviour toward them. More widely, there appears to be a difference between the way in which male and female circles operated, with male talk seeming to lack much sense of urgency and exhibiting little reaction to how others acted, while female talk adhered more closely to older models of strong ties of interest and family (and family connections, most saliently through husbands) in which talk – indeed gossip – played a major social role in shaping conduct. The insight that 'gossip centers on areas where the cultural ideal is demanding and creates stress'²¹ gives us some purchase on why gossip may have been systematically more important in women's circles in this period. Moreover, the practices of gossip also indicate that it takes place in relationships that have strong rather than weak ties.

Certainly, many women's social relationships do seem to have been rather different from Silver's model of disinterested friendship. For example, for women from outside of the aristocracy, acceptance within such elite circles was extremely fragile. Actresses, singers and entertainers might find some conditional acceptance – occasionally aristocrats made actresses their wives, only for them subsequently to be consigned to the country estate.²² For the most part, women were defined by their rank and their social lives were restricted to social circles appropriate to

²¹ Sally Engel Merry, 'Rethinking Gossip and Scandal', in Donald Black (ed.), *Toward a General Theory of Social Control*, v. 1 (New York: Academic Press, Inc., 1984), p. 279.

²² Lord Derby and Elizabeth Farren were exceptional in that his first wife was unfaithful and the couple were careful to present a perfect picture of modest and chaste mutual affection under the watchful eye of her duenna mother until the death of Derby's wife, which then allowed them to marry and for her to be received at court. That did not, of course, prevent their caricaturing – See James Gillray's *A Peep at Christies* (H. Humphrey, 1796, BMS 8888); *Contemplations on a Coronet* (H. Humphrey, 1797, BMS 9074); and *The Marriage of Cupid & Psyche* (H. Humphrey, 1797, BMS 9076) (this last being especially brilliant); nor did it stop James Sayer from depicting her naked in *A Peep Behind the Curtain at Widow Belmour* (no publisher (n.p.), 1790, BMS 7736).

that status. When they left it, they found only limited tolerance. Even within one's own status group, acceptance could be fragile. Status denoted but did not wholly determine how one was responded to; that was also affected by those with whom you mixed. Mix low and you would be treated as such; mix high and, while increasingly vulnerable to predatory and exploitative behaviour from your new (especially male) friends, you might also lose ready acceptance within your own milieu – and the issue of with whom you were associating was very much a matter of gossip. Here women policed women, still more than did their husbands. Smith describes Mrs Nollekens as noted for the fact that her 'female acquaintances were not all equally well or wisely selected; some of them having been opera-singers, and others servants to their husbands, and in some instances worse'. Her friend, Mrs Carter berated her for her laxity, and warned of the consequences: 'You can clearly see', she observed one day during a sale of choice china at Christie's, that

that duck-footed woman, your 'dear friend', as you have just been pleased to call her, is not at all noticed by the wives of those gentlemen to whom her husband is known. They all shun her as they would a wife who has been made over to her husband with what her former possessor considered a *handsome consideration*. Indeed, my old friend, you should at all events be a little more cautious in your epithets, or you will at last, like her, pass unnoticed.²³

This type of gossip is intimate, and would have been extremely salient for Mrs Nollekens, who was being encouraged to consider her position. In this form of gossip, you gossip about people you know, to people who know them, and the likelihood is that the people who are being gossiped about know that they are being talked about. Functionalist accounts in anthropology tend to stress the place of gossip as a form of collective policing of intimate social groups, with strangers being excluded through their lacking knowledge of the principals (and, more crucially, lacking

For a more comprehensive discussion of representations see Gattrell, *City of Laughter*, esp. chapters 11–14, and Katrina O'Loughlin "'Strolling Roxanas": Sexual Transgression and Social Satire in the Eighteenth Century', in Susan Broomhall (ed.), *Spaces for Feeling: Emotions and Sociabilities in Britain 1650–1850* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 112–136. Later, and similarly, Catherine Stephens who married the 5th Earl of Essex found a reception in Queen Victoria's Court. But the standard result was largely exclusion or very incomplete inclusion: Louisa Brunton, who married the Earl of Craven in 1807; Harriot Mellon, who married Henry Beauclerk in 1827; Maria Foote, who married Charles Stanhope in 1831, never attained the same degree of acceptance by their marriages. See for example Kimberly F. Schutte, *Marrying by the Numbers: Marriage Patterns of Aristocratic British Women, 1485–2000*, Phd. Thesis, University of Kansas, 2011, and her subsequent *Women, Rank, and Marriage in the British Aristocracy, 1485–2000: An Open Elite?* (London: Palgrave, 2014).

²³ John Thomas Smith, *Nollekens and His Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929 [first published in 2 vols 1828]), p. 215.

any social relation with them).²⁴ This underlines the intimacy required for participation and is in sharp contrast to ‘celebrity gossip’. Even this form of gossip might vary, from the passing of social information with little moral judgement, through to talk which has major consequences for one’s interaction with the subject, ranging from destabilising a person’s position within a group to resulting in their social exclusion. It may also play an important role in signalling to one’s closest connections (especially one’s family) areas of their vulnerability to social reaction or condemnation and in imposing conduct on (or in disguising the conduct of) members of one’s most intimate circles.²⁵

I have no wish to resurrect a separate spheres picture in relation to gender.²⁶ My case here is grist to the mill of those who want a more complex picture – who recognise women’s participation in publishing, campaigning and organising but who also recognise that there were more barriers and costs to such participation than for many men and who also acknowledge that men’s worlds might be more complex and multiple than that older thesis proposed. My concern is to try and tell a more subtle and convincing story about how men and women of the middling orders, arts and professions of the 1790s and 1800s (predominantly in London, but drawing on other evidence where relevant) sought to live their lives, to assess the obstacles and opportunities they faced or could create and to regulate their relationships with those whom they knew and to set this in the context of increasing government repression and intolerance towards unorthodox political views.

Godwin is a frequent participant in the discussions of this book. It is not a book about him, but it does focus recurrently on the circles in which he moves in London and it makes extensive use of his diary. But I have also sought out other diaries and journals, letters and memoirs of the period (several of which have not been explored by scholars of the period) as a way of engaging in a more detailed (occasionally quantitative) analysis of how people conducted their lives and how more broadly social circles in London worked. In doing so, I aim to help us appreciate

²⁴ Such as Max Gluckman’s ‘Gossip and Scandal’, *Current Anthropology* 4(3) (June 1963), 307–316.

²⁵ As is often pointed out – gossip is most intense in exclusive groups – See Gluckman, ‘Gossip and Scandal’, p. 315; Diego Gambetta, ‘Grandfather’s gossip’, *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, XXXV (1994), 199–223; Merry, ‘Rethinking Gossip and Scandal’; and Patricia Meyer Spacks, ‘In Praise of Gossip’, *The Hudson Review* 35(1) (1982), 19–38.

²⁶ See the very useful review of literature by Vickery, ‘Golden Age to Separate Spheres’ for Britain (and the also useful North American discussion in Linda Kerber, ‘Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History’, *Journal of American History* 75(1) (1988), 9–39.

how, in particular, the circles around those who responded warmly to the opening events of the French Revolution and who were enthusiastic for domestic reform and for the spread of education and enlightenment at home operated and responded to the government's commitment to war and its recourse to repression and to the wider societal reaction that emerged under loyalism.

In the final part of the book, I turn to questions of music and movement and make a case for the way that music moves people in this period, both emotionally and physically – sometimes emotionally because physically, sometimes physically because emotionally – and to think through the ways that this contributes to the maintenance and expression of a set of cultural and social commitments that complicate the processes of political dissent and protest. Here, too, the tapestry of sound and of the culture it contributed to and shaped was one that, even when it operated largely unawares, was not reducible to such elements. Indeed, neither element – whether sound or movement – is often wholly under people's conscious control. The best players of instruments have disciplined and habituated themselves to forge a relationship with their instrument and the medium of sound and music. They do so as much by 'inhabiting' it as by subjecting it to their will. And those who sing, dance or otherwise respond to them are similarly 'in' the medium. Understanding this, I believe, helps us to recognise how such performances in the period embedded a range of dispositions which often had significant political implications that my reformers attempted to resist.

In my discussion I refer to different forms of dance, music and song and will argue for their importance in understanding the texture of people's lives and for moulding people's worlds and their accompanying narratives. At the same time, I examine the question of how resources from the same domain might serve to assist people in standing against the status quo and with what limitations.

The approach I have taken has, I believe, wide implications for how we should understand the period as a whole. Much of the extensive literature on the period sees the literary and political culture of London as a relatively unified domain, in which people knew each other and in which there was extensive engagement, often across gender and class boundaries. In contrast, I want to suggest that the worlds people inhabited may have been much more fractured and divided and that the character of these worlds might have varied considerably between men and women and between areas of cultural activity and profession. I suggest we might usefully think of a range of ways in which people were known to each other – friendship, acquaintance and ties based on family and locality.

We should be concerned to distinguish strong and weak ties and should look carefully at the different forms that 'strong' ties might have taken; and that we should reflect on the way that people's aspirations for certain types of exchange might have influenced the types of relationships they formed. Some relationships became, in this period, fraught with difficulties when people sought to extend them across gender boundaries. Moreover, as the government challenged the claim that private discussion had no public or political implications, the character of people's relationships also began to be influenced and began to change. Out of those changes comes a different kind of oppositional political discourse and set of practices – if not immediately, at least in the period immediately following the end of the war.

The account I give also suggests that as the boundaries between the public and the private were challenged in various ways there was a brief flourishing of more egalitarian relations between the sexes, albeit rapidly politicised and contributing to the emerging censoriousness in relation to female conduct and reputation and to the remarginalisation of many literary and professional women in the romantic period.

Finally, my account is intended to help us see how difficult it was to question the established order at this particular time (with the war on France) and in the way that many of the most outspoken critics sought to do. The existence of these aspiring critics was the culmination of decades of relative stability coupled with a growing optimism about the possibilities of progress and the development of knowledge. Their failure was in part a failure of enlightenment thinking (with its heady optimism), in part a failure fully to appreciate the underlying dynamics of the political world (and its stubborn resistances) and in part a failure to acknowledge the deep embeddedness of many of their contemporaries (and themselves) in a taken for granted order that they found undercutting their aspirations. That most people fell back on older ways does not mean that things remained wholly unchanged – but their experience testifies to the fragility of people's deliberative ambitions and conduct when these came into conflict with the conventional practices of their social worlds. This is intended as an account of the complex world of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century London in which people developed aspirations for a different sort of future and sometimes experimented with approximations to that future, but found their present repeatedly encroaching in ways that further alienated and fragmented the wider community they had hoped to take with them.