Reform in Scotland And the Working Class

It is well known that the mid-eighteenth century introduced in Scotland a period of rapid change and transformation. Though change appeared most dramatically in the economic and social spheres, its impact was also felt in other aspects of Scottish life. In particular, the decades between the 1790's and 1820's witnessed loud demands for the reform of the political system to keep in step with economic and social development. While these demands were chiefly associated with the rising middle class, the lower ranks of society also showed a growing awareness of the inequity of a political set-up that deprived them of participation in the political process. This awakening of the Scots in general, and the lower orders in particular, to the existing political realities, is one of the more interesting aspects of the period.

Both before and after the 1707 union with England, it would seem that most of the Scottish population had little interest in politics, partly because of an over-riding interest in religious issues, partly also, no doubt, because the existing political system was so exclusive. The Scottish parliament remained to the end essentially medieval in its composition, and in practice was representative of only the more substantial landowners. (1) Nor did the Union with England change the situation. The Scottish county franchise remained the same. In 1790, for example, the total number of those entitled to vote stood at 2,655. (2) This meant that the entire Scottish electorate equalled that of Preston in England (2,800), was less than half as large as that of Bristol (6,000), one fifth that of the city of London (12,000) and one-seventh that of Westminster. (3) The situation became more ridiculous when considered county by county. Thus, in Perthshire the electorate numbered 128, in Fife 153, in Midlothian 83, while Renfrew had 32 electors, Banff 19 and Bute only 3. (4)

In the burghs the local administrative system displayed an equally singular lack of popular element. At one time in the Middle Ages the Town Council had possessed a representative character. An Act of 1469 however, had abolished the elective character of the Council by placing the responsibility of selecting a new Council in the hands of the old one, ostensibly to put an end to disorders which surrounded elections, but in fact to make sure that power remained in the hands of a few prominent patrician families. (5) The last trace of popular element disappeared when the election of the Deacons (who represented the Incorporated Trades on the Council) was in effect abolished. (6)

Having been excluded from the political and municipal life the generality of the population found an outlet for its energies in the church - the organization of which sharply contrasted with the political set up in Scotland. While the latter displayed definite oligarchic tendencies the former displayed
strong democratic tendencies. Such being the case, the Scots for the most part of the eighteenth century remained absorbed by doctrinal and ecclesiastical issues and focused their attention on the burning issue of ecclesiastical patronage. "The point on which the common people are maddest" – reported one contemporary – "is that of patronage." (7) In the course of the eighteenth century this issue led to the emergence of what were virtually political parties within the established church – the "moderate party" and the "popular party." The "popular party" however, fought a losing battle. Not even two secessions, one in 1740 and the other in 1761, succeeded in opening the eyes of the "moderates" to the danger arising out of their support of patronage. With the ascendancy of William Robertson, principal of Edinburgh University "moderates" triumphed. The "popular party" however, refused to give up the struggle. Its chance came in 1780, when Principal Robertson resigned. Immediately it levelled fresh assaults demanding the abolition of patronage. The party even secured some success in General Assembly. (8) Nevertheless the "moderates" succeeded in mustering sufficient strength to vindicate patronage finally when the Assembly refused to instruct its Commissioners to apply to Parliament for its abolition. (9)

What is significant in the controversy at this stage is the language employed by the "popular party" in the rich contemporary literature on the subject. In tone it is full of resentment against aristocracy and is distinctly political in character. The Incorporated Trades of Dundee, for example, hoped for the successful conclusion of the patronage issue in order that "those principles of liberty and regards to the rights of man" could be vindicated. (10) One of the authors of numerous addresses pointed out the incompatibility of patronage with the "republican" organization of the Church. The ecclesiastical organization was republican, while patronage favored arbitrary government and smattered of unlimited monarchy. The law of patronage could only increase the power of the aristocracy, which already was too powerful, and further add to the system of corruption. (11) Another author, after drawing a distinction with respect to Church and State constitutions, maintained that the abolition of the law of patronage was essential if the people were to retain any notion of liberty, for the civil constitution reduced the people "to the exercise only of common functions of animals, the gratification of hunger and thirst and other similar enjoyments." (12) These sentiments could easily be transposed from a setting that was religious and ecclesiastical to one that was public and political.

The awakening of the Scots to public and political issues became evident to some extent during the course of the American War of Independence and the subsequent political crisis caused by the loss of the American colonies. But it is in the demands for both county and burgh reform that we have a more tangible proof of the Scots' growing interest in public and political affairs. The progress, in England, of demands for administrative and Parliamentary reform were watched in Scotland with interest. Early in 1782 the passive interest was translated into direct action when the northern counties of Moray, Inverness and Caithness, no doubt inspired by the Yorkshire Committee, appointed commissioners to consider the question of fictitious and nominal votes. (13) This movement quickly gathered momentum. In August of the same
year delegates of twenty six counties set themselves to deliberate on the best means of removing abuses so prevalent in county elections. (14) As a result two proposed bills were drafted and referred to the counties for consideration.

Simultaneously with the action in the counties the question of Parliamentary reform, as well as that of burgh administration, was taken up in the towns, where it was prosecuted with greater vigours and zeal than in the counties. A series of letters, said to be written by a wealthy Edinburgh merchant, appeared in the CALEDONIAN MERCURY and pointed out the anomalous manner in which the Parliamentary representatives of the burghs were chosen. (15) Under the influence of these letters a committee composed of Edinburgh citizens was set up in April 1783 to look into the question. (16) The movement gathered momentum as the response from other towns indicated their interest was not lacking. In March 1784 an extraordinary convention of delegates from various towns took place at which thirty-three out of sixty-six royal burghs were represented, this number rising to forty-seven by 1785. (17)

The outbreak of the French Revolution, the sweeping away of the Old Regime, and the assertion of the rights of freedom and liberty by the French people, evoked great interest in events in France, as well as enthusiasm and admiration in some quarters in Scotland. This interest can be gauged by the increase in the number of newspapers. In 1782 there were only eight in Scotland but by 1790 the number had risen to twenty-seven. (18) "The politics of France" – reported the EDINBURGH HERALD – "and other parts of the Continent by which the example has been followed, give importance to the public affairs of the present period beyond those of almost any other era that can be remembered." (19) Many newspapers of the day carried full reports of the proceedings in France as well as their discussion. (20) The Dundee Whig Club went so far in its enthusiasm that it voted an address to the National Assembly congratulating the French people "on the recovery of your ancient and free constitution" and expressing an ardent wish "that this liberty may be permanently established in France." (21) Similarly Burke's, scathing criticism of the Revolution and the principles underlying it did not pass unanswered. His arguments were ably met and refuted by Thomas Christie and James Mackintosh, whose works (22) on the subject found, if not wholehearted approbation, at least a measure of admiration among many Scots.

But although the Scottish middle classes became gradually aware of the defects in the British constitution, the French Revolution failed to translate a passive desire for a reform into active agitation for a change in the political system. In fact even the demands for a Parliamentary reform coming from that section died down. The Bills proposing changes in the county elections, drawn up by the committee of the county delegates, when referred to the counties for consideration provoked such a considerable diversity of opinion that the movement for county reform lost much of its momentum and subsequently made little or no progress. (23) In the burghs what had begun as a movement for the reform of Parliamentary representation of the towns ended only as a demand for the reform of the latter's internal administration. Although one of the Bills drafted by the committee of the burgh delegates dealt with the election of Parliamentary representatives, it was subsequently
withdrawn as the result of the defeat of Pitt's proposal of a mild Parliamentary reform. (24) Neither the Scottish gentry nor the middle class engaged energetically in the agitation for Parliamentary reform until the late 1820's, when the latter decidedly took the field.

One reason for this might be due to the fact, as one contemporary observed, that the British constitution did not require as drastic an alteration as did the former political system in France. By and large it offered a greater measure of freedom and liberty which was appreciated and cherished. Measures which would alter the equality and adequacy of representation in Parliament and the mode of choosing its members might be regarded as very desirable but did not call for measures which would convulse the state. (25) The radical principles voiced by the French revolutionaries made little progress among the more substantial section of society. The apparent lack of active enthusiasm even for moderate reform of Parliament may also be due to the fact that Scotland had only recently entered a phase of industrial and commercial expansion which absorbed the attention and the energies of the Scots. Furthermore, the anomalies which existed in the burgh administration, particularly those in connection with Town Council elections were more glaring and vexing than the defective system of Parliamentary representation. The rising bourgeoisie might tolerate their political bondage for a time, but resented lacking a voice in matters which touched them as intimately as the administration of the affairs of the burgh where they resided and conducted their business. It was to the removal of these glaring anomalies that they turned their attention and expanded their energy, the consideration of Parliamentary reform fading into the background. (26)

Nevertheless, a number of individuals from the more substantial section of society did fall under the spell of equality and the rights of man. Lieut.-Col. Dalrymple of Fordell, for example, became President of the "Glasgow Associated Friends of the Constitution and of the People." Col. Norman Macleod joined the society shortly after its formation and remained dedicated to the cause of a radical reform of Parliament. (27) Thomas Muir, an advocate, vigorously agitated for reform for which activity he was to suffer transportation to Botany Bay. Lord Dear, the eldest son of the Earl of Selkirk, a member of the "London Friends of the People" and the "London Corresponding Society" figured prominently at the first General Convention of the Delegates from the Societies of the "Friends of the People" held in Edinburgh on the 11th, 12th and 13th of December 1972. (28) They constitute an exception, however, and even some of them subsequently held aloof from the activities of the Societies of the "Friends of the People" when the agitation for reform took a more radical turn.

If the French Revolution and the political principles underlying it failed to impress the Scottish middle classes and stimulate them to embracing wholeheartedly the cause of Parliamentary reform, the seed of democratic ideals sown by the prophets of the equality of man found a fertile ground among the lower classes.

The economic revival experienced during the second half of the eighteenth century affected the lower, no less than the upper classes of society.
Under the impact of economic forces wide cracks appeared in the existing social structure. The segregation into classes, more perceptible in towns and industrial areas, broke close personal relationships between master and servant - increasing the awareness of social distinctions. The growing prosperity filtered down through the ranks of society reaching even its lowest section. The diffusion of material prosperity in turn made for the emergence of a secular spirit which profoundly affected the manufacturing classes, the artisans, and the new industrial proletariat coming into being. Convinced that they too had a stake in the society they began to assert their interests in the community. This assertiveness, which was perceptible to some extent during the patronage controversy, reappeared more strongly in the industrial field in the form of independent action of the emerging labour union. To this expression of independence in the economic field was added a growing interest in politics and public affairs, later to develop into a participation in the political agitation. A relatively high standard of education among the common people (a result of the religious revolution in the sixteenth century) greatly facilitated the widening of their outlook and interests. "This is perhaps the only country in the world where" — so wrote one contemporary observer—"all are taught to read and write...with respect to education, the peasantry of Scotland far excel those of England as the latter are superior to the same order of men in those nations which adhere to catholic religion." (29)

If the new social conditions and a relatively high educational standard created a favourable climate for the awakening of the common people it was the French Revolution which provided the necessary stimulus to accelerate it. Events in France created great interest. Newspapers were largely procured and read. "Although the parish consists wholly of the poorer ranks of society" — so wrote one parish minister — "newspapers are very generally read and attended to, and the desire for them increases." (30) While another observed that "attention to public affairs, a thing formerly unknown among the lower ranks, pretty generally prevails now." (31) It was not uncommon among the members of the working classes to congregate in taverns or form clubs for the purpose of reading the daily news and discussing public affairs. It was said of the Paisley weavers that when the GLASGOW CHRONICLE arrived thrice a week all the looms stopped while its contents were read and eagerly discussed. (32)

Events in France, however, not only evoked a keen and vigorous interest in politics: the principles unfurled on the revolutionary standard—the proclamation of the equality and brotherhood of man — fired the imagination of the people, stirred their feelings and gave expression to aspirations which hitherto had lain dormant under the surface. It was Tom Paine the apostle of the revolutionary ideals who, in his RIGHTS OF MAN in simple and straightforward terms gave precision to the growing but still vague sense of grievances. Contrasting the British and French constitutions Paine not only exposed the grievances but pointed out the remedies. The government, alarmed at the progress of Paine's pamphlets and ideas, issued a proclamation suppressing seditious writings, which only served as an excellent advertisement for the RIGHTS OF MAN (33) and contributed to the rapid spread of so-called subversive literature.
The first “Society of the Friends of the People” was formed in Edinburgh in July 1792. (34) By the end of the same year Scotland was covered by a network of eighty such societies distributed among thirty-five towns and villages of the manufacturing districts. (35) Although the leadership of the movement for a radical reform may have come from the ranks of the middle class its strength was derived from the common people. That these societies did not aim to attract into their ranks only the more substantial element of society is reflected in the low subscription of three pennies quarterly which made the membership accessible even to the poorest element of society. (36) And since the members of the former refused to be drawn into the movement it remained mostly composed of the members of the lower classes, the shopkeepers, artisans, weavers, cotton spinners and others of similar description, people “from whom anything disagreeable can be expected.” (37)

The fact that the members of the societies came from the lower classes influenced the nature of the demands put forward. These were not for any limited extension of franchise and a more equitable distribution of Parliamentary seats but for a thorough reform based on manhood suffrage and shorter duration of Parliament. (38) In December 1792 the societies held their First General Convention of Delegates. The government, well informed by spies of the proceedings of the “Friends of the People” became gravely alarmed. (39) The radical measures proposed, the language and expression of some of the more enthusiastic members indicated an imitation of the French example, (40) while the outbreak of violence here and there, though not necessarily instigated by the “Friends of the People,” confirmed the government’s opinion of the revolutionary character of these societies.

The feeling of excitement and widespread discontent, not only with the government but with all constituted authority, ran high, occasionally sparking riots among lower classes during which Dundas, “manager of Scotland,” was burned in effigy many times over. (41) In Dundee, on 16 November 1792, some people attempted to plant a “Tree of Liberty,” after the French fashion. Although it was pulled down during the night by some unknown gentleman another was put in its place two days later to the shouts of “Liberty and Equality” and jubilation of the populace, which paraded through the town breaking windows here and there. (42) Ten days later a disturbance broke out in Perth during which Dundas suffered “an ordeal by fire” while the Sheriff reported that frequently shouts of “Liberty, Equality and no King” could be heard from the section of the town inhabited by the lower classes. (43) June 4th, the King’s birthday, witnessed a riot in Edinburgh which lasted three full days. (44) It was to no avail that the Societies of the “Friends of the People” protested strongly that they disapproved of violence and passed a resolution condemning it as seditious and excluding from its ranks all those “found guilty of rioting, creating or siding with sedition in the country.” (45) This was simply dismissed as a deceptive subterfuge calculated to conceal their real designs, which were firmly believed to be the subversion of the constitution.

Yet the government itself contributed to the growing unrest and discontent. The Corn Bill of 1791 was met with loud protest in Scotland, and these were not confined to the lower classes. Both the Town Council of Glasgow
and the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce declared against it, protesting that it was in the interest of manufacturers that a free importation of corn and meal should be maintained. (46) As far as the lower classes were concerned the Bill could have been regarded only as a distinct class measure. Failure to secure the repeal of the Test Act and the abolition of slave trade, both issues which excited the imagination of the Scots, served only as further irritants.

The threat of war with France and the eventual outbreak of hostilities early in 1793 created further resentment. Resolutions, some violent, but strongly condemning the war appeared in the newspapers throughout the country, particularly in the industrial west. "You may rest assured from the accounts I received from Glasgow, Perth and Angus" – reported Dundas’ nephew – “that the rascals have laid a plan for exciting the country again to a discontent and disorder on account of the war, and that this is the topic on which they are to ‘dwell’. ” (47) The opposition to war with France was brought about by an intense political feeling: economic considerations of a commercial nature also played their part. By 1792 the Scottish cotton industry was in the process of development and expansion; if it were to thrive, peace and accessibility to the world markets were regarded as essential. Thus the “Paisley United Societies” declared that peace was not only “the great cause of humanity” but it was also of the “utmost importance to your commercial interest.” (48)

We see our manufacturers ruined” – declared the petitioners for peace from Glasgow – “our commerce daily declining, misery and poverty making rapid process throughout the nation . . . Thousands of our fellow citizens are already out of employment and it is feared that thousands more will soon be crying for want of bread. (49)

The failure of Grey’s motion for reform, the arrests of Muir and Palmer, (50) rather than disheartening the ardent reformers, infused new life into the democratic movement. Towards the end of October 1793 a Convention of Delegates of the “Friends of the People” met in Edinburgh (51) and the delegates re-affirmed their determination, in more radical terms, to prosecute the cause of reform. When the “London Corresponding Society” and the “London Constitutional Society” sent delegates (52) the convention assumed the title of the “British Convention of the Delegates of the Friends of the People.” Universal suffrage and annual Parliaments became unequivocally their goal. At this juncture, however, the authorities stepped in once again: the convention was dispersed by the Lord Provost at the head of some thirty constables, while Gerrald, Margareet and Skirving were arrested and subsequently tried, all receiving sentences of transportation to Botany Bay for fourteen years. (54) The Habeas Corpus Act was suspended, and a year later enactment of more stringent Treason and Sedition Acts followed.

As a result of the government’s measures political agitation died down and the open activities of the democratic movement ceased. The repressive measures seemed to subdue the spirit of the people. Things remained relatively quiet but only on the surface, under it discontent was rife, occasionally bursting to the surface. Thus the presentation in Edinburgh of a
play entitled “The Royal Martyr” comparing the situation of Charles I and Louis XVI and inviting the public to draw a proper lesson “from stepping out of the path of virtue and religion” served as a signal for a democratic demonstration. (55) Enforcement of the much disliked Militia Act led to widespread disturbances and riots, (56) while the rise and spread of the secret organization, the “United Scotsmen,” composed almost exclusively of lower classes indicated that the cause of reform was not dead.

Most likely the “United Scotsmen” came into being as a result of the ramifications of other societies devoted to securing reform, attracting into its ranks more radical elements. The choice of name and of organization indicated the strong influence of similar societies in Ireland. Like the United Irishmen, “United Scotsmen” had an elaborate system of parochial, county and provincial committees. At the base was a cell consisting of not more than sixteen members. If any one parish contained more than three cells a Parochial Committee would come into being composed of two members balloted from each cell. In turn, when the members of the Parochial Committee reached three or more, County Committee was formed composed of the delegates from the former. Provincial and National committees would be similarly formed. (57) The purpose of the “United Scotsmen” was the forwarding of a “brotherhood of affection, a communism of rights” and of the cause of a radical reform of Parliament based on the principle of civil, political and religious liberty which included universal suffrage and annual Parliaments. (58) The enforcement of the Militia Act facilitated the spreading of the association. (59) In the middle of 1797 several meetings of delegates from the west took place in Glasgow. (60) The “Resolutions and Constitutions of the Society of United Scotsmen” circulated in the counties of Forfar, Perth and Fife. (61) But before the movement had time to take root government action checked its progress.

The outbreak of rebellion in Ireland prompted the authorities to come down heavily against the “United.” In November 1797 one Mealmaker, a weaver, regarded as a prominent leader in the movement, was arrested and brought to trial the following January. (62) Similar action was taken in England against the society of the “United Englishmen.” After these events all open political activity seems to have ceased: the files of the Scottish Home Office Correspondence remain singularly silent on the subject of open political activity or any secret political agitation. Although the repressive measures and their ruthless application greatly curtailed the activities of the Democrats, or Radicals, as they were later described, they failed to stamp out an ardent desire for reform. They succeeded only in widening the breach among the lower and upper and middle classes which was being created under the impact of economic forces and consequent social changes. The lower classes became instinctively convinced that their salvation lay in political emancipation, particularly after their applications to Parliament, such as those made by the weavers or the calico-printers asking for redress of legitimate grievances of economic nature, met with cold indifference. After one such unsuccessful petition of the combined Scottish and English weavers one of their number summed up the situation: “Had you possessed 70,000 votes for the election of members to sit in the House would your application have been treated with such indifference not to say inattention?” (63)
Towards the end of 1811 and the beginning of 1812 we begin to hear once again of the activities of the “United Scotsmen.” (64) Although the Lord Advocate was satisfied that “no immediate danger was to be apprehended” the authorities increased their vigilance. (65) And well they might. Toward the end of 1812 Margarot, of the Convention days in Edinburgh, the only prisoner to return from Botany Bay, was reported to be in Paisley and Glasgow, no doubt hard at work stirring up the people. (66) Such activities were all the more dangerous as the widespread unemployment caused by the trade recession, a result of the continental blockade and Orders in Council, made the lower classes restive, increased discontent and made them eager to take up once again the cause of reform.

The restoration of peace in 1815 did not, as was hoped, improve economic conditions. Bad as labour conditions were during the war because of frequent and wild trade fluctuations, they became worse during the five years following Waterloo. Amidst unemployment and low wages, and subsequent hardship and misery, the framing and enactment of the new Corn Law, raising the level of the price at which importation was allowed from 50/- to 80/- exasperated the people. Protests and petitions against it poured in from all quarters. (67) The petition from Glasgow, which can be taken as typical, indicated through which channel the discontent might find expression.

Your petitioners were always led to consider your Honourable House as the Constitutional Guardian of our Rights and Liberties, and as an Organ for Public Opinion; but the marked disregard which, on this recent and momentous occasion, has been shown to the voice of the nation, constitutionally expressed, has excited in them sentiments of a very opposite kind, and demonstrated beyond the possibility of contradiction, that in your Honourable House, the Representation of the People is radically defective. (68)

Under such circumstances it was not difficult for Major Cartwright, an ardent democrat, to rekindle the smouldering desire for radical reform. He spent two months in Scotland on his mission advocating manhood suffrage and annual Parliaments, his itinerant activities proving successful. (69) As a result of his efforts many societies favouring radical reform came into being, while Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register, selling at the low price of 2d per copy, nourished the people with radical propaganda. (70) In October, 1816 the largest meeting yet in Scotland in favour of Parliamentary reform took place in Glasgow, attended by some 40,000 people mostly of the lower classes. (71) This meeting passed resolutions in favour of reform and elected a committee to lay the grievances before the Prince Regent, the committee selecting Major Cartwright as its agent. (72)

The rife discontent, accentuated by trade depression, the rapid progress of radical principles, the agitated mind and the defiant attitude of the people was reflected in the numerous and at times turbulent meetings, (73) convinced the authorities that nothing less was contemplated by the lower classes, than a revolution or rebellion. (74) The Reports of Richmond, (75) a
government spy, telling of secret associations devoted to securing reform by means of force if the petition to be laid before Parliament failed, and the production by him of an oath which bound the associates to strive "either by moral or physical strength as the case may require" to obtain for all persons "the elective franchise at the age of twenty-one," confirmed their suspicions. (76) The authorities in England, after the riots in London during which the Prince Regent was insulted by the mob on his return from opening Parliament, came to the same conclusions. As a result the government introduced into the House four Bills calculated to arrest the progress of any further revolutionary activities, the most important of them being the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act. Meanwhile in Scotland Richmond's revelations led to swift arrests. On 23 February 1817, eighteen men who were thought to be members of the secret committee directing the treasonable proceedings, (77) were apprehended in Glasgow with a view to staging trials similar to those that had taken place in 1793. Unlike the latter occasion, the Lord Advocate was deprived of the pleasure and triumph of successful prosecutions which might have served as a warning to others: the conviction of one McLaren, a weaver, and Baird, a grocer, on charges of sedition, was easily secured, (78), but the more important prosecution of Edgar and McKinlay, two of the prisoners apprehended in Glasgow, broke down. Edgar and McKinlay were prosecuted under the Act of 1812 which made it a felony to administer any oath intended to pledge the taker to commit treason. Either the Act must have been singularly obscure or the Lord Advocate deficient in ability, for he seemed unable to frame an indictment which would withstand criticism brought to bear upon it by the defence. Twice the indictment was repelled and ruled irrelevant by the judges. (79) Finally the third indictment, by a margin of two to three, was allowed to go to proof, though other circumstances prevented the case from succeeding. It would appear that the law officers persuaded one of the prisoners, John Campbell, either by extending a hope or a positive promise of reward, to turn King's evidence. (80) Unfortunately for the Lord Advocate, Campbell who was undoubtedly the star witness for the prosecution revealed this fact in the court. (81) In consequence of such a revelation, the case against McKinlay collapsed and proceedings against other prisoners were subsequently abandoned. Even though the trials failed, the show of determination by the authorities to deal with secret societies of a seditious nature no less than the improving trade conditions, arrested any further progress of a vigorous political agitation. (82)

The respite, however, proved of short duration. Towards the end of 1818 and throughout 1819 and 1820 the agitation, stimulated no doubt by another trade recession, was reopened and prosecuted with increased vigor. In England, the beginning of 1819 witnessed numerous meetings, particularly in Lancashire the center of the cotton trade, hit particularly hard by the recent recession. These meetings passed resolutions demanding the repeal of the Corn Law of 1815 and the reform of the franchise. (83) Similarly in Scotland, particularly in the industrial west, meetings in favour of radical reform took place. As in England, a network of societies called "Unions" devoted to manhood suffrage and annual Parliaments came into being, covering the counties of Ayr, Dumbarton, Lanark, Renfrew and Stirling, organized on the lines not unlike those of the "United Scotsmen." (84)
Unemployment, which by August 1819 was rife in and around Glasgow, increased the feeling of frustration among the people, intensified the hatred for the upper classes, and fortified the belief that the only salvation lay in a drastic reform of Parliament which would give a voice to the people in the election of their representatives.

It is easy, my fellow citizens" - so ran the first number of the Spirit of Union, a newly established Radical organ in Glasgow - "for those who are thus amply supplied both with necessaries and luxuries of life, to become your admonitors, and calm you with good words instead of good food, feeling as they do in the riches of their own carcasses the full force of their observation. But is there one among the whole host of these advisers who knows what it is to live on mere meal and water and even of this receive a limited proportion? (85)

At a meeting of the unemployed weavers held in Glasgow on August 26th the industrial distress and the condition of the working population was unequivocally attributed to the want of universal suffrage and annual Parliaments. (86) While the tension was mounting the "Peterloo Massacre" only served to incense the people. Yet no serious outbreaks in Paisley sparked a riot which ran the course of three days besides being a cause of sympathetic riot in Glasgow.

On Saturday, September 11th, on a moor near Paisley, a great Radical demonstration took place to which working people from Kilbarchan, Dary, Johnstone, Kilmarnock, Nialston, Glasgow and other places, numbering some 18,000, made their way with banners flying and bands playing, but in an orderly fashion. After the Manchester affair was denounced, and resolutions in favour of reform passed, the meeting would have disbanded in an orderly manner had not one of the officials seized one of the banners carried by the Glasgow contingent. A scuffle ensued, crowds gathered, and a riot developed which lasted until the following Monday. (87) The news of the riot in Paisley sparked riots in Glasgow and Bridgetown and in both cases the cavalry was required to disperse the rioters. (88)

The proceedings of the radicals in Scotland no less than those in England once again convinced the government that an armed insurrection was in the offing set either for December 13th or in the New Year. How reliable this information was must remain doubtful: the radicals in Scotland were divided, one group preaching caution and moderation, another more extreme and violent measures. (89) A member of the police force in Edinburgh, dispatched to Glasgow by the Lord Advocate to infiltrate the ranks of the radicals, informed him that "The Reformers, I have good reason to know, highly disapprove of these proceedings." They regarded riots and use of violence as prejudicial to the cause of reform. The more intelligent and sensible among them would prefer to continue with intensified propaganda and agitation "until they ensure success." (90)

The extremist element must have taken the upper hand, for on Sunday, 2 April 1819, Glasgow awakened to the manifesto issued by the
mysterious "Committee of Organization for Forming a Provisional Government," calling upon the people, soldiers in particular, to take arms to recover their rights. The manifesto concluded with a stirring exclamation: "Liberty or Death is our motto, and we have sworn to return home in triumph or return no more." (91) For the most part the workmen obeyed the call to strike (92) and gathered on the streets of Glasgow but the radical army failed to materialize. The only "battle" of the "revolution" took place at Bonnymuir where a small party of about four score or so of the radicals fled in all directions, nineteen of them being taken prisoner. It is obvious that the whole insurrection was engineered by a small extremist group or, as some of the contemporaries alleged, by agents provocateurs who managed to delude a small group of dupes. (93) Nonetheless the authorities decided to exploit the situation and make an example of those apprehended: forty-seven persons were actually charged with high treason, all of whom belonged to the lower class, the largest group among them belonging to the depressed craft of weaving. (94) Of the forty seven three were executed and eighteen transported. After the Bonnymuir episode the movement dissolved partly as a result of repressive measures and partly because of suspicion of treachery in the leaders.

Thus ended the first phase of the democratic agitation in Scotland, born out of social and economic changes. Although radicalism suffered a defeat the cause of reform did not die with it. If the radical demands of the people, inspired by the equality and the rights of man heralded by the French Revolution and stimulated by industrial depression, remained as yet unacceptable, moderate opinion, demanding limited and specific reforms, was irresistible and could not be denied on the ground that it smattered of revolution of 1830 in France advanced the cause of reform which, with the accession of the Wigs into power, became at least a reality.

The Reform Act of 1832 removed the oppressive and grossly irrational Scottish representative system, or perhaps it would be more correct to say it created a representative system in Scotland for the first time, though on a very limited scale. In burghs the self-perpetuating council was abolished and franchise conferred on households valued at £10, or tenants with seven year leases who paid £50 in rent. Although the political agitation of the people played a considerable part in the reform movement and its ultimate success, the lower classes of society who could not show property qualifications, (and that included all the workers and most, if not all, artisans) remained excluded from the franchise. Nevertheless the breach had been made. It now remained to widen it. No sooner had the great Reform Bill become law than the movement for political emancipation of the lower classes resumed its course.

FOOTNOTES

1. The franchise, though ostensibly on the English model – the forty shilling freehold was in fact greatly limited by the exclusion from it of the poorer gentry. An Act of 1861 made this already small and exclusive electorate a much smaller and more exclusive. The Act of 1861 virtually abolished the forty-shilling freehold franchise by basing it on the valuation of land made during the thirteenth century. As the value of land since then had increased

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enormously the forty-shilling freehold lost all its meaning. The Act provided an escape clause for those big landowners who could not produce a title going back to the thirteenth century. It granted the franchise to those whose property, according to the book of the land tax, was valued at £400 Scots. (Acts of Parliament of Scotland, VIII, 353, 354.)

2. SCOTS MAGAZINE, LII, 354.


5. 1409 c. 5, A.P.S. II, 95.

6. In the course of time it became an established practice for the Deacon instead of being elected, to be selected by the Council and Incorporated Trades. Porrit, op. cit., 64.


9. Ibid.

10. CALEDONIAN MERCURY, Feb. 26, 1783.

11. AN ADDRESS ON CIVIL AND ECCLESIASTICAL LIBERTY, 1783.

12. AN INQUIRY INTO THE PRINCIPLES OF ECCLESIASTICAL PATRONAGE AND PRESENTATION, Edinburgh, 1783.

13. CALEDONIAN MERCURY, July 31, August 7, 1782.


15. December 23, 28, 1782; Jan. 6, 22 and Feb. 5, 1783.

16. Ibid., April 4, 1783.


18. Ibid., 86.

19. MARCH 15, 1790.

20. See for example the files of the CALEDONIAN MERCURY for the period.


23. One Bill proposed the abolition of the subdivision of superiorities for the purpose of elections; the other proposed, in addition, to attach the franchise to the land as opposed to superiority valued at £200. Observations on the Laws of Election of Members of Parliament, Edinburgh, 1782; AN ADDRESS TO THE LANDED GENTLEMEN OF SCOTLAND UPON THE SUBJECT OF NOMINAL AND FITICTIOUS QUALIFICATIONS etc., Edinburgh, 1783. The question was reopened in 1792, and early in 1793 another Bill was drafted; because of dilatory tactics employed by the Lord Advocate, who at the Convention of the county delegates represented Midlothian, the whole question of county reform became moribund. Meikle, op. cit., 127, 128.


25. Quoted by Meikle, op. cit. 47, 48.

26. In 1817 the question of burgh reform was reopened once again. In 1815 the town council of Montrose elected its members by a ballot and when this innovation was repeated a year later the Court of Session declared the ballot illegal and quashed the election. In consequence a poll warrant was issued. The burgesses having thus seen their rights revived, demanded, and their demands were acceded to, that future vacancies on the council should be submitted to their vote permanently. This injected new life into the movement for the burgh reform and by the beginning of 1818 thirty out of sixty-six burghs voted resolutions in favour of reform. This move proved equally fruitless. SCOTS MAGAZINE, June-December, 1817, April, 1818.

27. CALEDONIAN MERCURY, October 13, 1792.

28. See Minutes of the Proceedings reported by a government spy. H. O., 102, Vol. VI.

29. Quoted by Meikle, op. cit. 65n.


31. Ibid., Vo. XIV, 483.


33. The editor of the "Bee" stated . . . "that in a small town in the north of Scotland before the proclamation there was just one copy of Paine's pamphlet; and the bookseller of that place declared three weeks ago that he had since then sold seven hundred and fifty copies of it." Quoted by Meikle, op. cit., p. 80.

34. CALEDONIAN MERCURY, July 28, 1792.
35. The first Convention of the "Friends of the People" was attended by 160 delegates from eighty local societies. See spy's reports, H. O., 102, Vol. VI.


37. Sheriff of Ayr - H. Dundas, Nov. 24, 1792, H. O. 102, Vol. VI. While in Perth investigating the "Friends of the People" there, Watt, a government spy observed that "in general the Associated Friends of the People consist chiefly of operative weavers . . . and operative people in various Trades of Perth." Ibid.,

38. The members of the Glasgow Society of the "Friends of the People" had to sign a resolution to the effect that the society would co-operate with the "London Friends of the People" in all measures calculated to bring about an equal representation of the people in Parliament as well as shorter duration of Parliament. There can be little doubt, however, that this was understood to mean manhood suffrage and annual Parliament as far as the people were concerned. See the "Plan of Internal Government of the Society of the Friends of the People," for Glasgow, H. O., 102, Vol. V, and resolutions of various societies of the "Friends of the People" in the CALEDONIAN MERCURY, Aug. 8, Oct. 8, 1792.

39. See reports of Robert Watt and "J. B.," government spies in H.O., 102, Vo. VI.

40. Lord Dear for example addressed the Convention by the familiar term "Fellow Citizens." It was reported by one of the spies that during a sitting of the committee of the society of the "Friends of the People" one member remarked, "It is a maxium of mine that a King should be sacrificed to the Nation every 100 years." Report on Scottish Societies by a spy, Ibid., Vol. VI.

41. HISTORICAL REGISTER, June, 1792.

42. Provost Riddoch - Lord Advocate, Dec. 8, 1792, H. O., 102, Vol. VI.

43. CALEDONIAN MERCURY, Nov. 12, 1792, H. O. 102, Vol. VI, Nov. 24, 1792.


45. CALEDONIAN MERCURY, Nov. 24, 1792.

46. EDINBURGH HERALD, Jan. 31, 1791.

47. R. Dundas - H. Dundas, July 29, 1793, H. O. 102, Vol. VIII. See also reports of "J. B." government spy, June 16, 18, 21; July 2, 5, 12, 1793. Ibid. The following societies published resolutions against the war: Bridgetown, Benton, Kilmarnock, Loch Mill, Irvine, Lennox, Campsie, Cambuslang, Darvel, Torrens.

49. CALEDONIAN MERCURY, Sept. 21, 1793.

50. Rev. T. F. Palmer, Unitarian minister; A prominent member of the Dundee Society of the "Friends of the People", member of the first Convention. He was co-author with G. Mealmaker of an address complaining of war, taxes and demanding manhood suffrage. The address which was printed in July 1793 was considered as treasonable, in consequence of which Palmer was arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to seven years transportation. DICTIONARY OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY, Vol. XLIII, pp. 162, 163.


53. The first Convention limited itself to passing a more vague resolution demanding "an equal representation of the People in Parliament." The third Convention however declared itself in favor of manhood suffrage and annual Parliaments. STATE TRIALS, Vol. XXIII, 452, 453.

54. R. Dundas - H. Dundas, Dec. 6, 1793, H. O., 102, Vol. IX.


59. "You will observe that the first step of this sytem (imported from Ireland) has been by threats to intimidate Justices from acting on the Militia Bill; while a mob being once collected, and having effected that purpose, are by degrees to be carried by Cameron and other ringleaders to purposes widely different." Duke of Atholl - Lord Advocate, Sept. 10, 1797, Ibid., Vol. XV.

60. Ibid., Vol. XVI, Declaration taken before the Sheriff at Glasgow, April, 1798.

61. STATE TRIALS, Vol. XXVI, 1138.


63. Quoted by Hammond, J. L., and B., THE SKILLED LABOURER, 1760-1832,

64. A. Colquhoun - R. Ryder, Sept. 6, 1811, H. O., 102, Vol. XXII.

65. A. Colquhoun - R. Ryder, Nov. 19, 1812, Ibid.

66. A. Colquhoun - R. Ryder, Nov. 4, 15, 19; Dec. 22, 1812. Ibid.

67. Ibid., Vol. XXV, 30, Feb. 30; March 7, 20, 23, 24; April 12, 1815.

68. April 21, 1815. H. O., 102, Vol. XV.


73. James Black in a letter to Lord Sidmouorth pleaded for a bill which would forbid meetings frequently held in Glasgow to the annoyance of the public. Jan. 20, 1817, H.O. 102, Vol. XXVII.

74. "I have no hesitation in saying that reform is merely a pretext, and that the present movement originates from the recent visit of Major Cartwright to this vicinity and other incendiaries employed by Hampden Club and that the object is nothing less than revolution and rebellion; and what strengthens my opinion - at least in the view of the people here - is that several of them who were particularly active in the seditious practice of 1793 have been first to step forward on this occasion." Provost of Dunfermline - Lord Advocate, Dec. 9, 1816, H. O. 102, Vol. XXVI.

75. Richmond was a leader of the weavers' combination of 1812 who he escaped arrest. Later on he returned and was drawn in by Kirkman Finaly to work for the government as a spy. See Mackenzie, EXPOSURE OF A SPY SYSTEM PURSUED IN GLASGOW, ETC., Glasgow 1832, passim.

76. Lord Advocate - Lord Sidmouth, Jan. 31, 1817, H. O. 102, Vol. XXVII.

77. SCOTS MAGAZINE, Vol. LXXIX, 235.


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79. Ibid., pp. 235, 313, 395. "The delay which has arisen in these cases, has given me the greatest uneasiness, and my only consolation is that it has proceeded altogether from the Court, which I cannot help saying, has shewn a want of nerve that, had it belonged to the Judges in the year 1795, would have gone far indeed to the destruction of Government" Lord Advocate - Lord Sidmouth, June 4, 1817. H. O., 102, Vol. XXVII.

80. See Cockburn, M., MEMORIALS OF HIS TIMES, Edinburgh 1872, pp. 334-336. Mackenzie, P., op. cit., pp. 16, 30, 31-33. There is no concrete evidence in the files of the Home Office Correspondence (Scotland) that a promise was made. On the 22 March, 1817 the Lord Advocate enquired of Lord Sidmouth how far he should go in order to induce Campbell to testify, to which Lord Sidmouth replied that he should not go further than offering protection, adding that Campbell's reward would be proportionate to the value of his disclosures and evidence. From the Lord Advocate's letter of July 20, 1817, it would appear that some promise was actually made. Lord Advocate - Lord Sidmouth. March 22, July 20, 1817, Lord Sidmouth - Lord Advocate, March 26, 1817, H. O., 102, Vols. XXVII, XXVIII.


82. "I am sure I may safely affirm that the situation as to wages as well as employment is in gradual state of improvement..." K. Finlay - Lord Sidmouth, Jan. 22, Feb. 12, 1817, H. O., 102, Vol. XXVII.

83. MANCHESTER OBSERVER, Jan. 9, 23 Feb. 1, 20, 1819.

84. The "Union Societies" were composed of some fifteen to twenty persons led by a class leader, the cells elected delegates to form district committees and delegates from the districts formed the central committee. This central committee named six to seven persons to the secret committee. Deposition of "A. B.," H. O., 102, Vol. XXXII.

85. "Spirit of the Union," No. 1, Vol. 1, Ibid., Vol, XXXI.


89. Lord Advocate - Lord Sidmouth, Oct. 27, 1819, Ibid., Vol. XXXI.

90. Lord Advocate - Lord Sidmouth, Oct. 27, 1819, Ibid., Vol. XXXI.

91. Lord Provost of Glasgow - Lord Sidmouth, April 2, 1820, Ibid., Vol. XXXII.

92. Ibid., H. Monteith - Lord Sidmouth, April 4, 1820; Lord Advocate - Lord Sidmouth, April 5, 1820.
93. See Mackenzie’s Exposition of the Spy System, passim.

94. Of the forty-seven prisoners eighteen were weavers, nine were nail makers, two smiths, stocking makers and shoemakers and one labourer, tailor, grocer, changekeeper, wright, bookbinder, cabinet maker and muslin binder. “Calendar of Prisoners charged with High Treason,” H. O., 102, Vol. XXXIII.

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