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## THE UNITED ENGLISHMEN AND RADICAL POLITICS IN THE INDUSTRIAL NORTH-WEST OF ENGLAND, 1795-1803\*

The theory of a secret revolutionary tradition, closely woven into the fabric of early working-class activity and surfacing at particular moments of crisis, continues to fascinate historians. In their attempts to assess its validity much recent effort has been directed at the ten years following the introduction of the infamous Two Acts in December 1795. There has been intensive study of the secret societies in the metropolis and their counterparts in the West Riding of Yorkshire and of their relationship to the Irish rebels.<sup>1</sup> Yet whilst it is now generally recognised that radicalism did not simply evaporate in the oppressive aftermath of the “gagging acts”, its nature and significance continue to provoke disagreement.<sup>2</sup> This paper is a contribu-

\* I would like to thank Colin Heywood for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>1</sup> M. Elliott, *Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen and France* (London, 1982); id., “The ‘Despard’ Conspiracy Reconsidered”, in: *Past & Present*, No 75 (1977), pp. 46-61; J. A. Hone, *For the Cause of Truth: Radicalism in London 1796-1821* (London, 1982); J. L. Baxter and F. K. Donnelly, “The Revolutionary ‘Underground’ in the West Riding: Myth or Reality?”, in: *Past & Present*, No 64 (1974), pp. 124-32; J. R. Dinwiddy, “Debate: The ‘Black Lamp’ in Yorkshire 1801-1802”, *ibid.*, pp. 113-23, and “A Rejoinder”, pp. 133-35; F. K. Donnelly and J. L. Baxter, “Sheffield and the English Revolutionary Tradition, 1791-1820”, in: *International Review of Social History*, XX (1975), pp. 398-423; R. A. E. Wells, *Dearth and Distress in Yorkshire, 1793-1802* [Borthwick Papers, No 52] (1977).

<sup>2</sup> For more general recent accounts of radicalism in this period see E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, revised ed. (Harmondsworth, 1968); A. Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (London, 1979); R. Wells, *Insurrection: The British Experience, 1795-1803* (Gloucester, 1983); G. A. Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes* (London, 1968); J. E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace: Anti-War Liberalism in England, 1793-1815* (London, 1982); E. Royle and J. Walvin, *English Radicals and Reformers, 1760-1848* (London, 1982), esp. chs 3-6; A. D. Harvey, *Britain in the Early Nineteenth Century* (London, 1978), esp. chs 3, 5; M. I. Thomis and P. Holt, *Threats of Revolution in Britain, 1789-1848* (London, 1977), ch. 1; J. Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in Britain, 1700-1870* (London, 1979), chs 7, 8; C. Emsley, *British Society and the French Wars, 1793-1815* (London, 1979).

tion to this debate and an attempt to help stitch together a convincing account of plebeian protest in a region which, despite its prominent position in the radical history of this period, has received little systematic attention.

Investigation of this important phase of radical history is hindered by the nature of the surviving evidence. Government concern spawned a mass of intelligence, much of it emanating from spies and informers, often channelled towards Whitehall by local magistrates. Its quality is variable, but it is not valueless. Much depends upon the individual spy, for magistrates often employed several, the modest yet detailed accounts of W. R. Hay's informer "A" in 1801 impressing more than the sometimes wild exaggerations of Ralph Fletcher's agent "D".<sup>3</sup> Corroboration is also possible more often than might be imagined, and recent studies have shown that central government was surprisingly adept at sifting information received. Officials were quick to spot exaggeration and to check reports against other intelligence, initiating mail interceptions and interrogations where necessary, and deploying agents to suspected trouble spots to gather evidence.<sup>4</sup> This cautious realism it impressed upon local magistrates, who were aware that to blur the line between zeal and responsibility was to risk rebuke.

The notorious Ralph Fletcher, the Jacobin-hunting magistrate of Bolton, was one who received government censure, but continued to receive a hearing because his agents' intelligence often corresponded with that obtained from elsewhere. His indiscriminating transmission of information was not without its value. On the whole, though, local magistrates did their best to assist government by sifting the wheat from the hyperbolic chaff. The principal correspondents with Whitehall, T. B. Bayley, W. R. Hay and Thomas Bancroft, took their responsibilities seriously, recruiting informers on the basis of their sound character, intelligence and accurate memory, corroborating evidence wherever possible and, if not, stating their failure to do so. Errors of interpretation or fact were frequently corrected in subsequent correspondence.<sup>5</sup> In attempting to reconstruct the radical ex-

<sup>3</sup> W. R. Hay to Portland, 18 May, 7 and 17 June 1801, Home Office Papers 42/62 (hereafter HO), Public Record Office, London; Examination of J. Melling, 27 November 1803, Privy Council Papers 1/3583 (hereafter PC), Public Record Office; Home Office to Fletcher, 26 March 1804, HO 42/78.

<sup>4</sup> See especially Wells, *Insurrection*, op. cit., ch. 2; Hone, *For the Cause of Truth*, op. cit., pp. 59-82.

<sup>5</sup> On the cautious approach of Lancashire magistrates, see Th. Bancroft to Portland, 2 July 1798, HO 42/44; id. to Wickham, 9 July, HO 100/66/175; id. to J. King, 18 November 1800 and 9 February 1801, HO 42/53, 61; id. to Portland, 24 February, 1 March and 17 May 1801, HO 42/61-62; Hay to Portland, 18 May and 7 June; Th. B. Bayley to Wickham, 27 March 1798, PC 1/41/A136; id. to Lord Stanley, 1 April and 7 July, PC 1/41/A139, HO 100/66. For details see A. Booth, "Reform, Repression and Revolution: Radicalism and Loyalism in the North-West of England, 1789-1803" (unpublished

perience of these years, the opacity of the sources commands respect, but not awe. Particularly within the confines of a regional study, it is possible to proceed with a degree of optimism based upon a rigorous analysis of a mass of available information. What follows is such an attempt.

## I

The seemingly inexorable transition from democratic to insurrectionary politics in the two years following the Two Acts has never been adequately charted. For the legislation erected great barriers to traditional activity, and imposed a terrifying localism upon radical politics, which only fragmentary pieces of evidence have survived. Manchester is one of few towns which permit a reconstruction of this phase of activity. Here the proposed bills breathed new life into a cause which had long been moribund.<sup>6</sup> In November 1795 ex-members of the Manchester Constitutional Society rallied to play their part in a national campaign to petition against the legislation. These “defenders of constitutional liberty”, as they called themselves, fought an ultimately fruitless battle of words, in which their petition was torn to pieces and burned by a loyalist mob. They had nonetheless won a moral victory, their ill-fated petition, according to one leading campaigner, receiving five thousand more signatures than its loyalist counterpart.<sup>7</sup>

Reformers were jubilant. Despite the defeat in Parliament the spirit of opposition was clearly more widely diffused than had been anticipated. The merchants and manufacturers who had led the campaign determined to form a society along lines suggested by the Whig Club, which was attempting to promote a national association for the repeal of the legislation.<sup>8</sup> The lower classes were more inclined to follow the tactics of the London Corresponding Society and exploit the loopholes in the bills. In this they were encouraged by the founding of the *Manchester Gazette* towards the end of November 1795. Owned and edited by William Cowdroy, a man of impeccable radical pedigree, its reformist stance was represented in its

Lancaster University Ph.D. thesis, 1979), ch. 6, Appendix 3.

<sup>6</sup> On the earlier reform activity in the town, see especially Booth, “Reform, Repression and Revolution”, chs 1-2; F. Knight, *The Strange Case of Thomas Walker* (London, 1957); P. Handforth, “Manchester Radical Politics, 1789-1794”, in: *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, LXVI (1956), pp. 87-106.

<sup>7</sup> R. Walker to J. Watt, 16 December 1795, Birmingham Central Library, Boulton-Watt Correspondence, Muirehead Box 4W. On this campaign the *Manchester Gazette*, *Manchester Mercury* and broadside collection in Manchester Central Reference Library are particularly useful sources.

<sup>8</sup> Report of the North District Committee of the London Corresponding Society, 19 February 1796, PC 1/23/A138. On the general campaign Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty*, op. cit., p. 390.

motto: “Be Temperate in Political Disquisition. Give Free Operation to Truth.”<sup>9</sup> Its short, spiky and satirical articles soon won a wide readership and, for the first time in three years, offered a mouthpiece for the expression of opposition views. On 2 January 1796 its columns announced the formation of the Manchester Constitutional Thinking Club. In part a satirical protest at the attack on freedom of speech, it also provided a meeting place for reformers throughout the area. At its weekly meetings at the *Coopers Arms* more permanent and serious initiatives were soon in preparation. In February 1796 and “with grate [sic] trouble” the Manchester Corresponding Society was formed, the “trouble” being the strength of loyalism in the town and the rumour, fostered by the “Society of Gentlemen”, that the LCS and the Whig Club had united, which further delayed the birth of the new body. It too met at the *Coopers Arms*, where the Thinking Club had now been disbanded.<sup>10</sup>

By April the society could claim a membership of four hundred, and by the early summer several neighbouring townships had affiliated. There were even forays into the West Riding. Despite this encouraging start, the overriding impression afforded by its correspondence with London is one of insecurity. The society, its secretary affirmed, was “compos’d of mechanics”:

although we laid your letter and proceedings before the friends of freedom what (to use a fashionable [sic] phrase) is call’d the higher orders – they have not as yet join’d us nor gave to us any incorigement [sic] though the [sic] approve of our plan and conduct.<sup>11</sup>

For the first time the lower classes took the reins of the reform movement in the North-West. They were naturally unsure of themselves. The LCS *modus operandi* was swallowed whole; the Mancunians’ programme was a carbon copy of the earlier movement in the town, though with a pointed awareness of the need to appeal more directly to the interests of working

<sup>9</sup> Examination of W. Cowdroy, 15 April 1798, PC 1/42/A140; D. Clare, “The Local Newspaper Press and Local Politics in Manchester and Liverpool, 1780-1800”, in: *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, LXXIII-LXXIV (1963-64), pp. 101-23.

<sup>10</sup> J. Shaw to LCS, 3 March 1796, British Library, Additional Manuscripts 27,815, f. 28 (Place Papers); Report of the North District Committee of the LCS, 19 February. These rumours were also current in London, Hone, *For the Cause of Truth*, pp. 31, 36. Professor Goodwin has stated that Shaw was a delegate from London. Shaw’s letter of 3 March, however, gives the impression that he was a Manchester man and knew nothing of events in London.

<sup>11</sup> J. Ellison to LCS, 26 April, British Library, Add. Mss 27,815, f. 49. The correspondence between the Manchester and London bodies is contained *ibid.*, ff. 28, 49, 57, 60, 62, 73, 89, 92.

men: “while we avow ourselves the steady advocates of LOYALTY [. . .] we are not less the lovers of the LOOM.”<sup>12</sup> The increasing fragmentation of their metropolitan mentor precipitated further crises of confidence by delaying correspondence, a problem exacerbated by the interception of mail at both ends.<sup>13</sup> By mid July the line of communication had broken down, and in the autumn the society was further debilitated by a quarrel between the “gentlemen” and the “mechanics of the society”.<sup>14</sup> This was healed by the return of James Shaw, one of the founders of the society, from a lecturing tour of Yorkshire, but the relationship between the two groups was always uneasy. The gentlemen preferred to keep their own company, perhaps recalling the experiences of 1792-93, when they had been betrayed by the false testimony of Thomas Dunn, an Irish weaver, while the plebeian reformers were all too aware of their former dependence upon middle-class leadership. Perhaps this tension was behind the appeal which the Manchester Corresponding Society made in November 1797. In this its last public statement it declared: “unless the manufacturers of Manchester are in love with ruin, [. . .] they will immediately unite with us in forming but one party – whose only object is the Peace, Liberty and Happiness of Mankind.”<sup>15</sup>

There was also schism within the society itself. In July 1797 it was forced to deny publicly any knowledge of a Manchester Peace and Reform Society which was planning a public meeting, in line with LCS policy to initiate country-wide demonstrations to these ends. This tactic had caused disagreements in both London and Sheffield, and may well have resulted in the secession of some members in Manchester to form a rival society.<sup>16</sup> Certainly the Corresponding Society’s address implies that it knew more of the new body than it was prepared to admit. By this time the Manchester Corresponding Society was under the influence of more radical spirits, who six months previously had formed cells of the society of United Englishmen in the town whilst remaining members of the Corresponding Society.<sup>17</sup> One

<sup>12</sup> Manchester Gazette, 19 November. Its other addresses to the public are in the issues for 30 April and 10 December 1796, 25 November 1797.

<sup>13</sup> On the problems of the London society, see Hone, *For the Cause of Truth*, ch. 1. On mail interception J. Bradbury to LCS, 11 June 1796, British Library, loc. cit., f. 60; id. to J. Barton, 13 July, f. 89; Manchester Gazette, 16 April, 18 June, 27 August, 17 September, 17 and 31 December.

<sup>14</sup> Examination of J. Dixon, 5 May 1798, HO 42/45.

<sup>15</sup> Manchester Gazette, 25 November 1797.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 and 29 July, 5 August; Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty*, pp. 411-12.

<sup>17</sup> Notably James Dixon and Richard Stansfield. Charles Bent may also have been a member of both bodies, and Thomas Devenney and James Coulter were also suspected of joint membership.

such figure later recalled going to the Corresponding Society, where “there were about five or six persons [. . .], that there was a young man making a collection to get some books printed for the society. Examinant went again about two weeks after at Perrin’s on Sunday evening, [. . .] he was told by Mrs. Perrin that there were only one or two met upstairs and therefore he did not go upstairs.”<sup>18</sup> The United Englishmen had captured the initiative, and left their parent body in a state of terminal decline.

## II

From the early months of 1797 radical initiatives in the North-West lay with this new organisation. It was not the creation of the itinerant United Irish delegate James O’Coigley or any other delegates from Ireland, but grew naturally out of the Manchester Corresponding Society.<sup>19</sup> Towards the end of 1796 several of the more radical activists, predominantly expatriate Irishmen, had expressed an interest in the “united articles from Ireland”.<sup>20</sup> Four hundred of these had been brought back by James Dixon, a weaver originally from Belfast, in January 1797 and the United Society founded. It was among the first in the country.<sup>21</sup> Its inspiration was decidedly Irish. The test and regulations were identical to those of the United Irishmen with only minor anglicisations, and the society looked to Ireland as the key to a successful revolution on the mainland.

This has led Professor Goodwin to conclude that the movement, “in its organized form, [was] restricted to the destitute Irish ghettos in the capital and the industrial North-West”.<sup>22</sup> Both Liverpool and Manchester certainly possessed Irish quarters. In the latter the Newtown district, on the banks of the river Irk, had a formidable reputation for violence and impenetrability.

<sup>18</sup> Examination of Th. Devenney, 17 April 1798, PC 1/24/A140.

<sup>19</sup> Marianne Elliott is incorrect to attribute the birth of the United Englishmen to Irish delegates, M. Elliott, “Irish Republicanism in England: The First Phase, 1797-9”, in: *Penal Era and Golden Age*, ed. by T. Bartlett and D. W. Hayton (Belfast, 1979), pp. 208-09. The same tendency to overstate the influence of the United Irishmen on the English societies runs through her book, *Partners in Revolution*, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> Examinations of J. Dixon, March 1798, PC 1/41/A139; Examination of J. Dixon, 5 May; Further Information of J. Dixon, 7 May, PC 1/42/A143; Account of Irish Delegates, transmitted by Mr. Bayley, n.d., HO 42/45. Of the nine principal activists arrested at Manchester in April six were Irish. At Liverpool, despite rumours of Irish domination of the societies, most of the names given by the spy Barlow were English, Anon. to Home Office, 20 November, HO 42/45; Manuscript from Barlow, n.d., PC 1/38/A123; Secret Information from Liverpool, PC 1/44/A164.

<sup>21</sup> The societies in Scotland and London were forming at about the same time, Wells, *Insurrection*, pp. 73-74; Hone, *For the Cause of Truth*, p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty*, p. 416.

These were not, however, the strongholds of radicalism. In Liverpool the cellar dwellings clustered around the Old Dock were the home of the radical societies, and here the names mentioned are predominantly English.<sup>23</sup> In Manchester the streets radiating off Ancoats Lane and Newtown Lane are most frequently mentioned in connection with the United Englishmen, and of those secretaries of the society named by the informer Robert Gray three-quarters lived in this district. This area, the rate books reveal, contained a mixed community of Irish and Englishmen. The preponderance of weavers, shoemakers and other artisans accurately mirrors the social composition of the society itself. Of the 241 householders listed 117 were weavers, followed by shoemakers (7), then a variety of trades such as watchmaker, hatter, joiner, tailor, spinner, fustian cutter, warper, collier, filer, cloth dresser, print cutter and labourer. Of the nine suspects arrested in April 1798 three were weavers, two tailors, two printers, one a cotton spinner and a shopkeeper, formerly a "manufacturer".<sup>24</sup> Physical-force radicalism was not the product of ghetto destitution but of depressed artisanal districts of mixed ethnic origin.

From its base in Manchester the society began to carry its message into the surrounding area. In the spring and summer numerous reports, confirmed by the discovery of membership cards, constitutions and letters of affiliation from the "friends of freedom" at Royton, Chadderton, Rochdale and Gee Cross, testify to the growth of the movement.<sup>25</sup> Later Robert Gray, the principal informer on the societies, was to tell of divisions at Bury, Bolton, Failsworth, Oldham, Delph, Staleybridge, Mottram, Ashton-under-Lyne, Stockport, Saddleworth, Audenshaw and Wigan.<sup>26</sup> There was also delegate contact with Yorkshire, the Midlands, London and

<sup>23</sup> See the names and addresses in Manuscript from Barlow; Secret Information from Liverpool. Some of the same names emerged from the trial of Thomas Lloyd and John Saxton. See the informations in Palatinate of Lancaster Assize Depositions, 7 July 1797, Public Record Office PL 27/7. The district was not in the centre of the cellar-dwelling area, but was unhealthy, depressed and prone to flooding, I. C. Taylor, "The Court and Cellar Dwelling: The eighteenth century origin of the Liverpool slum", in: Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, CXXII (1970), pp. 67-90.

<sup>24</sup> Further Evidence of R. Gray, 15 April 1798, HO 42/45; No 1 District Collector's Book, 1806: Manchester Record Office M9/50/10.

<sup>25</sup> Papers relative to the Manchester treasons, 20 June 1797, PC 1/43/A152; printed card signed "The Trustees", n.d., *ibid.*; J. Jackson to "the friends of freedom at Manchester", 22 June, *ibid.*; Th. Chadwick to "the friends of freedom at Manchester", *ibid.*; J. Cheetham to "Gentlemen of the Union Society, Manchester", n.d., HO 42/40; Examination of S. Ashworth, 16 April 1798, PC 1/41/A139. A society was also forming at Stockport, Voluntary Examination of J. Cockin, 8 April, HO 42/43.

<sup>26</sup> Examination of R. Gray, 15 April, PC 1/41/A139. Most of these places already had a reputation for radical activity. On the Stockport society's growth see R. Glen, *Urban Workers in the Early Industrial Revolution* (London, 1984), pp. 128-30.

Scotland.<sup>27</sup> In July 1797 James Robinson of Hollinwood, near Oldham, was arrested for reading out the regulations of the society to a crowd at Birstall in the West Riding. He received a six-month sentence.<sup>28</sup> The rapid growth of the United Englishmen was founded upon a cohesion within the Manchester society forged by ties of residence and employment. This was reinforced by an organisational framework based upon signs, cyphers, “fronts”<sup>29</sup> and a hierarchy of secrecy.<sup>30</sup> The growing tide of Irish immigration doubtless increased the potential audience. Between 1787 and 1804 their numbers doubled, and many were in the weaving trade which was severely depressed throughout 1797.<sup>31</sup>

The unmistakable signs of proselytising have not convinced all historians that these societies should be taken seriously. The United Englishmen, it has been suggested, was “a fringe movement of extremists and fanatics”, comprising “no more than a handful of men”. Reports to the contrary are “fanciful” and “inflated”.<sup>32</sup> The problem lies in the absence of any reliable statistics with which to gauge the numerical strength of the societies. Nonetheless it is an error to dismiss so readily those which are extant,

<sup>27</sup> Further Information of J. Dixon, 7 May 1798; Bayley to Home Office, 26 March, PC 1/41/A136; Examination of R. Gray, 15 April; Examination of R. Gray, 17 April, HO 42/55; Further Examination of R. Gray, March, PC 1/3118. On the Scottish connection to English radicalism see also Examination of D. Cousbourn and J. Carne, 13 April, HO 102/16/206, 208-10.

<sup>28</sup> Leeds Mercury, 24 June 1797. See also Further Information of J. Dixon, 7 May 1798.

<sup>29</sup> Minutes taken from R. Gray, 23 March, PC 1/3118; Examination of R. Gray, 15 April; Bancroft to Portland, 24 November 1797, PC 1/40/A132; Bayley to Home Office, 23 March 1798, PC 1/41/A136. Freemasonry was a favourite cover, not a source of recruitment as suggested by Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty*, p. 441. See Examination of R. Gray relative to E. Atkinson, 26 April, PC 1/42/A140; Examination of Th. Towel, April, PC 1/41/A139; Diaries of Anna Walker, Vol. II, Wigan Record Office DDZ/EHC/1. See also Examination of S. Patterson, 17 April, HO 42/45; Further Evidence of R. Gray, 15 April; Bayley to Home Office, 28 March, PC 1/31/A136.

<sup>30</sup> Information was hidden from novitiates as in 1801. Joseph Jackson, a Stockport cotton-spinner, revealed that only certain parts of some printed articles were read to him at his initiation, Voluntary Examination of J. Jackson, 3 May 1798, HO 42/43. Other members knew very little of the inner workings of the society. See Examination of S. Ashworth, 16 April; Examination of R. Gray, 15 April; Bancroft to Portland, 24 November 1797.

<sup>31</sup> A. Wadsworth and J. de Lacy Mann, *The Cotton Trade and Industrial Lancashire* (Manchester, 1911), p. 313; G. W. Daniels, “The Cotton Trade During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars”, in: *Transactions of the Manchester Statistical Society*, 1915-16, pp. 59-61; E. Helm, Chapters in the Manchester Chamber of Commerce (Manchester, 1902); M. M. Edwards, *The Growth of the British Cotton Trade, 1780-1815* (London, 1967), p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty*, p. 416; Harvey, *Britain in the Early Nineteenth Century*, op. cit., p. 86; Royle and Walvin, *English Radicals and Reformers*, op. cit., p. 88.



particularly if they can be corroborated. The numerical estimates of Robert Gray, the principal informer on the Lancashire societies, are often of doubtful accuracy. His revelations of fifty divisions in Manchester and eighty throughout Lancashire are probably exaggerated.<sup>33</sup> The detailed list of the names and addresses of twenty-nine secretaries of the Manchester society which he provided for the authorities, however, compares favourably with information gathered at the time of the arrests of the principal suspects in April 1798.<sup>34</sup> If we assume that the number of divisions in the town was nearer thirty than fifty, it is possible to reach a rough estimate of membership. The constitution stipulated a maximum divisional membership of thirty-six, at which point the society would divide into the ideal number of eighteen. The available evidence suggests that the numbers per division in Manchester were around eighteen to twenty,<sup>35</sup> which would mean a total paid-up membership of around five or six hundred, a figure similar to that reported in 1801. This certainly scotches rumours of 20,000,<sup>36</sup> but is also more than earlier reform initiatives had achieved and may, of course, grossly underrepresent actual levels of support. Certainly in 1797 the radical cause was far from “on the point of collapse”.<sup>37</sup> Rather it was stronger than it was to be again until the spring of 1801.

These men may have had “no significant London contacts”,<sup>38</sup> though delegate contact certainly existed, but their knowledge of events in the metropolis was sufficient to a movement that looked elsewhere for its inspiration. The Irish connection to English radicalism in this period has been well charted.<sup>39</sup> Manchester activists had travelled in Ireland and Irish delegates had frequently crossed to the mainland, the most celebrated being Rev. James O’Coigley. His two visits to Manchester in June 1797 and January 1798 are well enough known,<sup>40</sup> nonetheless they cast some interesting light upon the nature of radical operations in the region. The nature of

<sup>33</sup> Examination of R. Gray, 15 April 1798.

<sup>34</sup> James Dixon told of twenty-five divisions of the society in Manchester, Further Information of J. Dixon, 7 May. See also “Notes 1 and 2, found at William Cheetham’s in the one pair of stairs, 14 April 1798”, HO 42/40.

<sup>35</sup> Examination of S. Ashworth, 16 April; Examination of S. Patterson, 17 April; S. Patterson to Bayley, 24 May, PC 1/42/A143. See also the notebook “found in Mr. Milne’s back yard after Patterson had left the yard, 23 March 1798”, PC 1/41/A136. This contained the initials of seventeen members and was clearly a divisional record.

<sup>36</sup> Rev. J. Waring to Home Office, 15 February, PC 1/42/A152. Similarly ridiculous were reports of 1,800 “put-up” in Wigan. Bayley to Wickham, 31 March, PC 1/41/A136.

<sup>37</sup> As in Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty*, p. 486.

<sup>38</sup> Harvey, *Britain in the Early Nineteenth Century*, p. 86.

<sup>39</sup> See especially Elliott, *Partners in Revolution*, *passim*.

<sup>40</sup> See Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty*, pp. 432-38; Wells, *Insurrection*, pp. 75-76; Elliott, *Partners in Revolution*, pp. 145-46, 174-82.

the relationships between the “gentlemen” supporters and the United societies has never been resolved. O’Coigley’s visits to Manchester suggest that there was a general sympathy for the aims of the plebeian radicals which, as set out in the society’s Constitution, were little different from those of the old merchant-led Constitutional Society, but an unwillingness to be actively involved in such dangerous organisations. Thus on both occasions that O’Coigley passed through the town the United men felt able to turn to such well-known reformers as Thomas Walker, Thomas Collier, Thomas Norris, Joseph Hanson and Samuel Jackson for financial help to assist his passage to France. These men still met to discuss politics, sometimes with plebeian activists present, but their role was, one suspects, purely passive. When the delegates from the United societies called upon Joseph Hanson in connection with the O’Coigley subscription, the merchant replied testily: “You never come but you want something.”<sup>41</sup> As with the Corresponding Society, the higher orders preferred to keep out of the political spotlight which had proved so uncomfortable in 1792-93.

O’Coigley had also stressed the need to arm and subvert the troops in preparation for a rising. The attempt to enlist the soldiery was particularly alarming to the authorities in the light of the naval mutinies of May 1797. Despite lengthy investigations, however, the depth of military subversion was never uncovered. The available evidence suggests that while Robert Gray’s claim that 700 soldiers were sworn in at the Manchester barracks is exaggerated,<sup>42</sup> some cells had certainly been formed among the soldiery and there had been a concerted attempt at subversion.<sup>43</sup> Certainly there were more than isolated inroads made into the loyalty of the troops, but the extent of penetration is impossible to assess.<sup>44</sup> The most successful

<sup>41</sup> Further Evidence of R. Gray, 15 April 1798; Floud to Wickham, 14 April, PC 1/41/A139; Minutes taken from R. Gray, 23 March; Further Information of J. Dixon, 7 May. The printer and newspaper proprietor William Cowdroy, however, had certainly printed numbers of the United Constitutions for the society, Examination of W. Cowdroy, 15 April.

<sup>42</sup> Examination of R. Gray, 15 April; Bayley to Lord Stanley, 1 April. See also Minutes taken from R. Gray, 23 March.

<sup>43</sup> The infiltration of Joseph Tankard, a sergeant in the Galloway Fencibles quartered at Manchester, did much to confirm Gray’s testimony. See the Information of J. Tankard, 15 April, HO 42/45; Examination of J. Murdoch, 14 April, PC 1/41/A139; Brownrigg to Wickham, 29 April 1799, HO 50/9; Examinations respecting Simmonds, April 1798, PC 1/41/A139; Lord Stanley to Earl of Derby, April; Bayley to Lord Stanley, 3 April, *ibid.*; Blackburn Mail, 5 July 1797; Examination of R. Henwood, 13 April 1798, PC 1/41/A139; Examination of J. Harrison, 26 April, PC 1/41/A140; Further Information of J. Dixon, 7 May. The authorities strongly suspected others, but lack of evidence precluded prosecution, Wickham to Brownrigg, 28 April, HO 51/152/172.

<sup>44</sup> For opposing views on this, see Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty*, pp. 441-42; Wells, *Insurrection*, pp. 76-77, 126-27.

approaches seem to have been made to Irish soldiers: the three most obviously implicated – Murdoch, Simmonds and Twigg – were all Irish, as were those sent to recruit them. The evidence of arming is still more flimsy. There were rumours of an arms cache in Wigan and subscriptions for arms at Stockport, but, apart from the drawing of a pike picked up in Manchester, little real evidence.<sup>45</sup> Indeed during his second visit to Manchester O’Coigley had tacitly admitted the lack of preparedness when he

observed that it would be necessary immediately to enter into a subscription to procure arms for the Friends of Freedom in this country. Examinant [R. Gray] said the people were poor and trade bad. Quigley [O’Coigley] then said they must make application in Ireland there were plenty there.<sup>46</sup>

Ironically, O’Coigley himself had forestalled any real attempts to arm when on his first visit he had talked confidently of the strength of the United Irishmen, the certainty of French assistance and the fact that they “made little of the force of England if it was once invaded”.<sup>47</sup> O’Coigley instilled reformers with a false sense of confidence in the case of invasion, such that William Cheetham, a leading activist, advised one member to get as far into debt as he liked as the revolution would erase his financial obligations.<sup>48</sup>

Until O’Coigley’s visit in June 1797 the activities of the United Englishmen had been largely propagandist. The Manchester radicals flooded the surrounding countryside with their constitutions, copies of which were found in almost every town in the area. These, alongside other political broadsides, notably extracts from Paine and Thelwall with Irish broadsides such as “Paddy’s Resource” and “Freedom Defended”,<sup>49</sup> formed the spearhead of their campaign to foster a “brotherhood of affection”, whose strength would ensure the success of their demands for universal suffrage and annual parliaments. From the summer of 1797, however, they began to

<sup>45</sup> Bayley to Home Office, 26 March 1798; Examinations of Th. Hadfield and Ch. Radcliffe, 26 April, HO 48/10; Bancroft to Portland, 24 November 1797; Examinations of J. Nicolson and E. Rowbottom, 21 April 1798, PC 1/42/A140; Floud to Wickham, 22 April, PC 1/42/A140.

<sup>46</sup> Examination of R. Gray, 19 March, HO 42/45.

<sup>47</sup> Examination of R. Gray, 15 March, PC 1/41/A136. Other Irish agents had also stressed the strength of the Irish societies and their military preparedness, Examination of J. Dixon, 5 May. Confidence in invasion was therefore high among radicals in the North-West, see Examinations of J. Murdoch, April, HO 42/45; Bancroft to Portland, 7 January, PC 1/40/A133; Bayley to Wickham, 26 and 28 March, PC 1/41/A136; Examination of J. Tankard, 15 April. However, only in Cumberland did anything resembling a plan of revolution come to light, Senhouse to Portland, 28 April 1799; Lawson to Portland, 27 March, HO 42/47.

<sup>48</sup> Examination of S. Patterson, 17 April 1798.

<sup>49</sup> Information of J. Reeves, 12 April, HO 42/45; Enclosure in Bayley to Home Office, 23 March, PC 1/41/A136.

look increasingly towards an invasion as the only means to reform. This policy itself created divisions, however. The Bolton radicals were said to be particularly uneasy about the intentions of the French; they had no wish for French dominion.<sup>50</sup> In Manchester and Staleybridge there were differences of opinion over the fate of the King in the event of a successful revolution.<sup>51</sup> By the beginning of 1798 there was more determined talk of assassinating local magistrates, though this too caused disagreement. If such violence of rhetoric indicated that the societies were “prepared to rise”, they were certainly not properly prepared.<sup>52</sup> For not only were they lacking in arms, but they were rapidly losing ground. In January Rev. Thomas Bancroft reported that at Bolton “the meetings of the classes are said to be discontinued. We are informed that they entertained great apprehensions of discovery – that the Government had spies etc.”<sup>53</sup> Their fears were well grounded. By this time the Manchester informer Robert Gray had turned King’s evidence, and in February O’Coigley and O’Connor were seized at Maidstone *en route* to France, leaving Manchester’s radicals in constant fear of arrest.<sup>54</sup> By March Robert Gray had enabled the compilation of a formidable dossier on radical activity in Manchester over the preceding twelve months. In April the leading activists in both London and Manchester were arrested.<sup>55</sup>

With these arrests the movement fell apart. Many suspects fled, and of the twenty-seven warrants for arrest issued only four were executed.<sup>56</sup> One such suspect, Samuel Patterson, “sent the bell man around the night after the persons were apprehended in Manchester to publish that he was not the informer.”<sup>57</sup> Loyalism swung back onto the offensive. The Tory press inflated the role of the arrested men, the authorities intercepted the mail of other suspects and denied licences to publicans who had harboured radical meetings.<sup>58</sup> The failure of the Irish rebellion further dampened radical

<sup>50</sup> Bancroft to Portland, 7 February, PC 1/40/A133.

<sup>51</sup> Examination of R. Gray, 15 April 1798; Examination of J. Dixon, n.d. [1798], PC 1/42/A140.

<sup>52</sup> Wells, *Insurrection*, p. 77. On the talk of assassinations, see Colonel McDowell to Grinfield, 5 April 1798, PC 1/41/A139; Examination of R. Gray, 15 April.

<sup>53</sup> Bancroft to Portland, 7 January. For evidence that this was also true in Manchester, see Mrs Greg to W. Rathbone, April, Rathbone Papers II 1/65, Liverpool University Library; Examination of J. Dixon, 5 May.

<sup>54</sup> King to Bayley, 21 February, HO 43/10/288; Bayley to Wickham, 23 March, PC 1/40/A133; Minutes taken from R. Gray, 23 March.

<sup>55</sup> R. Floud to Wickham, 10 April, and *id.* to Wickham, 13 and 14 April, PC 1/41/A139.

<sup>56</sup> *Id.* to Wickham, 17 April, PC 1/42/A140.

<sup>57</sup> Examination of S. Patterson, 17 April.

<sup>58</sup> See the Manchester Mercury for April onwards; J. Harrop to Freeling, 16 April, HO 42/213; Bayley to Wickham, 15 September, HO 100/66/233.

spirits. By July the Bolton magistrate Thomas Bancroft could hear nothing.

The intelligence which of late they [my spies] have been able to obtain has been very inconsiderable, tho' I believe they have not abated of their assiduity. The fears of the faction and the fortunately bad success which their rebellious attempts in Ireland have met with, have so disconcerted them that I am willing to hope there will be little occasion to employ, especially in these smaller towns in the country, any emissaries to watch over them.<sup>59</sup>

By the following year the authorities were able to breathe a sigh of relief. Radicalism had been extinguished. The passing of the Corresponding Act in July, which made illegal all Corresponding and United societies in England, Scotland and Ireland, was merely the "formal and legal slaying of the slain".<sup>60</sup>

### III

Whilst reports of radical activity dwindled, in Lancashire, as in London, some cells remained stubbornly alive.<sup>61</sup> A thin thread of radical names link the agitation of 1797 to that of 1801,<sup>62</sup> and the influence of the Irish is still more apparent. Although the rumour of a revival of Liverpool's radical societies proved groundless,<sup>63</sup> in Manchester Irish activists continued to meet. They were stimulated by the tide of refugees from Ireland in the wake of the Great Rebellion,<sup>64</sup> and more particularly by the proposed union with Ireland. In the early months of 1799 a number of anonymous letters landed on the desks of prominent Irish politicians and administrators. Representative was one, postmarked Manchester, which read:

There is now a bill pending in Parliament to enable his Majesty to send the militia to Ireland to enforce a union, they mean to take advantage of the division among you, there being no alternative but to unite in one common cause to repel any attempts on your rights. You see what Clare, Beresford

<sup>59</sup> Bancroft to Portland, 9 July, HO 100/66/175.

<sup>60</sup> G. S. Veitch, *The Genesis of Parliamentary Reform* (London, 1913), p. 340.

<sup>61</sup> On London see Hone, *For the Cause of Truth*, pp. 87-90; Wells, *Insurrection*, p. 152.

<sup>62</sup> Such men as William Cheetham of Manchester, Joseph Jackson of Chadderton, Thomas Taylor of Royton, John Magee and James Moorhouse of Stockport, John Beswick of Bolton and James Robinson of Hollinwood.

<sup>63</sup> G. Orr to King, 12 and 20 September 1799, PC 1/44/A 161; id. to King, 12 October, HO 100/87/310; Notes on the Irish residents at Liverpool, enclosed in R. Fletcher to Pelham, 18 November 1801, PC 1/3534.

<sup>64</sup> *Chester Courant*, 17 July 1798, 26 March 1799; J. Corry to Portland, 14 July, PC 1/43/A152; T. Whinney to Lees, 29 March, HO 100/86/226; W. Huddleston and Ch. Church to Portland, 17 June, War Office Papers 1/769/539; Benn, Huddleston and Church to Home Office, 2 May, HO 100/66. See also the lists of persons sailing from Ireland in HO 42/43-44. Many rebels also went to London, Wells, *Insurrection*, p. 166.

etc. can do. Such men ought to be done away with from any society who sell their country on a lieucrative [sic] view. Ireland is undone if you do not unite, and with heart and hand assist your brave Countrymen in arms with all the religious animosity, and all the efforts of Pitt or hell will not subdue you, let every camp resound with glory to the Lord on high.

P.S. If any more forces are sent to Ireland etc. we mean to support our rights, there is 700,000 organised here [. . .].<sup>65</sup>

An agent quickly despatched to the town confirmed that “there is a numerous body of North Country Irishmen who meet in the suburbs of Manchester and profess the same views and principles as the United Englishmen.” Still more significantly, he added that at Bolton Irish activists held similar meetings: “Their ostensible reason for associating is for the purpose of regulating their wages, being weavers; but from what the Informant has seen and heard he is persuaded that their object is to form societies, divisions etc. according to the plan of the United Irish.”<sup>66</sup>

This was among the first pieces of evidence to suggest a link between the weavers’ campaign over wages and the radical societies. In the spring of 1799 a temporary revival in the cotton trade coincided with a rapid increase in the price of provisions. Almost immediately a General Association of Weavers emerged. Representing a broad spectrum of cotton towns – Manchester, Stockport, Oldham, Wigan, Warrington, Blackburn, Chorley, Newton, Bury, Whitefield, Chowbent and New Chapel –, a central committee in Bolton began to co-ordinate their claims to have suffered a one-third reduction in wages over the preceding two years. The campaign was used by the government to reinforce their case for the Combination Act passed in July 1799. This blunt tool of repression not only banned all trade unions, but took away certain constitutional liberties, most notably the right to trial by jury and appeal against conviction. It also, E. P. Thompson has claimed, “unwittingly brought the Jacobin tradition into association with the illegal unions.”<sup>67</sup> This statement has aroused considerable historical debate.<sup>68</sup> The evidence from the North-West, although

<sup>65</sup> Enclosure in E. Littleholes to Wickham, 14 January 1799, HO 100/85/69. See also enclosure in J. Shaw to Castlereagh, 26 March, HO 100/86/228.

<sup>66</sup> W. Wickham to Cooke, 13 May, HO 100/86/361. On the agent Orr, see Hone, *For the Cause of Truth*, pp. 61–62.

<sup>67</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, op. cit., p. 546.

<sup>68</sup> For the pro-Thompson position, see Baxter and Donnelly, “The Revolutionary ‘Underground’ in the West Riding”, loc. cit.; J. Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1974), pp. 38–39; Wells, *Insurrection*, pp. 48–53, 170–71. For criticism of his views, see Dinwiddy, “The ‘Black Lamp’ in Yorkshire”, and “A Rejoinder”, loc. cit.; M. I. Thomis, *The Town Labourer and the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1974), p. 186; Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty*, pp. 455–64; D. Bythel, *The*

suggestive, is mostly circumstantial. Whilst Barlow's information is unreliable, several other observers noted the similarity between the organisation of the weavers' union and the radical societies which both met in the same areas of the same towns.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore in 1801 James Holcroft, a leading figure in the Bolton weavers' committee, was reported to be assisting a collection to defray the costs of the trial of several men arrested for administering the United oath.<sup>70</sup> More positively, in that year another Bolton union leader, James Greenhalgh, was transported for committing the same offence.<sup>71</sup>

The more strident tone of the weavers' literature after the introduction of the Combination Act of 1799 further suggests that political and industrial matters were increasingly difficult to keep apart: "The opulent are protected by their opulence, experience daily demonstrates [ . . . ] the overbearing hand of wealth presses upon the poor", declared one broadsheet.<sup>72</sup> Politics was relevant to working men, a point emphasised by a recession in the cotton trade in the winter of 1799.<sup>73</sup> While wages fell still further, prices rocketed. Oats, wheat and potatoes, the staple diet of the lower classes, more than doubled in price between October 1798 and October 1800.<sup>74</sup> Relief schemes merely highlighted the extent of distress. Thousands

Handloom Weavers (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 207-11; Glen, *Urban Workers*, op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>69</sup> Apart from Orr's information, see Bancroft to Portland, 11 April 1799, HO 42/47; id. to Wickham, 29 April, PC 1/44/A155; Bayley to King, 8 May 1800, HO 42/50.

<sup>70</sup> Bancroft to Portland, 18 March 1801, HO 42/61.

<sup>71</sup> Id. to Wickham, 29 April 1799; Manchester Mercury, 1 September 1801; Information of J. Howard, 18 June 1801, HO 42/62; Hatton to White, 30 July 1801, HO 49/3; Palatinate of Lancaster Assize Indictments, 1801, Public Record Office PL 26/57.

<sup>72</sup> "On Combinations", enclosure in Bayley to Home Office, 7 November 1799, PC 1/45/A164. For the handbill literature, see W. Radcliffe, *Origin of the New System of Manufacture* (London, 1974), pp. 73-77; PC 1/44/A155 and 1/45/A164; HO 42/47.

<sup>73</sup> Diary of Timothy Cragg, October 1799, Lancashire County Record Office, Preston; Diary of William Rowbottom, 23 September, November, Oldham Public Library; Th. Fletcher, *Autobiographical Memoirs* (Liverpool, 1843), pp. 67-68. For the increasing difficulties in many trades in these years, see the entries in the diaries of Cragg and Rowbottom; Bayley (Manchester) to Home Office, 21 October 1800, HO 42/51; Ch. Prescott (Stockport) to Portland, 25 September; B. Markland (Blackburn) to Home Office, 28 September, HO 42/50; J. Hartley (Colne) to Home Office, November, HO 42/53; T. S. Ashton, *An Eighteenth-Century Industrialist: Peter Stubs of Warrington* (Manchester, 1939), p. 122; A. Redford, *Manchester Merchants and Foreign Trade* (Manchester, 1934), p. 144; R. Hodgkinson (Bury) to Lord Lilford, 31 October, Lilford Muniments, Lancashire County Record Office, DDL I/57; H. Bateson, "Saddleworth during the French Revolution", newspaper cutting in Oldham Public Library.

<sup>74</sup> On this and the reasons for it, see A. Booth, "Food Riots in the North-West of England, 1790-1801", in: *Past & Present*, No 77 (1977), pp. 88-89. Also, agricultural returns for Bury, Wigan, Lancaster, Ashton-under-Lyne, Colne and Stockport, November 1800, HO 42/53-54.

queued outside soup-kitchens in Manchester; its workhouse overflowed.<sup>75</sup> The situation at Chowbent, near Oldham, was typical. Here a committee established to visit the poor was horrified: “Their reports of distress and starvation are too shocking to repeat”, wrote Lord Lilford’s estate manager. “The bedding and cloths [sic] of the poor are entirely worn out and yet their earnings will not procure them half food.”<sup>76</sup> At nearby Dob Cross the poor were “half-naked”.<sup>77</sup> A virulent fever which swept across South Lancashire compounded their misery.<sup>78</sup>

The dogged perseverance of the poor, so warmly applauded by nervous magistrates, inevitably broke down. Factory fires mysteriously increased, robberies multiplied.<sup>79</sup> At Atherton, near Bury, the potato fields were persistently raided by hungry men, cows were slaughtered in the fields.<sup>80</sup> A wave of food rioting swept across the region. As in London and Yorkshire these disturbances had a distinctly political tinge.<sup>81</sup> The rioters’ targets were increasingly magistrates and government as well as grain dealers and farmers. Threats against property accompanied demands for cheaper bread. “I wish we had a peace and provisions lower”, wrote one observer, “as it is the odium rests on Government for every evil. Even the prevalence of the fever is ascribed to Mr. Pitt, as he is said to cause the dearness of provisions and want produces illness.”<sup>82</sup> Others commented upon the politicisation of the poor owing to the prevailing level of distress. The people were desperate. “Better to die in a battle rather than be starved in our houses” was a common saying in the early months of 1801.<sup>83</sup> By March 1801 a note of desperation had crept into the voices of men of authority. “Never was the castle at Lancaster so crowded”, noted Thomas Bayley, “We fast approach

<sup>75</sup> *Manchester Gazette*, 29 March 1800, 7 March 1801.

<sup>76</sup> Hodgkinson to Lilford, 24 January 1801, Lilford Muniments, loc. cit.

<sup>77</sup> Bateson, “Saddleworth during the French Revolution”.

<sup>78</sup> Rowbottom Diary, 30 October, 31 December 1800; 19 April 1801; *Chester Chronicle*, 5 December 1800; Hodgkinson to Lilford, 24 January 1801.

<sup>79</sup> Rowbottom Diary, 20 December 1800, 28 January and 7 February 1801; Bayley to Home Office, 21 October 1800; id. to Portland, 21 March 1801, HO 42/61; *Manchester Gazette*, 13 July 1799. There was a similar crime wave in Yorkshire, Wells, Dearth and Distress in Yorkshire, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>80</sup> Hodgkinson to Lilford, 22 March 1801, Lilford Muniments.

<sup>81</sup> See Booth, “Food Riots in the North-West of England”, loc. cit. On London, Hone, *For the Cause of Truth*, p. 93; J. Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England 1700-1870* (London, 1979), pp. 176-79.

<sup>82</sup> A.B. to Home Office, 22 March 1801, HO 42/61.

<sup>83</sup> Th. Ainsworth to Peel, 12 March, HO 42/61. See also Hodgkinson to Lilford, 22 March; Bayley to Portland, 30 November 1800, HO 42/53; *Manchester Gazette*, 27 December; Bancroft to King, 9 February 1801, HO 42/61; Bayley to Home Office, 21 October; Mayor of Wigan to Portland, 20 September, HO 42/51.



a state of anarchy.”<sup>84</sup> One terrified Bolton property-owner slept with three loaded shotguns at his bedside in case the poor should rise.<sup>85</sup>

Not surprisingly, it is at this point that the amorphous reports of radical activity which had characterised the previous six months begin to assume a more definite shape. The politicisation of food rioting, the discovery of United constitutions and the prevalence of rumour in the winter of 1800-01 had persuaded the magistracy that the United Englishmen were once again fomenting revolution. One recent historian, however, has not been so easily convinced. Roger Wells has claimed that although revolutionary cadres may have been struggling into existence in these months, they were quickly “swamped” by a mass-petitioning movement in the North organised along the lines of Major Cartwright’s town associations. The United oaths so frequently discovered were not evidence of a new physical-force initiative, but were used as a general commitment to petitioning. Thus in this period “The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the organisation of petitions was the first priority of northern activists”. Not until April-May did the United Englishmen try to capitalise upon the growing frustration of the petitioners.<sup>86</sup>

There was certainly a petitioning movement in Yorkshire, where the United Englishmen were only in 1801 beginning to establish themselves and where Cartwright knew the lie of the land.<sup>87</sup> Across the Pennines, however, the lower classes had dominated the radical movement since 1796, and a militant strain of radicalism had put down strong roots. Here, as Cookson points out, “the situation was altogether more volatile than elsewhere”.<sup>88</sup> In Lancashire Thomas Bayley, Manchester’s principal magistrate, observed in March 1801 that “Democrats of more rank and knowledge” were alarmed at the “wild theories” that had taken hold among the lower orders.<sup>89</sup> Here there was no burgeoning petitioning movement in the last months of 1800. Petitioning was mentioned only once before March 1801, and then amidst some loose talk in a pub concerning its past failure.<sup>90</sup> Whilst

<sup>84</sup> Bayley to Portland, 21 March 1801, HO 42/61.

<sup>85</sup> A.B. to Home Office, 22 March. On the tension in Lancashire in this month, see also the letters of Bancroft and Ainsworth in HO 42/61; Hodgkinson to Lilford, 22 March.

<sup>86</sup> Wells, *Insurrection*, pp. 187, 195-209.

<sup>87</sup> On Cartwright, see J. W. Osborne, *John Cartwright* (London, 1972), especially chs 5-7. Cartwright had close contacts with Christopher Wyvill, the Yorkshire reformer. See the correspondence between them in Ch. Wyvill, *Political Papers* (6 vols; York 1794-1802), V-VI; J. R. Dinwiddy, *Christopher Wyvill and Reform, 1790-1820* [Borthwick Papers, No 39] (1971), especially pp. 10-12.

<sup>88</sup> Cookson, *The Friends of Peace*, op. cit., p. 187.

<sup>89</sup> Bayley to Portland, 21 March 1801.

<sup>90</sup> Id. to Home Office, 18 November 1800, HO 42/53.

there were open-air meetings in Yorkshire towards the end of 1800, which Wells claims were part of the petitioning impulse, in Lancashire there was only one aborted gathering. This was to be on Billinge Hill on 17 November, and was said to be “of all people as were slaiving [sic] to redress their grievances that they should have their pikes and screws in readiness.”<sup>91</sup>

If by the beginning of 1801 Sheffield and, possibly, Nottingham were ready to petition,<sup>92</sup> Manchester certainly was not. Indeed the available evidence suggests that, in the winter of 1800, the United societies were gathering strength in the region rather than any petitioning movement becoming established. From Bolton and Stockport came news of plans to disarm the Volunteers and of former United activists in the area.<sup>93</sup> From Manchester and Wigan came reports of arming, contacts with Birmingham, Sheffield, London and Ireland, and a projected coup in which the banks would be seized and the national debt cancelled at a stroke.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, when the picture became clearer in March 1801, with the penetration of spies and the testimony of those arrested, it revealed not merely the administration of oaths, but the formation of divisions and a military-style organisation similar to that to be employed by Colonel Despard, as well as plans for arming and insurrection.<sup>95</sup> In the North-West the United Englishmen were too strong to let the initiative slip from their grasp in any reform initiative.

The spring of 1801 saw a major campaign launched against the prevailing level of distress. Beginning with a meeting at the *Britannia Inn* in Manches-

<sup>91</sup> Major Clayton to Home Office, 5 November, HO 42/53. On the Yorkshire meetings, see Wells, *Insurrection*, pp. 186, 194-95; Donnelly and Baxter, “Sheffield and the English Revolutionary Tradition”, loc. cit., pp. 406-07.

<sup>92</sup> Wells, *Insurrection*, p. 203.

<sup>93</sup> Bancroft to King, 9 February 1801; H. Watson to Bayley, 15 November 1800, HO 42/53. In particular James Moorhouse and John Magee were back at work, Bayley to Portland, 15 and 16 November 1800, HO 42/53; Bancroft to King, 15 December, HO 42/55. See also Bayley to King, 16 November 1799, PC 1/45/A164, for early evidence of a renewal of radical activity in Stockport.

<sup>94</sup> Bayley to Home Office, 18 November, and Bancroft to King, 10 and 18 November, HO 42/53; id. to King, 15 and 20 December, HO 42/55; id. to King, 9 February 1801; id. to Portland, 24 February; J. Singleton to Home Office, 24 March, HO 42/61.

<sup>95</sup> Bancroft to Portland, 7 and 14 March, and Portland to Bancroft, 14 March, HO 42/61. Bancroft noted that the men “upon being sworn are numbered and every man who can swear ten is to be a Sergeant.” The case of William Gallant was to provide more details. See Informations of P. Doran, 28 March, 3 April, and Informations of William Bowman, 3 April HO 48/10; Information of Daniel Porter, 5 April, HO 42/61. Another veteran radical, John Beswick, had also been arrested with a copy of the United oath on him, Hay to Portland, 12 March, HO 42/61. For his earlier activities, Bancroft to Portland, 24 November 1797; id. to Portland, 10 May 1798, HO 100/66/97.

ter on 18 March 1801, the following two months saw a rash of open-air demonstrations on remote moors and hillsides at Newton, Royton, Tandle Hill, Rusholme, Buckton Castle, Rivington Pike, Horwich Moor and several other unspecified sites in the region. These declared their intention to redress a wide range of grievances relating to the war, prices and wages as well as the state of representation.<sup>96</sup> Who was responsible for this campaign is as much a matter of debate amongst historians as it was amongst contemporaries. E. P. Thompson suspects the mark of the United Englishmen, a claim vigorously denied by Dr Dinwiddy.<sup>97</sup> More recently Roger Wells has seen in the meetings the culmination of the petitioning movement, whilst Marianne Elliott suggests that they were “designed to support the passage of the Weavers’ Bill through Parliament”.<sup>98</sup> The available evidence strongly suggests that in the North-West at least the meetings were organised by United activists, in an attempt to capitalise upon the groundswell of discontent which by March threatened to destabilise the whole of the cotton belt of South Lancashire and Northern Cheshire.

The evident organisation of these gatherings, from the prior arrangement of details to the disciplined system of assembling, is suggestive.<sup>99</sup> At Buckton Castle, the largest meeting and the one about which most is known, several thousand people were called together by the blowing of horns. They had been invited by friends, letters and handbills which requested the “friends of freedom” “to consult on some measures of redress of our Grievances”.<sup>100</sup> On the evening before some thirty delegates had arrived, “in small parties from different quarters”, to co-ordinate affairs using a sort of sign language, or so it appeared to a local man trying to eavesdrop on their conversation. The activists arrested at these assemblies were clearly United men. At the *Britannia Inn* meeting in Manchester Charles Bent, the principal speaker, was found to have the new test of the United Englishmen in his pocket. This had come from London and was to

<sup>96</sup> For their aims see Examination of Ch. Bent, 18 March 1801, and R. Fletcher to Portland, 6 April, HO 42/61; Manchester Gazette, 18 April. The cold logic of printed addresses sometimes gave way to demagoguery in the actual meetings, Bancroft to Portland, 2 May, HO 42/62.

<sup>97</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 517-20; Dinwiddy, “The ‘Black Lamp’ in Yorkshire”, pp. 121-22.

<sup>98</sup> Wells, *Insurrection*, pp. 209-13; Elliott, *Partners in Revolution*, p. 284.

<sup>99</sup> Th. Coke to Portland, 7 and 18 April 1801, HO 42/61; Bancroft to Portland, 2 May; Hay to Portland, 4 May, HO 42/62.

<sup>100</sup> Examination of Th. Bennett, 21 May, and Examination of J. Nadin, 20 May 1801, HO 48/10. See also Hay to Portland, 4 and 13 May, and Bancroft to Portland, 2 and 27 May, HO 42/62.

be used extensively by the society in the following months.<sup>101</sup> Another speaker, Richard Stansfield, had been a United leader since 1797,<sup>102</sup> while several of those in the audience were to be involved in the organisation later in 1801.<sup>103</sup> At Rivington Pike men from an Orrell colliery, “where it is said there are many United”, had tried to “twist-in” two young workmen asking them if they would have a “big loaf” for a shilling.<sup>104</sup> The Buckton Castle meeting provided further information. In the pocket of Thomas Bennett, an organiser of the demonstration, was discovered a paper which proved to be the method of proceeding of the Despard conspirators in London.<sup>105</sup> Indeed it was reported that several London delegates had been at Buckton. Thomas Bancroft, the senior Bolton magistrate, had been told by his spies that “the people about Ashton were too forward in their revolutionary movements, that it has required the strongest injunctions from London to prevent them rising.”<sup>106</sup> Bennett’s brother was also an avowed republican and upon being arrested cursed Pitt and Portland, declaring:

If I had said so five years ago, I should have found myself in Cold Bath Fields, but in a Quarter of a Year there will not one of them have a head upon their Bodies. [ . . . ] I was at the meeting at the Britannia Inn, with Citizen Gill, but I escaped by giving three shillings to the man at the Gates. [ . . . ] I believe I could turn a thousand in a month.<sup>107</sup>

The evidence suggests that in the North-West the campaign of the spring of 1801 was an attempt by the United Englishmen to turn the tide of discontent to their advantage. As such their aims were wideranging, and this would account for contemporary confusion concerning the purpose of the meetings. This confusion was increased by the vague nature of the handbills circulated which merely detailed a variety of grievances, and at most asked their audience “to consult on some measures of redress”. Indeed one reliable informer declared that harassment of the magistracy and military was one of the aims of the organisers.<sup>108</sup> Rumour therefore

<sup>101</sup> Copy of the Commitment [ . . . ] of those arrested on 18 March 1801, HO 42/61; Chester Courant, 24 March. The spy Hilton claimed that Bent had read this out to the audience, Information of E. Hilton, 18 March, HO 42/61.

<sup>102</sup> Further Evidence of R. Gray, 15 April 1798; Further Information of J. Dixon, 7 May.

<sup>103</sup> Notably John Rushworth, Robert Gill, John Bennett and John Scorr. See Fletcher to Pelham, 31 August 1802, HO 42/66; Examination of G. Halliwell, 18 March 1801, HO 42/61; Examination of J. Nadin, 20 May; Recognisance Rolls, 1801, Lancashire County Record Office QSB1/1801 (Gill).

<sup>104</sup> Bancroft to Portland, 27 May; Examination of Th. Kay, 4 April, HO 42/61.

<sup>105</sup> Examination of Th. Bennett, 21 May.

<sup>106</sup> Bancroft to Portland, 17 May, HO 42/62.

<sup>107</sup> Examination of J. Nadin, 20 May.

<sup>108</sup> Hay to Portland, 18 May.

abounded. Some felt that the application to Parliament to amend the Weavers' Bill was the "means of combining and stimulating the people"; others that revolution was in the air.<sup>109</sup> Of those arrested, several at the *Britannia Inn* meeting and one at Buckton Castle avowed that their aim was to petition for a redress of grievances.<sup>110</sup> As in the Luddite disturbances of 1812, however, this may have been a cover in the knowledge that more support and money could be gained this way.<sup>111</sup> Charles Bent had made it clear that if petitions failed "there would be a general rising of the people", and the text that he had read out to his audience had stated that "nothing short of a change of system can restore us to our Right."<sup>112</sup> The testimony of Thomas Bennett, arrested at Buckton, which mentioned petitioning was a tissue of evasion, and may have been an attempt to avoid prosecution in the manner of the men arrested at the *Britannia Inn* meeting, which his brother had attended.<sup>113</sup>

In Lancashire the radical initiatives of 1800 and 1801 were made by the United Englishmen. Here they were not swamped by a mass-petitioning movement, but rather directed an offensive from March 1801 against the high level of distress prompted by the recent expiry of the Habeas Corpus Suspension and Seditious Meetings Acts. Thus George Halliwell, a watchmaker arrested at the *Britannia Inn* and the only witness to crack, recalled that the principal speaker "was at the meeting speaking about the Habeas Corpus Act in an ambiguous way and said friends you know what I mean."<sup>114</sup> The information supplied by the spy "A" in May and June lends further support to such an interpretation. "A", a man chosen for his "intelligence and good memory", had been recruited by Hay, the zealous magistrate for Ashton-under-Lyne. He was the first fully to penetrate the United societies in 1801, and his testimony appears informed but not inflated. "A" confirmed that the open-air meetings were the work of United activists. At one divisional meeting at Crompton a petition was mentioned, but in such a way as to seem distant from realities in Lancashire.

<sup>109</sup> Bancroft to Portland, 2 May; Information of J. Shawcross, 11 May, HO 48/10.

<sup>110</sup> Examination of Ch. Bent, R. Coleclough, G. Halliwell, 18 March, HO 42/61; Examination of Th. Bennett, 21 May.

<sup>111</sup> J. Dinwiddy, "Luddism and Politics in the Northern Counties", in: *Social History*, IV (1979), p. 49.

<sup>112</sup> Examination of R. Coleclough, 18 March 1801, and Information of E. Hilton, 18 March, HO 42/61.

<sup>113</sup> Examination of J. Nadin, 20 May.

<sup>114</sup> Examination of G. Halliwell, 18 March. See also Information of E. Hilton, 18 March. The caution was due to the knowledge that there were likely to be spies at the meeting. Indeed a toast had been drunk wishing "Damnation to all spies and informers".

One of the principal Topics of Conversation turned on their friends in London – it was stated that their friends had a code of laws and a system of government ready and that people had been named to fill the principal offices. Mr. Horne Tooke was spoken of as a particular friend, and he was expected to present some petition to the House of Commons for a redress of grievances, and that the fate of that petition was to be the watchword for a general rising in London among the metropolitans.<sup>115</sup>

In Lancashire however, he noted, the talk was of invasion followed by an insurrection: “it was currently said that some of the members held correspondence with France, and that they have a promise of an invasion.”

#### IV

The United Englishmen had clearly been re-grouping for some time by May 1801. “A”, from his base in the Crompton society, told of cells throughout the area at Oldham, Stockport, Bury, Bolton, Rochdale, Ashton-under-Lyne, Gee Cross, Saddleworth, Failsworth and Manchester. Each township was divided into four or five districts according to membership size, and these met weekly at carefully varied locations. Delegates met quarterly, their information being passed through a central co-ordinating body called the Directory to the district meetings. By April 1801, however, a new *modus operandi* was becoming established. It was imported from London, where the societies had been re-invigorated by the release of the state prisoners on 2 March, and was already in use at Newton, Bolton and Staleybridge.<sup>116</sup> The new organisation was built upon units of ten. The whole operation was directed by the ten men of the “Executive”.

These communicated, by means of a Superintendent, with ten others in each district, called Conductors, each of whom was to have ten men under him, known only to himself, to swear in fresh members, to transmit a list of their names and places of abode to the Executive and such money as was collected for the use of the Society, to the Treasurer.<sup>117</sup>

In addition to the oath, a test comprising four questions had been included, though by May this had been abandoned in favour of instructing members in a variety of signals.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>115</sup> Hay to Portland, 18 May.

<sup>116</sup> Examination of Th. Bennett, 20 May, and Informations of P. Doran and W. Bowman, 3 April, HO 48/10; Hay to Portland, 18 May and 17 June.

<sup>117</sup> Cobbett's Parliamentary History, XXV, c. 1306: Second Report of the Commons Committee of Secrecy, 15 May 1801. For the printed rules on the appointment and duties of the Conductors and the oath of allegiance, see *ibid.*, c. 1301: Report of the Lords Committee.

Yet, as in 1797, the movement was soon faced with mounting problems. The re-imposition of the Seditious Meetings and Suspension Acts in April, and the report of the Committee of Secrecy the following month, drove them back underground and convinced the petitioners in Yorkshire of the futility of this tactic.<sup>119</sup> The Committee of Secrecy report also raised a crescendo of fury in the Tory press, and a major offensive in which large numbers of suspects were arrested. Between March and November 1801 forty-eight men were arrested for political offences, the largest annual total between 1790 and 1812. Local employers were urged to sack all men of radical persuasions.<sup>120</sup> The revival of trade and the falling price of provisions from May also eased the tension in the region. The movement ground to a dispirited halt. In June a special meeting of delegates from Bolton, Bury, Ashton, Saddleworth and Failsworth was convened to discuss the "state and strength" of the societies. There was talk of Southwark, the home of the Despard conspirators, as "a place where they had many friends" and where arms were deposited.<sup>121</sup> One of those present revealed that a subscription was in preparation to send representatives to a delegate meeting there. This was carried into Yorkshire, where Ralph Fletcher's spy "C" had been hawking radical publications with the veteran campaigner James Robinson of Hollinwood, who was said to be a "general messenger to all the principal districts in the kingdom". He had talked confidently of arms, an invasion and the holding of meetings in the provinces to distract the military in the event of "some fatal blow" being struck in London.<sup>122</sup>

The return of the delegates from London did little to raise spirits. It was reported that "a difference of opinion prevails on the measures proper to be pursued and [ . . . ] until some better arrangement can be agreed upon

<sup>118</sup> This test had first been discovered at the Britannia Inn meeting of 18 March in the pocket of the leading speaker, Charles Bent, Hay to Portland, 18 May.

<sup>119</sup> See Wells, *Insurrection*, pp. 213-15, for the impact of the London radicals. See also J. A. Busfield to Fitzwilliam, 14 April, Fitzwilliam Papers, f. 45/12, Sheffield Central Library.

<sup>120</sup> Fletcher to Portland, 6 June, HO 42/61. See *Manchester Mercury*, *Chester Courant* and *Blackburn Mail*, April-July. On the wave of arrests, see especially "Calendar of Crown Prisoners [ . . . ] in Lancaster Castle", 24 March, Lancashire County Record Office QJC/19; Examinations of J. Buckley, J. Stanfield and J. Jackson, 3 May, HO 48/10; Fletcher to Portland, 6 July, HO 42/62; Hatton to White, 6 August, HO 49/3; Court Order Book, 1801, Lancashire County Record Office QSO.

<sup>121</sup> Hay to Portland, 7 June, and Fletcher to Portland, 6 June, HO 42/62. The same was true of Yorkshire, Bancroft to Portland, 23 June, HO 42/62.

<sup>122</sup> Bancroft to Portland, 2 May, 9, 23 and 29 June, and Fletcher to Portland, 31 August, HO 42/62. For Robinson's activities in 1797 see above, p. 278.

nothing can be done.”<sup>123</sup> To seek clarification a new delegate, the veteran campaigner Caleb Taylor of Royton, was quickly despatched to the capital. His return brought news of a plan of insurrection and a “new mode of initiation”, a printed card which declared:

#### CONSTITUTION

The Independence of Great Britain and Ireland.

The Equalisation of Civil, Political and Religious Rights.

An ample Provision for the Families of the Heroes who shall fall in the contest.

A liberal Reward for distinguished Merit.

That these are the Objects for which we contend; and to obtain these we swear to be United.<sup>124</sup>

Beneath this was printed the oath of allegiance. Identical cards were to be discovered in Yorkshire in 1802 and upon the Despard conspirators in London. The card-oath was to be employed in association with the new more militaristic mode of organisation in preparation for the rising. For a short time it produced a new spate of activity, but this quickly gave way to disagreement. The reorganisation seems to have been used as an opportunity to shuffle the officers of the societies. The result was conflict “between the followers of the Old and New Mode, the Treasurers of the former refusing to pay over the cash in their hands to the Treasurers of the latter, and this causing an unwillingness in the members to contribute weekly (as they formerly did)”.<sup>125</sup>

The societies were rapidly losing momentum. The trials of those arrested in the summer and autumn and the weavers’ application to Parliament distracted them from wider issues. Trade continued to revive, and in November the death of Caleb Taylor, the principal delegate to London, was a further blow. The greatest setback, however, came in October 1801 with the ratification of peace preliminaries with France. The prospect of an invasion melted away and the peace was greeted with euphoria by a war-weary populace. The *Manchester Gazette* described the unbounded joy,

particularly from the laborious and the poor throughout the whole of this side of the Country. [. . .] in village, in hamlet or in town, [. . .] wherever the

<sup>123</sup> Fletcher to Portland, 6 July 1801. For the reasons for this difference of opinion, see Hone, *For the Cause of Truth*, p. 96.

<sup>124</sup> Fletcher to Portland, 28 July, HO 42/62. See his note “To the Friends of Freedom at Manchester, 20 June 1797”, PC 1/43/A152.

<sup>125</sup> Id. to Portland, 28 July; to Pelham, 31 August and 2 November, HO 42/62; to Pelham, 7 January and 3 April 1802, HO 42/65.



news was propagated. [. . .] Peace! Peace! was caught and was reverberated, with indescribable enthusiasm, from ear to ear and from voice to voice – Peace! Peace! was the cry. [. . .] No-one paused to enquire the terms. Peace [. . .] simple, naked, unconduted, unappointed Peace was the absolute and abstract object of the anxiety and the devotion of all: as if everything else in which they were interested, was consequently and inevitably to follow.<sup>126</sup>

Peace, lower prices and the “rapid career of every [sic] sort of business” brought “universal happiness” to the region: “Instid [sic] of the thin Meagre dejected Countinace [sic] we meet nothing worse than Constious [sic] Smiles. So much for this Blessed Peace.”<sup>127</sup>

Spies’ reports dwindled; the cause of revolution was “at a stand”. It was never to be as strong again. Nonetheless the societies were still in touch with Ireland, Bonaparte had re-stated his support for the Irish and English rebels, and in Yorkshire the United Englishmen were beginning to regain their momentum.<sup>128</sup> By April the cause was also reviving in Lancashire, perhaps due to the activities of William Cheetham, a veteran activist who in March 1802 had been sent to the “National Committee” to obtain instructions.<sup>129</sup> His trip was funded by a subscription which Charles Bent, Fletcher’s spy “B”, carried into Yorkshire, collecting six pounds and valuable information on the Leeds, Sheffield and Wakefield societies.<sup>130</sup> Cheetham’s experiences in London are not documented, but on 24 June Pawson, the Leeds delegate, told Bent that he had been introduced to several of the committee who asked “many questions respecting the State of the Country”. A further meeting was also attended by delegates from the United Irish society in London and the Guards, who presented a paper giving details of a projected coup. Those assembled then agreed

that the Tower and Bank should be seized first but not until Parliament is dissolved [. . .] and all Towns which are concerned in this Business shall have timely Notice, so as to have the Flags of Liberty ready to hoist and all

<sup>126</sup> Manchester Gazette, 10 October 1801. See also Rowbottom Diary, October, 8 November.

<sup>127</sup> Rowbottom Diary, 16 November. The trade revival continued in the following year, Report from the Select Committee on Manufactures, Commerce and Shipping [Parliamentary Papers, 1833, VI], q. 9437; Blackburn Mail, 26 May 1802; Daniels, “The Cotton Trade During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars”, loc. cit., p. 63.

<sup>128</sup> Fletcher to Pelham, 7 and 27 January, 3 April, 31 July 1802, HO 42/65. See also the many letters from Liverpool to Home Office, *ibid.* Ireland was still felt to be the scene of the “first burst of Rebellion”.

<sup>129</sup> Fletcher to Pelham, 7 January and 3 April. Cheetham, one of the State prisoners of April 1798, had been released in March 1801, and was soon “very forward to renew his evil Practices and to avow his bad Principles”, Bayley to Portland, 11 April, HO 42/61.

<sup>130</sup> Fletcher to Pelham, 3 April 1802; Donnelly and Baxter, “Sheffield and the English Revolutionary Tradition”, p. 409.

must join their own Standard; and that no private property must be meddled with on any pretence whatsoever.<sup>131</sup>

The projected coup never materialised. On 16 November 1802 Despard and over thirty of his supporters were arrested at the *Oakley Arms* in Lambeth. With these arrests the movement finally collapsed. In January 1803 a tour of the provinces to raise money for the defence of Despard and his fellow conspirators was far from productive. John Nicolls, the delegate responsible for the collections, was reported to be

highly disgusted with his journey. The Country Patriots are lukewarm and frightened and we have been much deceived in point of their numbers. He has brought to London only £3/11/6 in addition to the £10/10 – sent per post, and the Committee advanced him £5/5/9 to prosecute his journey, so that after travelling many hundreds of miles he has only profited us £8/13/6. So much for Country Civism.<sup>132</sup>

The news reached Ireland, where serious preparations were under way for the insurrection that was to have included the English radicals. In April a delegate was sent to Manchester to investigate the “backwardness” of the people there. He told Bent that in Ireland “they were numerous and never more determined”, and talked confidently of a French invasion.<sup>133</sup> It was too late. The system of spies which had burgeoned in this period had little to report. Under government instruction they turned their attention to surveillance of the growing Irish population and of any strangers in the area.<sup>134</sup> Particularly after the declaration of war with France in May 1803, there was nothing to tell of indigenous radicalism except a few seditious outbursts by individuals. Nobody was arrested for political offences in either 1802 or 1804. In 1803 there were only three arrests for seditious expressions. By December 1805 Ralph Fletcher felt able to recount that “At present from all the reports lately received it appears that there are no regular meetings of the disaffected in any part of this country – nor I believe in the great County of York adjoining.”<sup>135</sup>

Between 1797 and 1803 the United Englishmen in the North-West were among the first, and perhaps the most consistent, supporters of insurrectionary politics in the country. The product of dissatisfaction with the

<sup>131</sup> Fletcher to Pelham, 7 July 1802, HO 42/65.

<sup>132</sup> J. Notary to Mr Bruce, 7 February 1803, in M. W. Patterson, Sir Francis Burdett and his Times (2 vols; London, 1931), I, p. 169.

<sup>133</sup> Fletcher to King, 8 April 1802, HO 42/70.

<sup>134</sup> See Fletcher’s letters to King and Pelham in HO 42/72, 73, 77, 80-82. On the growing state of watchfulness at Liverpool letters in HO 42/67, 68, 71.

<sup>135</sup> Fletcher to King, 24 December 1805, HO 42/83. He was immediately ordered to dismantle his spy network, enclosed note from King, *ibid*.

faltering reformism of the Manchester Corresponding Society, their strength lay in the weaving districts of Manchester and its satellite towns, where political and industrial protest increasingly came together in the face of mounting distress. Their membership was small, though an advance on that of earlier reform societies in the region. In 1797 the Manchester society was some five hundred strong. In 1801 the reliable informer "A" gave figures of 274 for Bury, 361 for Bolton, 199 for Oldham and 427 for Manchester.<sup>136</sup> Their significance, however, far outweighed their size. For in these years English radical politics was played out in an international context. Plans for a rising were made in expectation of French assistance. This, as Marianne Elliott has shown, was no fanatical delusion and the government was right to take the threat seriously,<sup>137</sup> though whether an invasion would have unified an often disjointed movement and attached to it the growing groundswell of popular discontent is a matter of conjecture. Roger Wells has argued that it might have done so, but it is equally possible that a rallying to the flag would have occurred as had happened when the French "invaded" the Welsh Coast in 1797.<sup>138</sup> Whatever the prospect of revolutionary success, it receded rapidly after 1803, though the insurrectionary strand of radicalism remained stubbornly alive, particularly in the North-West, where it was to colour the Luddite disturbances of 1811.<sup>139</sup> Here the experiences of the later 1790's were critical in changing the character of both radical politics and popular sympathies. In this process the United Englishmen played no small part.

<sup>136</sup> Hay to Portland, 7 June 1801.

<sup>137</sup> Elliott, *Partners in Revolution*, *passim*.

<sup>138</sup> Wells, *Insurrection*, ch. 12. On the French invasion of 1797, see E. H. Stuart Jones, *The Last Invasion* (Cardiff, 1950). For the reaction to the invasion of 1797 in the North-West, see *Recollections of a Nonagenarian* (Liverpool, 1863), pp. 53-55.

<sup>139</sup> On the attempts of this small band of activists to turn events to their advantage, see King to J. Leaf, 24 May 1803, HO 42/70; Fletcher to Home Office, 23 November 1804, HO 42/79; id. to King, 16 February 1805, HO 42/80; id. to King, 16 January and 7 March, HO 42/82; Chippendale to Fletcher, 29 January 1806, HO 42/87; id. to Fletcher, 25 December 1807, in Fletcher to Home Office, 27 December, HO 42/91; Fletcher to Home Office, February 1808, HO 42/95. On the Luddite disturbances Dinwiddy, "Luddism and Politics in the Northern Counties", *loc. cit.* Copies of the United oath were found at the scene of the attack on Westhoughton factory, *Leigh Monthly Magazine*, 1845, p. 3.