

DR. RICHARD PRICE: RADICAL OR REVOLUTIONARY?¹

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Abstract

Born in Wales and based in London the dissenting minister and intellectual polymath Richard Price (1723–1791) has been called a formative mind of the Enlightenment, Britain's first left-wing intellectual, and the greatest thinker Wales has thus far produced. Through his efforts at promoting political and social reform and his advocacy of civil liberty, in which he expressed support for the American Revolutionaries and the opening events of the French Revolution, Price is seen as a key eighteenth-century radical. Yet his passionate support for revolution in America and France introduces considerable ambiguity into his position as simply a radical reformer.

Introduction

Between leaving Wales for London in 1740 and the onset of the troubles in colonial America in 1775, the background to Richard Price's life, at home and abroad, is one of war.² From 1776 until his death in 1791 this changed to one of revolution.³ For Price these later revolutionary years were a time when a 'spirit' was in the air. It emanated first from America and he felt sure it 'must in time produce great effects' in Europe. 'A general fermentation seems to be taking place' he wrote to his revolutionary friend Benjamin Franklin in September 1787, just two years before the start of the French Revolution. 'The minds of men are becoming more enlightened, and the silly despots of the world are likely to be forced to respect human rights and to take care not to govern too much lest they should not govern at all.'⁴

¹ Parts of this paper were first given at the Yale Centre for Representative Institutions Conference 'Revolution, Dissent and Democracy: The Political Thought of Richard Price' at Yale University, 11 and 12 September 2015 and, more recently, to the Richard Price Society and members of the Cymmrodorion. I am grateful for the many comments and questions relayed at those events which have helped formulate the paper as it is presented here.

² The War of Austrian Succession (1741–48), the Jacobite Rebellion (1745), and the Seven Year or French and Indian War (1756–63).

³ The American Revolution (1776), Revolution in Geneva (1782 and 1789), the Dutch Patriot Revolution (1787), the Revolt of the Belgians (1787–89), the French Revolution (1789). For details see Janet Polasky, *Revolutions without Borders: the Call to Liberty in the Atlantic World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

⁴ 'Price to Benjamin Franklin, 26 September 1787', in *The Correspondence of Richard Price*, ed. by Bernard Peach and D. O. Thomas, 3 vols (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press; Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1983–94), iii, 149 (hereafter *Corr.*).

Born in 1723 in Tynton, a still extant farmhouse in the village of Llangeinor in south Wales and educated at various Dissenter academies in Wales and London, Richard Price was an eighteenth-century polymath. He made substantial contributions to subjects as diverse as moral philosophy, theology, actuarial science, probability studies, astronomy, demography, civil liberties and political and social reform. His significance in the history of science has recently been discussed in these Transactions⁵ and his championing of civil liberties, political reform, and religious toleration are the subject of numerous papers and books.

The epithet ‘revolutionary’ however is not usually applied to Price in historical or modern sources. Instead he is described less controversially as a ‘radical’ or simply ‘a reformer’. A man who, as Christopher Wyvill put it in *A Defence of Dr Price and the Reformers of England* (1792), ‘preferred safe and progressive improvement to the doubtful event of great but hazardous Revolution’.⁶ It is a conclusion echoed in D. O. Thomas’s 1977 work *The Honest Mind: The Thought and Work of Richard Price*. In a powerful analysis of Price’s political thinking in relation to the criticisms of it in Edmund Burke’s classic outline of conservatism, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Thomas throws down a challenge to those modern writers who would see Price as a revolutionary. Price’s ‘main preoccupation’, Thomas argues, ‘was with the restoration and the purification of the [British] constitution and any claim that he was a revolutionary must be understood in that light.’⁷ A consideration of this challenge is the subject of this paper.

Radical or revolutionary?

As a founder member of the Society for Constitutional Information and as a pamphleteer on civil liberties, Richard Price had long advocated reform of the British constitution by the abolition of such anachronisms as rotten boroughs and through the redistribution of constituencies, shorter parliamentary terms, and an extension of the franchise. To many these reforms were decidedly radical but none of them seemed precursors to, nor threatened, the revolutionary overthrow of Britain’s balanced constitution of commons, lords and monarch. In a discourse given at the Old Jewry Meeting-House in London on 25 April 1787, Price’s defence of this balanced constitution, as well as his desire to see its ‘restoration and purification’, are evident. So too is an appreciation that some people were suspicious as to his true political position.

⁵ John V. Tucker, ‘Richard Price in the History of Science’, *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 23 (2017), 69–86.

⁶ Christopher Wyvill, *A Defence of Dr. Price and the Reformers of England* (London: n. pub., 1792), p. 64.

⁷ D. O. Thomas, *The Honest Mind: The Thought and Work of Richard Price* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), p. 306.

I cannot help taking this opportunity to remove a very groundless suspicion with respect to myself by adding that so far am I from preferring a government purely republican, that I look upon our own constitution of government as better adapted than any other to this country, and in Theory excellent. I have said in Theory, for, in consequence of the increase of corruption and the miserable inadequateness of our representation, it is chiefly the theory and form of our constitution that we possess, and this I reckon our first and worst and greatest grievance.⁸

Given their content it is not surprising that Price's writings and oratory gave rise to a suspicion of republicanism which then, as now, implies an absence of hereditary aristocracy and monarchy.⁹ Two examples of his writing will suffice to illustrate the point. The first is from his writing on the American Revolution and the second is from his writing in the wake of the French Revolution.

Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution and the Means of Making it a Benefit to the World (1784) is Price's third and final pamphlet of advice to the American revolutionaries.¹⁰ In a section entitled 'Of an Unequal Distribution of Property' he notes, 'there is an equality in society which is essential to liberty and which every state that would continue virtuous and happy ought as far as possible to maintain.' Among the enemies to that equality, he argues, is the right of primogeniture¹¹ which by creating a disposition to 'raise a name by accumulating property in one branch of a family is a vanity no less unjust and cruel than dangerous to the interest of liberty and no wise state will encourage or tolerate it'. A further enemy to equality was the granting of hereditary honours and titles of nobility, since persons so distinguished tended to think of themselves as superior and 'made for power and government' while at the same time being 'hostile to general liberty'.¹² At the publication of *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution* in 1784 Price's intent was for its readership to be solely in America; there was no

⁸ Richard Price, 'A Future Period of Improvement in the State of Mankind', in *Price: Political Writings*, ed. by D. O. Thomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 164–65 (hereafter *PW*).

⁹ For a discussion of 'Republican' in relation to Price's time see D. O. Thomas, 'Neither Democrat nor Republican', *The Price-Priestley Newsletter*, 1 (1977), 49–60 (p. 52).

¹⁰ The others are *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, the Principles of Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War with America* (1776) and *Additional Observations on the Nature and Value of Civil Liberty, and the War with America* (1777). See *PW* pp. 20–75 and pp. 76–100, respectively.

¹¹ In the wake of the revolution in France primogeniture would be replaced by partible or equipartition inheritance. In America, Thomas Jefferson would abolish the entail that helped ensure the descent of property through the generations. For a discussion of Price's attitude see Paul Frame, *Liberty's Apostle; Richard Price his Life and Times* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015), p. 169; for the situation in post-revolution France see Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 361–66.

¹² Price, 'Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution', in *PW*, pp. 116–51 (pp. 145–46).

intention to publish it in Britain. It was only because of a threat of pirated editions being made available in Britain that a London edition appeared the next year, 1785.¹³ For that London edition Price did not change his attack on primogeniture and hereditary honours, despite their significance to the balanced British constitution. Whether Price simply forgot or was not concerned enough to modify his position for a British audience is not known.

In early August 1790, in the wake of the French Revolution of July 1789, Price received a letter from the Citizens of the District of Quimper in Brittany. In it they thanked him for his *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*, delivered on 4 November 1789 to the Society for Commemorating the [1688 Glorious] Revolution in Great Britain, at the end of which he had passionately welcomed the opening events of the French Revolution.¹⁴ In his reply to the Citizens of Quimper, and despite the fact that he is writing to people in the throes of a tumultuous revolution, Price appears in the guise of the radical reformer removed from any revolutionary cause as he again expresses support for the balanced constitution and the need for its radical reform:

The Government of BRITAIN would be *nearly* such a Government as is here meant, and its constitution would be *all* that the writer of this letter can wish to see it, were the three States that compose it perfectly independent of one another, and the House of COMMONS in particular, an equal and fair representation of the kingdom, guarded against corruption by being frequently renewed, and the exclusion of placemen and pensioners.¹⁵

Yet this support for Britain's balanced constitution is directly challenged by advice he proffered earlier in the same letter. Revolutionary France, he writes, has helped establish that

[...] the governing power in every nation ought to be, not the will of any man or classes of men pretending to hereditary rights, but the collected wisdom of the nation drawn from the general mass, and centered [*sic*] in a NATIONAL ASSEMBLY by such modes of election, and such an extension of its rights, as form a part of the new constitution of France.¹⁶

¹³ For full details of the publication histories of the pamphlet (and its translation into French by Mirabeau) see D. O. Thomas, John Stephens and P. A. L. Jones, *A Bibliography of the Works of Richard Price* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993), pp. 116–120.

¹⁴ Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (London: n. pub., 1789).

¹⁵ Price, 'Appendix', in *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, 4th edn (London: n. pub., 1790), pp. 41–42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Not only does he deny here the principle of ‘any man [king?] or classes of men [Lords?] pretending to hereditary rights’ as the governing power, he also states, crucially, that in ‘every nation’ the governing power should not be reliant on such rights. It is hard to reconcile this position with D. O. Thomas’s assertion that Price was ‘not hostile to monarchy’. Any attack on the hereditary principle (and primogeniture) in Britain would undermine the legitimacy of the House of Lords, seriously affect the make-up of the House of Commons (particularly when coupled with Price’s advocacy of a much wider franchise without which ‘government is nothing but an usurpation’), and in no small degree impact negatively on the position of an hereditary monarchy.

Price was always keen to see a reduction in the power of monarchy, even of Britain’s constitutional one. In an undated manuscript, probably written during the Regency Crisis of 1788 when the illness of George III meant it was possible the Prince of Wales might become regent in his father’s place, Price notes under the heading ‘Reasons for making the Prince of Wales perpetual regent’ that ‘It is of some weight with me, that a permanent regency will contribute to destroy the notion of the independent and indefeasible rights of Kings to govern’. Under the second heading, ‘Reasons against a perpetual regency’, he notes, ‘the danger of a dreadful struggle to restore the King after a recovery. Such are the notions still remaining among us of the rights of Kings.’ In finally deciding in favour of a permanent regency he wanted it tempered by a temporary period first and also by ‘a proposal of such conditions to the Regent as shall bind him to such points as are most desired by the kingdom and most necessary to its welfare’,¹⁷ which sounds suspiciously like an attempt ‘to ensure the implementation of the political and social changes he wished to see in Britain’, and had long advocated.¹⁸

In *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution*, Price went even further regarding monarchy and hereditary honours. He advised the Americans to ‘continue for ever what it is now their glory to be – a confederation of states prosperous and happy, without lords, without bishops and without kings’.¹⁹ To these unequivocally republican sentiments, which are also pregnant with democratic and revolutionary possibility, he added a footnote at the word ‘bishops’:

I do not mean by ‘bishops’ any officers among Christians merely spiritual, but lords spiritual, as distinct from lords temporal, or clergymen raised to pre-eminence and invested with civil honours

¹⁷ Beryl Thomas and D. O. Thomas, ‘Richard Price’s Journal for the Period 25 March 1787 to 6 February 1791, Deciphered by Beryl Thomas with an Introduction by D. O. Thomas’, *National Library of Wales Journal*, 21.4 (1980), p. 400.

¹⁸ Frame, *Liberty’s Apostle*, p. 203.

¹⁹ Richard Price, ‘Observation on the Importance of the American Revolution’, in *PW*, p. 146. Price had first expressed similar sentiments in the ‘General Introduction’ to his *Two Tracts on Civil Liberty* of 1778 (*PW*, p.19) where he saw America as ‘A rising empire, extended over an immense continent, without bishops, without nobles, and without kings’. He felt no need to add any footnote qualification on that occasion.

and authority by a state establishment. I must add that by what is here said I do not mean to express a general preference of a republican constitution of government. There is a degree of political degeneracy which unfits for such a constitution. Britain, in particular, consists too much of the high and the low (of scum and dregs) to admit of it. Nor will it suit America should it ever become equally corrupt.²⁰

In discussing Price's 'no lords, no bishops, no kings' text as it appeared in *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution*, D. O. Thomas maintained that 'Price had no wish to abolish the Monarchy, neither did he wish to abolish the Lords (even though he could congratulate other nations on the happy accident whereby they found themselves without them . . .)'.²¹ Yet this 'happy accident' was the consequence of a violent revolutionary upheaval and if Price's earlier noted advice to the Americans and the French on nobility, hereditary honours and primogeniture were implanted into the British state, as his 'every nation' advice to the Citizens of Quimper implies it should be, the House of Lords and the monarchy would be seriously undermined as any proposal inimical to heredity and primogeniture is a challenge to those institutions.

In *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Edmund Burke likened Price and his attitude to monarchy to that of Hugh Peter, the Cromwellian Divine whose sermons had helped realize the execution of Charles I; Peter was also popularly believed to have been the masked assistant to the executioner of the king. Folk memory aside, Peter had come to Britain from America, where he had attended Harvard. He also preached in a sermon given in 1648 that 'This army [the New Model Army] must root out monarchy, not only here but in France and other kingdoms round about'.²² How knowledgeable about Peter the readers of *Reflections* might have been is impossible to say, but clearly Burke's comparison of Price with Peter has some significance.

It is clear too that in the light shone on monarchy in France by the revolution of July 1789 Price reviewed the nature and functioning of the institution in Britain. He noted his feelings on the issue in a letter to America's representative in Paris, Thomas Jefferson, on 3 August. The French Revolution, he felt, was 'one of the most important revolutions that have ever taken place in the world'.

A Revolution that must astonish Europe; that shakes the foundation of despotic power; and that probably will be the commencement of a general reformation in the governments of the world which hitherto have been little better than usurpations on the rights of mankind, impediments to the progress of human improvement, and contrivances for enabling a few grandees to oppress and enslave the rest of mankind. Glorious patriots! How has my heart been with

²⁰ *PW*, p. 146, n. 16.

²¹ Thomas, *Honest Mind*, p. 306.

²² Quoted in Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change & Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 569.

them? And how ardently do I wish they may finish the great work they have begun in a manner that shall be most honourable to themselves and most beneficial to the world to which they are giving an example.

He then compared the newly developing situation in France with that pertaining at the same time in Britain:

Indeed the Patriots in *France* pay us too great a compliment by speaking of us, as I find they do, as their model, and considering themselves as imitating us. I scarcely believe we are capable of making such an exertion as the French nation is now making with a spirit of unanimity altogether wonderful. We are duped by the forms of liberty. A representation so partial as to be almost a mockery and so venal as to be little better than a nuisance bears the name of a *real* representation. Our Patriots are vicious men, and their opposition in general is nothing but a vile struggle for power and its emoluments. It is happy for the people of *France* at this crisis that they have no forms to deceive them, and that their struggle is with absolute power avowed, and not with a power apparently limited but really absolute in consequence of an undue influence which overturns the constitution and spreads corruption thro' every corner of the kingdom.²³

The crucial inference here is surely that while the French 'struggle is with absolute power avowed' in Britain it is with a more insidious 'power apparently limited but really absolute'. In eighteenth-century thinking the essential word in 'Britain's balanced constitution' is *balance*. As Bernard Bailyn notes in his *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*,

So long as the crown, the nobility, and the democracy remained in their designated places in government and performed their designated political tasks, liberty would continue to be safe in England and its dominions. But if any of them reached beyond the set boundaries of their rightful jurisdictions; if, particularly, the agencies of power – the prerogative, administration – managed, by corrupt practices, to insinuate their will into the assembly of the commons and to manipulate it at pleasure, liberty would be endangered [...] The very idea of liberty was bound up with the preservation of this balance of forces.²⁴

²³ 'RP to Thomas Jefferson, 3 August 1789', in *Corr.*, III, pp. 247–48.

²⁴ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 5th printing (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1971), pp. 76–77.

The question, then, becomes: had Price, in his letter to Jefferson, come to see the British situation he had long claimed to be in need of reform as having moved from one of limited power to an absolute one? In such an absolutist position might he have felt that the situation had moved beyond reform to the need for something more dramatic, perhaps even revolutionary? If this were so, the monarchy would undoubtedly be in some danger given his already noted comments on hereditary rights and another he had made in a July 1786 letter to physician, and signatory to the American Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Rush. The comment comes in a section discussing the possibility of episcopacy being established in America:

How strange is it, that the same people who have discarded the nonsense of the hereditary right of Kings should retain the greater Nonsense of the Hereditary right (or uninterrupted succession) of Bishops.²⁵

If the hereditary right of Kings is ‘nonsense’, and he is talking here of the rule of George III that the Americans ‘have discarded’, then the constitution of Britain is again undermined.

Price also appears little moved by the increasing plight of the monarchy in France. His surviving correspondence and his personal journal are resolutely silent on the issue of the October Days in 1789 when a violent crowd stormed Versailles and forced the French royal family to move into what was effectively imprisonment in Paris. Two weeks after the event he simply confides to his journal that ‘the affairs of France continue interesting in the highest degree through forming a new constitution there which will be an example and instruction to the world’.²⁶ Forming a new constitution in France was something he supported ‘whatever may be the consequences for this country [Britain], for I have learnt to consider myself more as a citizen of the world than of any particular country, and to such a person every advance that the cause of public liberty makes must be agreeable’.²⁷

On a wet 4 November 1789, Price gave his celebrated *A Discourse on the Love of our Country* to his fellow members of the [1688] Revolution Society assembled in the Old Jewry Meeting-House in London. It ends with his dramatic welcoming of the revolution in France and his warning to those who oppose change and reform:

After sharing in the benefits of one Revolution [1688], I have been spared to be a witness to two other Revolutions, both glorious. And now, methinks, I see the ardour for liberty catching and spreading, a general amendment beginning in human affairs, the dominion of kings changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience.

²⁵ ‘RP to Benjamin Rush 30 July, 1786’, in *Corr.*, III, p. 56.

²⁶ Entry for 18 October 1789, in Thomas and Thomas, ‘Richard Price’s Journal’, p. 391.

²⁷ ‘RP to Thomas Jefferson 26 October 1788’, in *Corr.*, III, p. 182.

Be encouraged, all ye friends of freedom and writers in its defence! The times are auspicious. Your labours have not been in vain. Behold kingdoms, admonished by you, starting from sleep, breaking their fetters, and claiming justice from their oppressors! Behold, the light you have struck out, after setting America free, reflected to France and there kindled into a blaze that lays despotism in ashes and warms and illuminates Europe!

Tremble all ye oppressors of the world! Take warning all ye supporters of slavish governments and slavish hierarchies! Call no more (absurdly and wickedly) reformation, innovation. You cannot now hold the world in darkness. Struggle no longer against increasing light and liberality. Restore to mankind their rights and consent to the correction of abuses, before they and you are destroyed together.²⁸

At a meeting of the same Society a year later (1790) Price proposed a toast: ‘the Parliament of Britain – may it become a NATIONAL Assembly.’ D. O. Thomas suggests that Price ‘was not always sufficiently guarded in his statement of the principle of popular political sovereignty’ and that this toast ‘was a mistake for it gave the impression that his proposals for reform were much more radical and far-reaching than they were’.²⁹ Furthermore, it reflected ‘an unmeasured and unqualified enthusiasm for recent developments in France’.³⁰ Both Price’s toast and the peroration to his *Discourse on the Love of our Country* could be read in this light, but the *Discourse* peroration was not simply an ‘unmeasured’ enthusiasm for the situation in France. The form of words he used had been developing for some time, as this extract from a letter to the Marquis of Lansdowne in September 1789 illustrates: ‘If I mistake not a day of Judgment is coming upon slavish governments and Hierarchies; and their abettors were they wise would prepare for it, and by yielding in time and consenting to reform gradually would endeavour to lessen the violence of their fall.’³¹ If anything Price seems to have *deliberately* strengthened rather than weakened the rhetorical power of his words for his 4 November oration.

As he had with some of his other utterances, Price attempted to qualify the meaning of his toast in an appendix to the fourth edition of the published *Discourse*. His real intention with the toast, he suggests, had been to say that ‘the representation of the kingdom [of Britain]’ should be reformed so that ‘the Parliament, consisting of Lords and Commons, might be justly deemed a *National Assembly*’.³² Nevertheless, the toast certainly did represent a dangerous enthusiasm, for, by the time Price made it, the French National Assembly, into which he hoped the British parliament might morph, had already abolished feudalism and privileges (4 August 1789), rejected a second chamber (10 September 1789), nationalized church

²⁸ Richard Price, ‘A Discourse on the Love of Our Country’, in *PW*, pp. 195–96.

²⁹ D. O. Thomas, *Ymateb i Chwyldro / Response to Revolution* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1989), pp. 41–3.

³⁰ Thomas, ‘Neither Republican nor Democrat’, p. 54.

³¹ ‘RP to Marquis of Lansdowne 9 September 1789’, in *Corr.*, III, p. 257.

³² Price, ‘Appendix’, p. 42.

property (2 November 1789) and abolished nobility (19 June 1790).³³ Given Price's extensive correspondence with Paris at this time, as a member of the correspondence committee of the Revolution Society and through personal correspondents such as Mirabeau and the duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, it seems highly unlikely he was unaware of these developments. It is odd, therefore, that a well-informed man acting as chairman of the 4 November meeting, who was lauded for 'his wisdom and prudence in that situation', should utter a toast that was 'unmeasured and unqualified'. A further objection to Price uttering 'unmeasured and unqualified' comments comes from Christopher Wyvill, whose assessment of Price's character was as a 'cool and rational' man.³⁴

In his *Defence of Dr Price*, Christopher Wyvill also suggests,

[T]he conduct of Dr. Price respecting the Revolution in France is free from objection. His exultation on the establishment of French Liberty, was expressed in unison with the general joy of his Countrymen; who without any invidious reference to the Constitution of England, or any wish to adopt the peculiarities of the New Constitution of France, rejoiced with him that the millions of men who had been Slaves in that Country, had regained THEIR NATURAL RIGHT TO BE FREE.³⁵

Yet if Price had no wish for Britain to emulate 'the peculiarities' of the new French Constitution we must wonder why he bothered to add, and comment favourably upon, the French Declaration of Rights included as an appendix to the first published edition of his *Discourse on the Love of our Country*; a Declaration which, as he notes in an introductory comment, not only 'forms the basis of the new Constitution of France' but also 'contains [...] authority for some of the sentiments' contained in his own *Discourse*.³⁶

Conclusion

It has not been the aim of this paper to prove conclusively or otherwise that Richard Price was a revolutionary. The aim has been to address the challenge noted at the beginning: to consider a claim to revolutionary status in light of the belief that his main preoccupation was the restoration and purification of Britain's balanced constitution. Revealed, it is hoped, by the examples given above is the ambiguity of his position in this regard – on the one hand wanting to see reform of the British constitution yet consistently rejecting the idea of hereditary rights on which a large part of it is based. A man who, on the one hand supports the balanced British

³³ William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, paperback edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 435.

³⁴ Wyvill, *Defence of Dr. Price*, p. 63.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³⁶ Price, 'Appendix', in *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, 5th edn (London: n. pub., 1790), p. 5.

constitution, yet on the other writes and speaks powerfully in support of revolutionaries and revolutionary events abroad and who welcomes an absence of lords and kings; a man who wilfully or otherwise published in Britain political ideas inimical to its constitution. How, then, do we explain this ambiguous position?

Price was not alone in his ambiguity, as the example of Sir William Jones illustrates. Jones, the celebrated Anglo-Welsh poet, linguist and lawyer, otherwise known as ‘Orientalist Jones’ or ‘Republican Jones’, was a fellow member of the Club of Honest Whigs with Price, and, from 1782, a member of the Society for Constitutional Information. In a 1780 letter to the MP David Hartley (while canvassing for Hartley’s electoral vote for Jones)³⁷ Price described Jones as ‘a friend whom I highly value’ and a man of excellent ‘public principles’ and ‘a zealous and decided Whig’.³⁸ In 1782 Price would almost certainly have seen a copy of *Ode in Imitation of Alcæus*, a poem written by Jones while travelling in a chaise between Abergavenny and Brecon³⁹ and which he described as ‘*the last sigh of my departed hope* for a renovation of our free Constitution’.⁴⁰ Beginning ‘*Althorp*, what forms a state?’, it goes on to declare that it is ‘Men, who their duties know, | But know their rights, and knowing dare maintain, | Prevent the long-aim’d blow, | And crush the tyrant, while they rend the chain; | These constitute a state.’⁴¹

In 1781 Jones wrote from Oxford to Viscount Althorp displaying the sort of divided political thinking also seen in Price:

I have already received some invitations here to dine in other colleges: yet they look upon me as a *republican*; very unjustly, if they mean one, who wishes to see a republick in *England*; but very justly, if they mean one, who thinks a republick *in the abstract* the only rational, manly, intelligible form of government.⁴²

Price too denied being a republican and a democrat,⁴³ while producing political ideas that encouraged increased democracy and, it can be argued, republicanism.⁴⁴

³⁷ The seat was Oxford University and Jones had noted that ‘Patronage, I fear, will carry votes against me: it must therefore be exerted for me’. See Michael J. Franklin, *Orientalist Jones. Sir William Jones, Poet, Lawyer, and Linguist 1746–1794* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 166. Price, who abhorred vote canvassing and the corruption it so often entailed, seems to have obliged his friend on this occasion.

³⁸ ‘RP to David Hartley, the Younger, 30 May 1780’, in *Corr.*, II, pp. 60–61.

³⁹ Franklin, *Orientalist Jones*, p. 177. The poem received wide acclaim and was sent to members of the Club of Honest Whigs and published by the Society for Constitutional Information. Price was a member of both.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *The Letters of Sir William Jones*, ed. by Garland Cannon, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), II, 463–64.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 499.

⁴³ The argument can be found in Thomas, ‘Neither Republican nor Democrat’, pp. 49–60.

⁴⁴ See Chapter 5 of Yiftah Elazar, ‘The Liberty Debate: Richard Price and his Critics on Civil Liberty, Free Government and Democratic Participation’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Princeton University, 2012), available online. Also D. O. Thomas, ‘Neither Republican nor Democrat’, pp. 49–60.

By 1782 Jones clearly felt the need to go further when faced with a possible peace with America: 'I am free to own, that, if peace were obtained abroad, I should prefer the horrors of civil war (though I have much to lose) to the enormous prevalence of monarchical or aristocratical power; and I wish to God, that every elector of Britain had as bright a bayonet as mine, with as much resolution as I feel myself to possess.'⁴⁵

Jones might be seen here as treading on the highly sensitive ground 'between the politics of speculation and the politics of incitement'.⁴⁶ It can be argued that this is the ground Price is treading too, but with words and political ideas rather than bayonets and, importantly, publicly as well as privately. A degree of caution and control in expressing political ideas was necessary for one's own security in troubled times, but such reticence could lead to a form of intellectual dishonesty whereby favoured ideals – such as republicanism (or even revolution) – are relegated to the abstract and viewed as 'a lost hope' through the necessity of being dishonestly conformist. Price, though cautious at times, is not guilty of this because so many of his controversial ideas and ideals entered the public domain at his own instigation.

The one person among Price's contemporaries to see his thinking in terms of Revolution was Edmund Burke. A substantial part of his concern over Price is expressed in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which was written in answer to the threat posed by the 'wicked principles' Price had celebrated in his *Discourse on the Love of Our Country*. The *Reflections* concentrated particularly on the threat those principles represented to the established church, and on the call of Price and his fellow 'reformers' for an extension of the franchise and their assertion of the illegitimacy of a government without it. When considering the latter cause Burke launched into a rhetorical attack which has even greater power when considered in conjunction with Price's publicly expressed opinion on hereditary honours, primogeniture and monarchy:

Indeed their principle ['the Revolutionists', Price among them], if you observe it with any attention, goes much further than to an alteration in the election of the house of commons; for, if popular representation, or choice, is necessary to the *legitimacy* of all government, the house of lords is, at one stroke, bastardized and corrupted in blood. That house is no representative of the people at all, even in 'semblance or in form'. The case of the crown is altogether as bad.⁴⁷

Allied to these fears Burke also saw in Price's *Discourse* a call to action, which Burke addressed by adding his own selected *emphasis* to Price's words:

⁴⁵ *Letters of Sir William Jones*, II, p. 527.

⁴⁶ Franklin, *Orientalist Jones*, p. 201.

⁴⁷ *Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. by Conor Cruise O'Brien, paperback edn (London, 2004), p. 147.

The gentlemen of the Revolution Society, who were so early in their congratulations [to the French National Assembly], appear to be strongly of opinion that there is some scheme of politics relative to this country, in which your proceedings may, in some way, be useful. For your Dr. Price, who seems to have speculated himself into no small degree of fervour upon this subject, addresses his auditory in the following very remarkable words: ‘I cannot conclude without recalling *particularly* to your recollection a consideration which I have *more than once alluded to*, and which probably your thoughts have *been all along anticipating*; a consideration with which *my mind is impressed more than I can express*. I mean the consideration of the *favourableness of the present times to all exertions in the cause of liberty*’.⁴⁸

So, was Burke right to see Price in a revolutionary light? After highlighting his fears that Price was a man advocating action as well as ‘wicked principles’, Burke continued by saying, ‘It is plain that the mind of this *political Preacher* was at the time big with some extraordinary design.’⁴⁹ In September 1789 Price had written to his friend the Marquis of Lansdowne from a rented cottage at Southerndown on the south Wales coast:

I find that a similar Revolution [to that in France] has already taken place in the Principality of Liege. Other European states will, I hope, soon follow; and sometime or other, perhaps, Britain ashamed to be left behind, will catch the contagion and demand with an irresistible voice like that of France a correction of abuses, and particularly an equal and virtuous representation in the room of that partial and corrupt one with which it is now mocked.⁵⁰

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a revolutionary as ‘a person who instigates or supports revolution; a participant in a particular revolution’. Price did not take part in any revolution even though he was given the chance when the American Congress, at the height of the revolutionary war, offered to bring him to America as their first financial advisor. He refused the offer. That he supported revolution in America and the early events in France through his oratory and published writings is beyond doubt. Some might even see his efforts as helping instigate such events. ‘Pamphlets, not muskets, ignited the revolutions that swept through America and Europe at the end of the eighteenth century’, says Janet Polasky in her 2015 book *Revolutions without Borders*. Richard Price, she concludes, was ‘one of the conduits of that fermentation’.⁵¹ In these terms and given

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 143.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ ‘RP to the Marquis of Lansdowne, 9 September 1789’, in *Corr.*, III, p. 256–57.

⁵¹ Polasky, *Revolutions without Borders*, pp. 17, 44.

our *Oxford Dictionary* definition of a revolutionary it is hard to see how Price does not fit the bill; but what is his place as a revolutionary in relation to the conditions he saw pertaining in Britain with its balanced constitution in need of restoration and purification?

As a pragmatist he does seem to prefer progressive change to the revolutionary mayhem that should always be a very last resort. Nor does he advocate violence of any sort. Yet he does not shy away from revolution when deemed necessary, as he considered it to be in America and France as a result of circumstances pertaining there. Nor is he pacifistically averse to violence, as his unwavering support of the Americans in their revolutionary war shows. The fact too that he expounds views and ideas profoundly inimical to the status quo in Britain and then qualifies them later is a method not unknown to modern politicians as a way of getting across a dangerous or unpopular point. At no point, though, does Price openly advocate revolution in Britain; and yet a modern reader of Price's views on lords, bishops and kings and his opposition to hereditary rights and honours and primogeniture might, at the very least, suspect something of a closet revolutionary. In this respect Burke's worries over the threat of revolutionary action in Britain by Price and his fellow 'Revolutionists' could be said to have had some degree of foundation, considering, for example, Price's comments in a letter to Benjamin Franklin as early as 1784:

The more wise and virtuous part of the nation are struggling hard to gain a Parliamentary reform; and think, with great reason, that while the Representation continues such a mockery as it is, no change of ministers can do us much good. But an equal representation is a blessing which probably we shall never obtain till a convulsion comes which will dissolve all governments and give an opportunity for erecting a new frame.⁵²

In the same year Price suggested to Thomas McGrugar, Secretary of the Committee of Citizens of Edinburgh, that 'The danger of producing confusion, and of setting government afloat, is often urged as a reason against attempts at reform. But this is an argument that proves too much'.⁵³ Even in August 1789 he could tell Thomas Jefferson,

You may be sure that what is passing in France cannot be very agreeable to the Courtiers and Tories in this country. They must be apprehensive that an example so striking may provoke the friends of liberty here to greater zeal in their endeavours to bring about a reformation of abuses so palpable as to be incapable of being

⁵² 'RP to Benjamin Franklin, 6 April 1784', in *Corr.*, II, p. 215.

⁵³ 'RP to Thomas McGrugar, 27 January 1784', in Rémy Duthille, 'Thirteen Uncollected Letters of Richard Price', *Enlightenment and Dissent*, 27 (2011), 105–106.

defended, and particularly to gain the only stable security of public liberty; I mean a representation render'd fair and independent by frequent elections, the exclusion of placemen, and an extension of the rights of election.⁵⁴

In the final analysis, what Price truly thought about revolution within Britain and its balanced constitution remains with him, and perhaps in the mind of his readers. So it is best to end abroad, on surer ground, with a comment written by Price in his private shorthand journal, just two months before his death on 19 April 1791, and which stimulated the writing of this paper:

The Revolution in *Fr[an]ce* will for ever distinguish the last year and will form an epoch of the greatest importance in the history of human kind. It is an event wonderful and *unparalleled*. I am refreshed and animated whenever I turn my thoughts to it and I *exult* in the hope that possibly I may have contributed a little towards producing and confirming it.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ 'RP to Thomas Jefferson, 3 August 1789', in *Corr.*, III, pp. 247–48.

⁵⁵ Entry for 17 January 1790, in Thomas and Thomas, 'Richard Price's Journal', p. 393.