Chapter One: Children of the Revolution

It is Easter 1916. The city centre of Dublin has been reduced to ash by British artillery and Irish bullets. Paidraig Pearce, soldier-poet and leader of the rising and The O'Rahilly, reluctant last minute volunteer, exchange a few words during a lull in the fighting. Pearce (later to be shot by firing squad) tells O'Rahilly, 'well, when we're all wiped out, people will blame us for everything, I suppose'.

This is how revolutions begin: with brave men who have 'stupid' dreams that apparently simply cannot succeed. Men, whom George Bernard Shaw said, 'fight with a rope round [their] neck' are outside our circumstances. Theirs is already a better world, somehow already achieved. They fight because others say that nothing has a hope of changing, and everything will remain as before. Yet to be a revolutionary you have to create a moral universe in which the future is different from the present and better: a deed sufficient to win freedom or if not, one in which 'our children will win … by a better deed!' Such a moral dream is changed into political reality by history. In almost all the cases in this book I must admit I would have stood aside and let them get on with their better future (which so often led to exile, the gallows or the bullet). I even may have condemned them as fools, but fools in an honourable cause. Indeed, such 'foolishness' seems more ubiquitous than many from the left or right of the political spectrum have been willing to concede, a continuing thread in Britain's history. In the context of Britain and Ireland heroism and foolishness are always very close.

This book presents for the first time the full story of the last two hundred years of republican 'terror' in the United Kingdom and the means and methods which have characterised the British revolutionary way from assassination plots against the royal family, prime ministers and government to full scale revolt and armed rebellion. It has long been a truism of political debate to talk of the 'presidential' style of our recent prime ministers. Such comments would be listened to with a sense of bitter irony by the men and women who feature within these pages. They would not see the people's utopian republican that they dreamed about through conspiracy, terrorism and war, instead they might remark that little had changed since the early republicans met in the heady days of the Corresponding Societies of the late eighteenth century. They might say things had got worse since England's first and only republic in the period known as the 'interregnum'.

Since the 1790s, perhaps as many as thirty five thousand subjects born in the United Kingdom have fought and died both at home and in the Empire in the cause of the republic. Not all were Irish, some were Welsh, Scots or English caught, as often as not, by government spies, police and informers before anything could happen and brought ignominiously to trial and execution. There were also those however, who had been exiled to Australia, Canada and the United States and who carried on the fight abroad. Nevertheless, more than might expected, took up arms and fought pitched battles in the streets of Welsh towns, the leafy lanes of southern England and the moors of Scotland before being overwhelmed by the forces of government and cast into the oblivion of official history. Their last glorious stand was (but where else) in Dublin during Easter 1916; their reincarnation as a modern movement the consequence of that romantic débâcle.

For over two hundred years there has been a myth that British politics runs by the clock of steady compromise and consensus, that reforms are the result of rational debate, too slow no doubt for many, but nevertheless measured and correct. History consigns the agitators and violent incidents that led to change to a paragraph or two in official history, described in heroic or disdainful detail according to the historian's political credentials. Whilst Peterloo, the Luddites, Tolpuddle Martyrs and Chartists remain in the collective memory as something vaguely attached to the industrial revolution, readers unacquainted with specialists histories are left utterly unaware of the long and violent struggles to make England, Scotland and Wales (not to mention Cornwall and the Isle of Man) revolutionary republican states, flying not the Union flag, but the colours of the banner of the revolution: red, white and green. Whilst every reader is aware of the struggle in Ireland, many will be surprised to see how central Irish revolutionary activities have been to the other nations in the British Isles, nor how tragic have been the consequences.

Indeed, not counting the three extraordinary bloody civil wars in Ireland, nor the bombing campaigns by the IRA in England up to the Second World War and from the 1970s to the1990s, there are have been two Welsh uprisings, one lowland Scottish civil war, one Highland 'rebellion', one uprising in Derbyshire and another in Kent, five attempts to assassinate the entire cabinet and seize London, numerous attempts to assassinate the royal family and an almost continuous history of terrorism from the Fenians of the 1860s to the Tartan Army of the 1970s. Add to these events three French invasions (two of which landed), the attempt to seize Canada by an Irish army calling itself the IRA and the various revolts in Australia (a direct result of transportation) and the political history of the British Isles takes on a very different complexion. The story is truly international, played out, at one time or another in the bars of New York, the jungles of Venezuela, the foothills of Afghanistan, and the prison camps and gold mines of Australia.

The first shot of revolution began with the birth of the United States. For Thomas Carlyle, working on his monumental study of the French Revolution during 1837, the war in America was the key to all subsequent world revolution: ‘the world is all so changed; so much that seemed vigorous has sunk decrepit, so much that was not is beginning to be! – Born over the Atlantic … what sounds are these; muffled-ominous new in our centuries? Boston Harbour is black with unexpected tea: behold a Pennsylvanian Congress gather; and ere long, on Bunker Hill, DEMOCRACY (sic) announcing, in rifle-volleys death-winged, under her Star Banner, to the tune of Yankee-doodle-doo, that she is born, and, whirlwind-like, will envelope the whole world!’

What began as a small scale problem with honorary Englishmen soon kindled a desire for democratic republicanism that had its philosophical origins in the time of Oliver Cromwell’s Commonwealth; the French Revolution announced the days of the old regime were finally numbered. Napoleon’s threatened invasion gave hope to scores of British radicals who had formed secret cells ready to go into action to topple privilege, wealth, monarchy, aristocracy and church and set up the Republics of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland.

Trafalgar and Waterloo crushed these hopes and sent them underground; radicals divided into parliamentary reformers and republican terrorists. Many reformers and radicals were dedicated to the defeat of monarchic and aristocratic rule, the overthrow of authoritarian government and the realisation of national parliaments dedicated to liberty, equality and universal suffrage. In their way stood the full weight of royal tradition, the Church of England, successive governments, oppressive laws against combination and free speech, the army, secret service and, from 1829, the new police.

Around a core of Irish nationalism and English republicanism there also remain the largely ignored or untold stories of Scottish and Welsh independence fighters and the violent revolutionary skirmishes and bombing campaigns that marked Anglo-Welsh and Anglo-Scottish relations from the 1790s to the 1970s. Equally ignored or sidelined have been the stories of men like Jeremiah Brandreth of Nottinghamshire and 'Sir' William Percy Honeywood Courtenay who led the last purely English rebellion in Kent which ended in the bloody battle of Bossenden Wood on 10 June 1838. Forgotten also by modern readers is the Suffragette conspiracy to assassinate Lloyd George and his cabinet as they played golf on Walton Heath. The plot, possibly engineered by the secret service, included the use of poison darts and blow pipes from South America – the very stuff of a Sherlock Holmes's mystery.

We think we know our past and the alternative version of British history at the core of republicanism seems a type of fiction. Nevertheless it is waiting in the wings to become the official version when the red and black flags replace the royal standard. Extremism is usually considered not quite cricket and quite un-British, but our national character has a more sinister side and if we remember only a convenient history that ignores this darker complexion we also fail to see how the very system we live under has evolved and what titanic struggles mould it for good or evil. Despite a general belief in tradition and the feeling that our parliamentary system has somehow evolved, nothing is further from the truth. Indeed nothing would have changed at all without those who saw the need to challenge complacency and injustice in an England where the old ways seemed neither fair nor natural. Reform has too often been linked to violence and the media has long enjoyed hyping the mild reformist into a loony lefty and yet agitators are dedicated to their causes and where reform might fail terrorism has sometimes triumphed.

Although often represented as martyrs to the cause of British democracy, the men and women of the extreme republican cause should not be lumped together with those working for reform.

Whilst the two groups are clearly connected and talk a similar language their methods differ considerably as do their attitudes to the cause. Republican extremists and those dedicated to various forms of national independence who proclaim or actually resort to assassination and military uprising are not simply working for reform but are, in a fundamental way denying the very basis of it. Reform is evolutionary and incremental, revolution is a final all-in-all settling of accounts to create a new world. Successive governments, panicked at such excess have often treated reformers as revolutionaries, but the paths to republican democracy taken by reformers and revolutionaries remain distinctly different, even if policemen, judges and historians lump them together.

At this point it is worth differentiating radical reformers from the true revolutionaries themselves. On the whole, reformers wish to ameliorate current injustice by reconvening the system as it stands; revolutionaries wish to abolish the system altogether and terrorists use armed force to do so. The authorities meanwhile, often treat the two threats as similar in their use of repressive responses and in so doing turn the radical ideas of reformers into the revolutionary aims of terrorists. Revolutionary terrorism will therefore sometimes grow from the stopped-up channels of reform. Reformers rarely become revolutionaries in the strict sense of working in armed secrecy for the overthrow of a regime. Rather, the extreme revolutionary elements become attached to causes, using those causes as a rationale for their own wider aims. This is clear in both the extreme wing of the Chartists and the later anarchist outgrowth of the social democrat movement of the 1880s. In order to successfully pursue their limited aims both the Liberal Party and later the Labour Party had to disassociate themselves from extremist agitation. Respectability was the key when representing the requirements of the working classes that voted first Liberal and then Labour. In this regard, reformers who aim at co-operating with the system in order to change it, become the real traitors in the eyes of revolutionaries – collaborators who have sold out. Nowhere did this become more obvious than in the internecine warfare in the Labour Party and union movement that came to a head with the expulsion of Militant Tendency in the 1980s.[*]

There is a great and tragic irony in the early fight of revolutionaries against the state for as they fought it, it grew the better to oppose them. Known as 'the Thing' to opponents, in the eighteenth century and the 'Machine' from the 1830s, the state was for over a hundred years little more than a chimera for revolutionary and nationalist proponents – a mystical tilting horse that hardly existed. Government there was, and power there was too but it did not reside in bureaucratic layers of civil servants and red tape. When, in 1829 on the eve of the new Police Act, Carlyle attacked the rise of bureaucratic society it was still a dream and when Charles Dickens's characters in David Copperfield complained of being 'bound hand and foot in red tape', the government department was imagined run by only a father and son. In reality, the Home Office in 1811 had only the Home Secretary, his Permanent Under Secretary, two other under secretaries, twelve clerks and a cleaner. Until the latter half of the twentieth century government was feeble at best, incompetent and draconian at worst; in the eighteenth and nineteenth it was virtually unpaid and without a clear sense of purpose other than to gather taxes for foreign wars and keep the monarch's peace. The inner government, the Privy Council, answered to the monarch even if they did not always tell him what he wanted to hear; cabinets were clubs of similar-minded men from similar backgrounds. A loosely knit world of magistrates and squires (usually the same thing) answered to a Lord Lieutenant of a County and moral regulation was left to parish councils and the village squire's young brother: the local parson. Almost all government was in local hands, almost nothing in the hands of those at the top.

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[*] This was a Trotskyist cadre within the Labour Party working on the one hand to use parliamentary process for the overthrow of capitalism whilst on the other giving support for the nationalist armed struggle of the IRA in Northern Ireland. Militant Tendency was, to all intents and purposes, a revolutionary party joined parasitically and often working secretly within a democratic one

In an age that has seen totalitarianism we find it easy to equate the Regency and Victorian policed state with our own recent knowledge of history. The 'policed' state of the pre-railway age had no police force and relied on local militias, yeomanry[†] and other loyal forms of amateur enthusiast to maintain general law and order and political propriety. Dangers seemed to lurk round every corner of the kingdom, 'the Home Secretary smelled sedition and treason everywhere'. Revolution never came, only isolated revolutionaries. Yet here is one key to the growth of the British state. The state grew in direct proportion to the threat to social, political and economic order. Required to act as a mechanism to raise taxes, parliament also needed a structure to collect those taxes it levied and prevent the possibility of refusal. To do this government needed the state. The people of the Regency period found the idea of the state so peculiar they named it 'the Thing' in incomprehension. It included parliament, the army, magistrates and lord lieutenants, parish and vestry officials, workhouse beadles, prison commissioners and mad-house governors and finally, the new Metropolitan Police: a hotch potch of official and semi-official busy bodies. At its head was the royal family but they didn't quite fit the new and gathering bureaucracy there to serve them.

[†] These men were privately sponsored bodies of amateur cavalry paid partly through land owners and through aristocratic patronage. The extraordinary need for regular army volunteers during the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars meant that a home army of 'territorials' was needed. During 1795, these amateur cavalry put down their first riot near Leicester Jail. By 1801, there were twenty thousand such volunteers as well as a militia of 'home guardsmen' used to defend fortresses. Alongside both were volunteer loyal associations of tradesmen and shopkeepers. Even more cavalry were raised through the Provincial Cavalry Act of 1794 and were intended to bolster the yeomanry. Armed with a light cavalry sabre and carbine, the yeomanry were a supplementary force used to support the regular army at home and therefore first on the scene when putting down a riot.

The police were formed not to combat rising burglaries but keep civil disorder. The creation of a political police, Special Branch was directly linked to the fight against Irish republicans and republicanism was a direct influence on the rise of the British state machine. Early terrorists fought a hazy and ill-defined enemy: the ruling elite. They fought the elite's monopoly of power and its control of the British way of life. This fight usually found identity in local machine breaking or direct attacks on the person of the monarch or his representatives. They were trying to break a spider's web of control. That very process forced those in authority to coalesce their positions and expand their remit in a purely defensive mode. Thus the modern state, with its bureaucracy and police and secret service emerged, professional, salaried and alert.

If the destructive element of British republicanism turned to the gun and bomb as a means to a final accounting with the rulers and their tyrannous system it is not true to say that such action was the final resort of the frustrated and downtrodden. It is a truism that frustration breeds terrorism. This is not quite so. Terrorists see their actions as positive, clearly defined in aim and determined in purpose; terrorists are happy because certain of their cause, conscious of its outcome. Remarkable confirmation of this new found psychological clarity of purpose experienced by armed terrorists comes from our own age in the testimonies of republican and loyalist volunteers during the troubles in Northern Ireland, men who felt elated and purposeful once armed. This is why they sometimes appear calm at their sentence or even elated. They are not reformers who went to extremes. They belong to a different category and therefore may be viewed as a splinter of the various movements calling themselves nationalist or democratic in the British Isles. They act on behalf of the poor and disinherited but are usually not of them.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such revolutionaries (and their self-appointed enemies) were often men who considered themselves gentlemen and who had lost money and fallen into the void between the squirearchy and the respectable tradesmen class, failures in everything but their self belief: James Tilly Matthews lost his tea business and his sanity working against the eighteenth-century version of the 'men in black'; John Bellingham, who killed Spencer Perceval, the prime minister in 1811, insisted his business had been ruined whilst on government business. For them, acts of entrepreneurial self promotion were also deeds of altruism. Utopian ideals melded with self image and produced a desire to find real self respect by rising above the social respectability denied them in their business and social life. Failure in business is a curious thread that unites the extremists of our story, such failure becoming a positive foundation for a belief that the system itself is rotten and one's own failure is an exemplary instance of a general trend. Personal revenge is then sublimated into a general principle from which an ideology can be extracted with universal significance. The hopes of the religious fundamentalists in an after life are here replaced for the secular republican fundamentalist (himself an authoritarian) by the concept of 'the future'.

> The real goal is power over the past and most of all power over the nature of the future. The past is disaster, unfair; but for all rebels the past should, must, end in future justice. The present is a constant humiliation. A similar future is intolerable. [‡]

This future forgives and justifies excess just as the final showdown is needed to save the soul of the nation.

Terrorists act because they know that terror actually succeeds in getting results. The attempts at uprisings and killings described in this book are not therefore final acts of desperation, but once decided upon, are acts determined by belief in success and the will to carry out whatever is needed. Men turn to guns when they are certain and convinced of their cause and when they have found clarity of purpose. Such a mood represents a moment of no return, a self made choice.

[‡] J.Bowyer Bell, The Dynamics of the Arms Struggle (London: Frank Cass, 1998) p.11

> Official denial that anything can be accomplished in politics by means of terrorism is, of course, inevitable: no government, whether it claims to rule by consent or imposes its rule by force, can afford to admit that its conduct of the nation's business is to be modified in any way by the use of force by any party of its opponents…. Such an admission would be a confession of failure to maintain law and order; and that its policies might have been mistaken.
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> But the facts of history do not bear out this assertion of the uselessness of terrorism; quite the contrary, for at all epochs and in all parts of the world governments have, in fact, repeatedly been forced by terrorists to change their policies, and in some cases have been overthrown by terrorism. [§]

If terrorism is a ticket for success that still leaves the question of whose terrorism and for what purpose? After all, all the terrorists and revolutionaries described in this book either failed before they began or were hunted down after their act. An explanation can be found if we look at the difference between 'offensive' and 'defensive' terrorism. Offensive terror, such as that used by cadres and revolutionary organisations is likely to fail as they lack the power of the state, its army, police, judiciary and economic base. Extraordinary outside pressure (such as Wolf Tone hoped to get by a French invasion and the reformist Cobden looked for in an economic 'accident') would be the only way to overthrow a regime.

[§] Edward Hyams, Terrorists and Terrorism (London: J M Dent and Sons, 1975) p.9

Defensive terror is that employed by the state itself. Here we discover what every British revolutionary already knows, that the state is deeply implicated in all revolutionary activity not only watching it but fermenting it in order to further increase its own power by mobilising its own structures and the people it employs. This was clear to Scottish radicals in the 1790s sentenced to transportation because of the government's use of spies; it was clear to Joseph Priestley when 'Church and King' mobs destroyed his laboratory; it was clear to those who watched the formation of loyalist clubs and associations to fight English democrats; it was clear to Edward Despard as he stood on the gallows; it was clear to the Pentrich insurgents duped by a government stooge; it was clear to the Steven's Inquiry investigating state sponsored assassination in Northern Ireland.

Indeed, the use of agents provocateurs, black propaganda, scaremongering, spies and deliberate falsification of history is almost the prerogative of the British State in its defensive posture. Amazingly, but not without reason, it might be concluded that all revolutionary terrorism in the United Kingdom has had state involvement since the Elizabethan age, either created in the cause of entrapment (first of Catholics[**], then of democrats, anarchists, and communists, then again of Irish Catholic nationalists) or used to egg on a conspiracy of words to that of deeds. In Ireland, Scotland and Wales national independence movements have long been infiltrated by intelligence organisations and quasi-official branches of the state.

[**] The Elizabethan secret service was expressly created to defeat the internal threat of a Catholic resurgence. The hatred of Catholics lasted long after the end of Elizabeth's reign and has revived intermittently up until the present day. After the rise of the Jacobites people such as Henry Fielding were quite open in their hatred of Popery.

> When Popery without a mask stalks publicly abroad, and Jesuits preach their Doctrines in print, with the same confidence as when the last Popish prince was seated on the throne, it becomes high time for every man, who wishes well to his country, to offer some antidote to the intended poison.

'A Proper Answer to a Late Scurrilous Libel', (London : M Cooper, 1747) p.1 This hatred has continued to the present day where in the Orange lodges of Northern Ireland they still (half humorously) drink to the destruction of 'papishs' and 'Jacobites'.

Democratic freedom and state terror long differentiated by left-wing historians are too closely related, too intermingled, too interdependent to allow our story a simple ending. At its core is the complicity between the need of the British state to maintain order and the desire of republican cells to overthrow that order and build a new Jerusalem of equality and freedom. The use of terror is the virus of revolution and the toxin of republican sentiment, activity and assassination up to the present day. The ideas that informed the conspirators, the lives of the participants and the struggle between revolutionaries and the 'secret state' over the last two hundred years also forms the hidden history of British democracy. Central to this hidden history is the interconnectedness between the French and the American revolutions and Scottish, Welsh and Irish nationalists and English terrorists, all of whom were prepared to use violent means to gain republican ends. Above all, the book tells a human often tragic tale of the thwarting of decent reformers by obstinate governments and the colossal self deception of idealists mesmerised by utopian dreams which may, who knows, one day, be realised.

The fashion amongst British communist or Marxist historians to see the revolutionary tendency as part of the rise of working-class socialism, in which such revolutionaries 'jumped the gun' in the historical process is only part of the story and less fashionable as an argument after the fall of the Soviet Union. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rise of international Islamic terrorism the story seems a little more complex. The old story of republicanism, told as a tale of continuous struggle for freedom of expression and democratic voting rights undertaken on behalf of working people has (at least in part) to be revised. New insights have offered themselves, first in terms of the nature of utopian ideological struggle and its impact on nationalism and republicanism and secondly on the significance of the extremist groups themselves. With renewed interest in marginal groups now the old left/right political divisions have broken down we are starting to reconsider histories that were ignored in both the official and Marxist versions of the past because they did not quite fit.

In moving from the first and only English republic through the political debates over republicanism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the critical period of the American and French Revolutions and thence to the assassination plots of Despard, the Cato Street Gang or the risings at Pentrich or Newport and onward to the machinations of the Irish Republican Army and Scottish National Liberation Army this book weaves an uncomfortable, unstable, ‘lumpy’ history of the United Kingdom in which neither the traditional nor the Marxist viewpoint quite works as a framework. To disrupt a seamless narrative of past events, in which cause and affect appear inexorably linked is a worrying task because it leaves questions unanswered. ‘Lumpy’ histories are not easy to tell because the heroes and villains are more difficult to discern and their viewpoints shift into contradictions without reconciliation.

Personality also recovers its place in human affairs, scanty records leaving us only tantalising glimpses of people who would willingly kill or be killed for a cause they had only read about in books or heard of as happening to a foreign people in a foreign land (including, most foreign of all, London itself) . Moreover it is worth remembering that the men and women in these pages who dedicated themselves to revolutionary violence and political assassination were not wicked foreigners but English, Welsh, Irish and Scots who dedicated their lives to revolution by any means, or who were converted to the cause by a combination of personal circumstances and sudden revelation. These are home-grown republican fundamentalist and secular utopians who lived their lives in secret cells and republican cadres and who were engaged in the overthrow of government and monarchy by any means. They were inspired by hatred of the system and by social inequality and injustice. Almost all were class warriors dedicated to the overthrow of the economic system, but they represent a spectrum of those who upheld the old moral economy of fair market trading right up to those who were outright communists.In the eighteenth century the revolutionary potential of the newly proletarianised struck observers of the factory system early on. Observing a Yorkshire cotton mill one aristocrat noted with alarm that, ‘with the bell ringing, and the clamour of the mill, all the vale is disturb’d; treason and levelling systems are the discourse; and rebellion may be near at hand’.

Yet it was also clear that in the artisan clubs of London and Nottingham, Sheffield and Glasgow, Bristol and Leeds that rebellion was a more serious possibility. Edward Thompson in his groundbreaking book the Making of the English Working Class which first appeared in 1963 was right to see these organisations as proving grounds for the new politics of social justice but his view that here was an arena for a new working-class consciousness and solidarity and a new class culture has been a matter for debate ever since. These self-employed men and their families did not simply vanish into a labour pool but often remained entrepreneurial small-time businessmen sometimes precariously pitched above the abyss of the mass of labourers. It was from this group of small craftsmen, traders, shop keepers, publicans and clerks, that the lower middle classes arose. It was the neurosis of this class perched ideologically and socially, not to say economically between the labouring majority and the squirearchy that proved the breeding ground for revolution as well as, rather ironically, the stoic virtues of Victorian sobriety.

It is, of course, difficult to discuss ‘class’ before class has made an appearance on the historical stage. Hierarchy is a better word, perhaps. The lower middle classes had hardly a name to call themselves right up to the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, their outline can be discerned in new attitudes, social desires and cultural neuroses. Their numbers included those gentlemen who though poor, did not make things and who refused to labour for money and those who did create with their hands and worked for wages. The author Walter Scott recalled, 'I was a gentleman, and so welcome anywhere', but he was the son of a lowly lawyer, the descendant of cattle rustlers and a novelist to boot. He based his status on his father's ownership of a small plot of land. This emerging class might also include men such as William Lovett the Chartist leader, whose mother was the daughter of a blacksmith and the wife of a sea captain. Lovett married a chambermaid and worked as a cabinet maker. Such people had eyes that saw above as well as below in the social scheme of things. Even at this lowly level, families attempted to marry their betters, even if that only meant owning a small landholding, a shop or a horse. James Mill, defender of middle-class virtues who blamed Peterloo on the lack of sober middle-class citizens in Manchester who would never have tolerated such 'occasional turbulence' was himself the son of a 'poor Scottish shoemaker'.

Middle-class virtue was, for Mill, the cure for all social ills. It was also the driving force behind social stability. And yet, the lower ranks of this new group were intrinsically unstable. If Britain was based on a cultural heritage of 'class, property and family', it was disturbed by 'the anarchical tendencies … of virile individuality and informal government'. 'Enable me', prayed Patrick Fraser Tytler, the young Evangelical, in 1810, 'to discharge my duty amiably in that situation in life in which it has pleased God to place me'. Robert Southey observe[d] with satisfaction: 'I am in that state of life to which has pleased God to call me, for which I am formed, in which I am contented'. The point was, however, that the lower middle classes, disturbed and disturbing never knew their place.

The lower middle classes, not the mob or the aristocracy, were and remain the truly unstable modern class of British history, ignored by snobbish traditional historians and Communist Party annalists of the rise (and betrayal) of the British working class. Articulate, organised, money savvy, proponents of self help and individual moral endeavour - a nation of shopkeepers is more likely to create a maverick than a nation of factory prols. The lower middle class that emerged from the artisan class chaffed at a political set up inappropriate to their needs and they led the reform movement in alliance with disaffected aristocrats and gentlemen farmers.

Yet on their fringe were those whose chaffing and whose annoyance found no outlet in trade or reforming religion and who saw bitterly the uselessness of the mob and the disinterest of aristocracy. This sub class was itself divided. Thomas Paine, failed stay maker and excise man, became a revolutionary but never a believer in terror. His books advocated neither regicide nor mob rule and he remained a supporter of justified republicanism and the rule of the property-owning respectable classes. The force of the American Revolution, on behalf of which he later became the voice, bumped him into a set of actions which in England he had not previously contemplated.

Men like Arthur Thistlewood, Despard and Honeywood were decidedly not working class in attitude or experience. Paine may have been an honorary citizen of revolutionary France but he was marked for the guillotine because of his refusal to vote for Louis XVI's death; on the other hand, Thistlewood, a follower of Paine, planning to massacre the British government as it sat down to dinner, would have voted Paine's death with a clear conscience (in the name of the cause) and pulled the lever to release the blade. John Lilburne, the seventeenth-century soap maker and brewer, Leveller leader and revolutionary ancestor of Paine and Thistlewood, who spent most of his life in gaol opposing Cavaliers and Roundheads with equal vigour always insisted his position stemmed from his rights as a 'gentleman'. He opposed the execution of Charles I only on the practical ground that Cromwell would be seduced into taking the Crown. Even the seventeenth-century proto-communist Digger leader Gerrard Winstanley, forced to work as a labourer, prefaced his address to the 'City of London' with the autobiographical detail that he was an entrepreneur 'beaten' by the 'cheating sons in the thieving art of buying and selling'. The class composition of Irish, Welsh and Scottish patriotic republicanism has similar divisions within the ranks of its lower-class leaders who despite playing the anti-capitalism card, often remain clearly on the fringes of their class, ideological warriors first and economic reformers second.

For whom was the revolution to be fought? On whose behalf were the revolutionary cadres to toil, fight and overcome? For whom might idealist martyrs be imprisoned or killed knowing they died in a just cause? The answer was 'the people'. The people were not yet the working class and far less the proletariat. Indeed, the people were never quite to be exactly aligned with the toiling masses. Rather, the term came to represent those who worked with their hands or tilled the earth, artisans, factory workers, farm hands all grouped vaguely into a strange alliance against the 'general public' who were rapidly turning into the capitalists and the middle classes. Between the 1790s and the 1860s the people were associated with all that was virtuous and wholesome about a nation. Rousseau had set the tone of all such thoughts with his belief that the people were the heart and soul of the nation and that 'they' spoke with one unalterable voice of liberty, equality and fraternity, unified by indivisible virtue. The ideal went to the heart of the French Revolution and through it helped shaped the image of the working classes in Britain and the concept of a national identity in Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

The emergence of a ‘Party of Virtue’ in revolutionary France created a new philosophy of social and political justice that, tied to the people was nevertheless a philosophical concept to which an ideal (the people) was attached. In such a way, ideology emerged, half description, half idealisation where the structure of a belief was attached to a vision of a society. The people (a singular entity) were not only the site of virtue but also indivisible. Those not of the people were seen as alien, foreign and a threat to its indivisible virtuousness. By such an argument all aristocrats, capitalists, priests and émigrés might be suspected of being of the devil’s party. Louis XVI went to the guillotine an ‘enemy of the people’, expelled from the body politic as an alien presence. The rebels in Ireland in 1798, in Scotland in 1820 and in Wales during the 1830s saw the British government in the same light. In later years, Irish, Scottish and Welsh nationalists came more and more to reconcile the people with their own version of the nation. In Wales this meant an emphasis on Welshness, especially the Welsh language and in Scotland this meant a new sense of the oneness of Highlands and Lowlands. In Ireland, the people eventually came only to include Catholics, their oppressors the Orange Order: Protestants backed by the British government.

Communism was the ‘final’ form of revolutionary ideology, in which social structure and political explanation were so entwined as to make a future wholly predictable. Thus the revolution took on its aspect of eternal struggle, never wholly completed nor truly begun as Alexander Sullivan enthused to a secret meeting of the American-Irish Clan na Gael in Chicago during August 1881 where he stated that, ‘we mean war… we mean that war to be unsparing and unceasing’. It was a sentiment with a heritage going back to the Jacobins, the society founded in 1789 to further the French Revolution and so-called because it met in an old

Dominican ('Jacobin') priory in Paris[††]. On 10 October, 1793 Louis-Antonine Saint Just, the so called 'Angel of Death' of the French Revolution's Committee of Public Safety had declared, 'the provisional government of France is revolutionary until the peace'. For the next two centuries, revolutionaries such as the Irish Republican Army, plotted their plots, planted their bombs, hoarded their weapons, dreamed their dreams of power with the ghost of Saint Just urging on the permanent revolutionary war.

The revolution was therefore to be enacted on behalf of the people if the people did not rise up spontaneously for themselves, finally enlightened about their oppression. To help them realise their destiny, revolutionaries took to journalism and pamphleteering before taking up the manufacture of pikes and bombs. Thus the people were to be taught that they alone were sovereign and all else that followed did so because of that one inalienable right, itself natural and in harmony with cosmic order. No king and no church could challenge such sovereign power. This new sovereignty bestowed upon the people the new rights and powers of citizens rather than subjects, and revolutionaries everywhere took up fraternal titles and signed themselves Citizen X or Y or a 'friend of the people'. Citizenship was international and joined the people of America, Ireland and France against the internal government of Britain which was in cahoots with other despotic regimes across the world. Thus patriotic revolutionaries might look to France or the United States to help in the 'liberation' of Ireland, Wales or Scotland even when their own governments were at war with France or the United States. In this sense patriotism was also a perverse form of treason.

[††] The Society was variously known as The Club Breton, the Société des Amis de la Constitution and the Amis de la Liberté et de l'Égalité. They met throughout the French Revolution and by July 1790 had over a thousand members. It was the most extreme of the revolutionary clubs and was an instrument of government with five to eight thousand affiliated clubs throughout France at the period of the Terror. Its name became a byword for any violent radical, but especially for republicans. In England, the word was usually used as a term of abuse similar to 'bolshie' in the twentieth century.

As the nineteenth century progressed, ‘the people’ became more and more associated with the working class, poor artisans and factory workers and less associated with the labouring peasantry in the countryside. Part of the shift was the influence of the French Revolution, part the influence of the new socialists, whose were based in the provincial cities and in London. From now on much emphasis would be placed on what the factory hand could do. As early as the mid 1790s, radicals had agreed that the political struggle was attached to the fight against a ‘capitalist’ class – hoarders, exploiters and financiers whom they declared enemies of the people. By the late 1840s, this grouping was divided into a middle class and an entrepreneurial sector, to whom the emerging ‘communist’ parties gave the familiar revolutionary appellations of the bourgeoisie and capitalist class. Now however the people were no longer in a hierarchic caste struggle with princes and popes but locked in a class struggle of ‘two … hostile camps’ as the Communist Manifesto put it, which was itself the expression of permanent revolutionary war.

The emergence of the citizen was also the emergence of world revolution. Thomas Paine called himself a citizen of the world and lived and plotted in England, America and France; Marx’s war on the French and Prussian states was conducted from London’s Soho. Paine aligned himself (as did Marx) with all those whom he considered to have had their political and human rights denied. Anarcharsio Cloots, the Prussian émigré who sat alongside Paine in the national convention of revolutionary France, considered himself an elected representative of the ‘human race’ and demanded world revolution. The final years of the French Terror and the emergence of Napoleon, tied the citizen firmly to the idea of national identity, but by the time of the Chartists, the term citizen, now old-fashioned, had metamorphosed into proletarian, a harder and less accommodating term without the class crossing application of the former word.

With the emergence of a proto-proletariat the struggle had found a new international perspective to take it forward.

To make the revolution a reality, most radicals sought two solutions. Either, the people, especially the ‘workers’ would spontaneously down tools rise up and refuse to the bidding of tyranny, as the Chartist ‘communist’ George Harney believed or a party of virtue would have to arise to force a revolution. Such a secret group would have to be highly organised and gather weapons ready for a coup. Such a coup might spontaneously alight the masses or the use of machine breaking and strikes might make a coup easier once the government of the day became rattled. Last, but not least, a foreign army (usually the French) might invade and bring liberty with it in its ranks, rallying the oppressed as it advanced on Dublin or London.

The combination of a belief in the power of the factory worker, the general strike, a revolutionary vanguard working in secret, international connections, spontaneity and a party of virtue, coalesced in the ideas of the Communist League, a secret cadre of agitators who met to hold an international ‘congress’ in a public house in London on a drizzly day in November 1847. The fifty assorted delegates and foreign exiles included Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels now working secretly to formulate their famous political manifesto. Like Robespierre and Saint Just they preached revolution, but the revolution was no longer on behalf of republican democracy, now that too had to be superseded in the vision of an international workers state, where democracy no longer meant the parliamentary and representative order previous revolutionaries had fought to create.

> In short, the Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement, against the existing social and political order of things … Let the ruling classes tremble … The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.

The Duke of Wellington had a nose for these dangerous upstarts; Napoleon was no 'gentleman' and on first meeting Horatio Nelson, Wellington dismissed him as a vulgar little man. Even Beethoven was, he believed, an overbearing newcomer, and the Duke remained a loyal violin-playing fan of the more discreet Mozart (presumably ignoring the composer's actual vulgar personality). The Duke spent his civilian life reinforcing the windows and gates of his London home, Apsley House, ready for the day of revolution and constantly called out the troops whenever radicals took to the streets and threatened civil war. By one of history's ironies, the disembodied Duke and his famous hook nose returned during the worst days of civil disorder in the late 1880s in the person and personality of Sherlock Holmes, the ultimate defender of wealth, property and sobriety against the new threat of foreign upstarts and entrepreneurial blackmailing murderers from the wrong side of the tracks. Sherlock Holmes made his literary debut in Beeton's Christmas Edition of 1887 in A Study in Scarlet. With his 'hook-like nose' and penchant for the violin, Holmes is the Iron Duke reincarnated in the age of the socialist menace. Not surprising that in the 'great cesspool' of London in this later age, the 'cold blooded' Mr Holmes should lament the fact that 'there are no crimes and no criminals' anymore, dull life for the fictional child of the hero of Waterloo.