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The ‘Spirit of Liberal Reform’: Representation, Slavery and Constitutional Liberty in the *Glasgow Advertiser*, 1789-94

Abstract:

The period from 1789 to 1794 in Britain witnessed both an accelerated momentum for reform movements as well as a crisis point for the realization of their aims, in part through widespread official panic about the domestic appropriation of notions of political liberty associated with the French Revolution. In Scotland, the trajectory for political reform reached back before these crisis years through the movement to make the administration and representation of the nation’s expanding cities more transparent and accountable to an ascendant commercial class. The burgh reform movement, like the campaign to abolish the slave trade and the movement for parliamentary reform in the early 1790s, took advantage of periodical print as a principal vehicle for the dissemination of its key legislative aims. The essay examines John Mennons’ *Glasgow Advertiser* (1783-1801) as an important case study for how this Scottish public sphere projected these three temporally and ideologically overlapping reform campaigns during a compressed and concentrated period of political volatility, focusing in particular on the newspaper’s attempts ‘to maintain a posture of strict independence in the face of sharply polarizing opinions and official harassment’, as Bob Harris has argued in a 2005 article for *Scottish Historical Review*. The essay maps the trajectory of these three reform movements in the *Advertiser*’s pages, and details how its column inches during the 1792-4 crisis years reflected a commitment to presenting key issues around parliamentary reform to meet a new demand for constitutional information amongst the West of Scotland’s labouring classes, whilst continuing to maintain its pages as a platform for the ideological concerns (and manifest anxieties) of the region’s propertied readers. What resulted was a unique Scottish periodical space that reconstructed binary debates on the nature of the British constitution—sometimes in items directly juxtaposed on its pages—emerging from increasingly segregated spatial contexts within the Scottish public sphere.

Key Words: Scottish newspaper press, John Mennons, French Revolution, Burgh Reform, Slave Trade, R. B. Sheridan, Thomas Muir, Scottish Association of the Friends of the People, Glasgow Constitutional Association

Manuscript

Periodical print played an essential role in framing, reflecting, and—at times—juxtaposing the complex urban politics of reform in the period after the French Revolution in Britain, when, as Jon Mee has put it in a recent major study, the ‘conditions of mediation’ for reformers were often marked by a range of physical, legal and spatial restrictions.¹ This crucial mediating function is evidenced in Emma Macleod’s mapping of the ‘Scottish opposition press’ during this period, providing, as she argues, ‘one of the strongest pieces of evidence for the continuing activity of opposition party activists’ linking the pre-revolutionary reform campaigns to those, like radical parliamentary reform, which emerged after the French Revolution.² We can learn a great deal about the continuities and ruptures within Scottish reform politics at the end of the eighteenth century—and the distinctive urban and class dynamics which marked these continuities and ruptures—through close analysis of those non-radical Scottish newspapers which remained open to publicising campaigns for political reform after 1792. Such an analysis has much to contribute to recent scholarship in Scottish political history,³ Scottish

¹ Jon Mee, *Print, Publicity, and Popular Radicalism in the 1790s: The Laurel of Liberty* (Cambridge, 2016), 9.

² Emma Macleod, ‘The Scottish Opposition Whigs and the French Revolution’, in Bob Harris (ed.), *Scotland in the Age of the French Revolution* (Edinburgh, 2005), 79-98, at 88.

³ See Emma Macleod, *A War of Ideas: British Attitudes to the Wars Against Revolutionary France, 1792-1802* (Farnham, 1998); Bob Harris, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution* (London, 2008); and Bob Harris (ed.), *Scotland in the Age of the French Revolution* (Edinburgh, 2005).

periodical history⁴ and Scottish urban history⁵ which have enriched our understanding of the wider ideological, material and developmental contexts that shaped reform debates in the Scottish public sphere in the five-year period after the French Revolution. Indeed, what emerges from the present examination is how invested Scottish reform politics in this period was with the predominant ideological language of liberty, accountability, and representation—a language derived from the movement’s distinctive notion of the British constitution. The legal and political challenges a newspaper like the *Glasgow Advertiser* faced when it sought to uphold the values this language encouraged remind us that the press was often on the front lines in negotiating their application to pressing economic, civic and political issues deeply imbricated in the material lives of its readers.

Bob Harris’ 2005 article for *The Scottish Historical Review* provides a valuable overview of the postures adopted by the key Scottish newspapers of the day in their negotiation of the revolutionary events across the Channel, as well as the increasingly volatile domestic reform politics these events inspired. In particular, he charts the

⁴ See Stephen W. Brown, ‘Newspapers and Magazines’, in Stephen Brown and Warren McDougall (eds), *The Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland, Volume 2: Enlightenment and Expansion, 1707-1800* (Edinburgh, 2012), 353-68; Alex Benchimol, Rhona Brown and David Shuttleton (eds), *Before Blackwood’s: Scottish Journalism in the Age of Enlightenment* (London, 2015); and Bob Harris, ‘Scotland’s Newspapers, the French Revolution and domestic radicalism (c1789-1794)’, *Scottish Historical Review* 84:1 (2005) 38-62; David G. Barrie and Joanne McEwan, ‘The Newspaper Press, Sedition and the High Court of Justiciary in Late Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh’, in Michael T. Davis, Emma Macleod and Gordon Pentland (eds), *Political Trials in an Age of Revolutions: Britain and the North Atlantic, 1793-1848* (London, 2019), 47-77.

⁵ See Irene Maver, ‘The Guardianship of the Community: Civic Authority Prior to 1833’, in T. M. Devine and Gordon Jackson (eds), *Glasgow, Volume I: Beginnings to 1830* (Manchester, 1995), 239-277; R. H. Campbell, ‘The Making of the Industrial City’, in *Glasgow, Volume I: Beginnings to 1830*, 184-213; Richard B. Sher, ‘Images of Glasgow in Late Eighteenth-Century Popular Poetry’, in Andrew Hook and Richard B. Sher (eds), *The Glasgow Enlightenment* (East Linton, 1995), 190-213; Richard Rodger, ‘Landscapes of capital: industry and the built environment in Edinburgh, 1750-1920’, in Brian Edwards and Paul Jenkins (eds), *Edinburgh: The Making of a Capital City* (Edinburgh, 2005), 85-102; David G. Barrie, *Police in the Age of Improvement: Police Development and the Civic Tradition in Scotland, 1775-1865* (London, 2012 [2008]); and Bob Harris and Charles McKean, *The Scottish Town in the Age of the Enlightenment, 1740-1820* (Edinburgh, 2014).

manner in which the political position of ‘most newspapers changed very abruptly and sharply in the final two months of 1792’ to a loyalist perspective that ‘was also shaped closely by the threat (and reality) of official and unofficial repression’.⁶ Aside from the avowedly radical Scottish press, ‘the majority of Scotland’s newspapers furnished unwavering support to the anti-radical cause’ and ‘the war against revolutionary France’ after this period, with the significant exception of the *Glasgow Advertiser*. The newspaper, edited by John Mennons—who at its founding in 1783 closely aligned his periodical with the agenda of Glasgow’s civic and commercial elite—‘sought to maintain a posture of strict independence in the face of sharply polarizing opinions and official harassment’.⁷ Harris’ article sets the context for this ideological transformation of the wider Scottish press by noting its role in earlier and contemporary reform campaigns, from burgh reform to trade liberalisation, identifying a ‘developing public sphere in later eighteenth-century Scotland’ that ‘the newspaper was instrumental’ to shaping, ‘determining how it operated, and its social and political parameters’.⁸

The present essay examines Mennons’ *Glasgow Advertiser* (1783-1801) as an important case study for how this Scottish public sphere projected three temporally and ideologically overlapping reform campaigns during a compressed and concentrated period of political ferment. It maps how the newspaper links a ‘spirit of liberal reform’ in practical service to achieving more transparent and effective modes of local representation and administration—manifested in the burgh reform movement of the late 1780s in particular—with a broader agenda reflective of ‘those principles of liberty’

⁶ Bob Harris, ‘Scotland’s Newspapers’, 45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

articulated in the anti-slave trade and parliamentary reform campaigns of the early 1790s. Conceptually, these three reform campaigns projected in the newspaper were marked by a moralistic conception of constitutional rights, together with a sustained faith in the role that improved mechanisms for maximising liberty and representation could play in Scotland's rapidly accelerating material development. These overlapping campaigns reflected a wider reformist imperative amongst Scottish opposition Whigs in the late eighteenth century, as Emma Macleod has noted, where 'improvements rather than...root and branch alterations' to the British constitution were championed.⁹

These reformist sentiments were a consequence of the spread of information provided by contemporary newspapers like the *Glasgow Advertiser*, given voice in a May 1792 letter 'To the FRIENDS OF BOROUGH REFORM' by 'A CITIZEN OF GLASGOW' published in Mennons' newspaper. '[C]onfident with those principles of liberty you profess, and with the spirit of liberal reform', the signatory's observation that 'knowledge is daily extending among us' is directly associated with 'the liberal spirit which accompanies it', manifested in the efforts of 'the incorporated Trades of Glasgow' to 'vindicate your rights as citizens', as the correspondent put it.¹⁰ Indeed, as this contemporary appeal to the 'principles of liberty' and 'spirit of liberal reform' of the organised trades in the *Glasgow Advertiser's* pages demonstrates, the newspaper's column inches in the 1792-4 period reflected a commitment to presenting key issues

⁹ Macleod, 'The Scottish Opposition Whigs and the French Revolution', 80.

¹⁰ See 'To the FRIENDS OF BOROUGH REFORM', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 7 May 1792, no. 673, 303. Local efforts burgh reform in Glasgow, as reflected in the letter, were led by the city's trades, and supported by the Deacon Convener, Robert Auchincloss, against the magistrates, dating back to a 1783 dispute over the management of newly acquired city land. See Hisashi Kuboyama, 'The Politics of the People in Glasgow and the West of Scotland, 1707-c.1785', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Edinburgh, 2012), 161-67.

around parliamentary reform to meet a new demand for constitutional information amongst the West of Scotland's labouring classes, whilst continuing to maintain its pages as a platform for the ideological concerns (and manifest anxieties) of the region's propertied readers. What resulted, as we shall see in the newspaper's coverage of the parliamentary reform campaign in particular, was a Scottish periodical forum that reconstructed binary debates on the nature of the British constitution—sometimes in items directly juxtaposed on its pages—emerging from increasingly segregated spatial contexts within the Scottish public sphere.

In publishing the reports, advertisements and notices associated with the key reform movements of the late 1780s and early 1790s the newspaper also illustrated the complex politics of national identity in Scotland during the last two decades of the century. As Harris observes in his major study of the contemporary Scottish reform movement, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution* (2008), 'proponents of burgh reform represented their cause as one of completing the Union, of fuller assimilation with British liberties, while abolitionism sought its justification in moral terms but also vindicating the British claim to be, uniquely and historically, the guardian of liberty'.¹¹ This Scottish-British dynamic at play in the Scottish reform campaigns, alongside the attention devoted to local (Glasgow), regional (West of Scotland) and Scottish reform interests found in the *Advertiser's* pages, also demonstrates how 'Scots shaped British identity for their own ends, using it to make demands on the British state', as Macleod

¹¹ Harris, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution*, 43.

observes in her assessment of tensions within Scotland's national identity in the reform movements of the next generation.¹²

Harris also argues that the 'economic and mercantile lobbying' of this Scottish public sphere—a posture encouraged in the *Glasgow Advertiser* through its close ties to the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce—was 'driven by pragmatic as much as ideological reasons' where 'the broadest possible range of support for an issue or demand needed to be shown'.¹³ Hamish Whyte's 2004 entry for Mennons in the *ODNB* observes how the *Advertiser* 'was noteworthy for its independence from political faction' and 'politically generally steering a middle course'.¹⁴ As this essay argues, the *Glasgow Advertiser's* coverage of the reform campaigns in the 1789-94 period, particularly its tacit support of the anti-slave trade campaign and attempts to provide a platform for voices on the radical side of the parliamentary reform campaign, demonstrate how the newspaper often challenged the conservative political instincts of the city's broadening commercial and administrative elite as identified by Irene Maver,¹⁵ which sought to maintain close ties to the first Pitt Ministry in order to maximise Glasgow's trade and manufacturing potential

¹² See Emma Macleod, 'Review of *Radicalism, Reform and National Identity in Scotland, 1820-1833*, by Gordon Pentland', *English Historical Review* 127 (2012), 195-6, at 195. For a discussion by Pentland of this Scottish-British dynamic within the Scottish radical conventions of the 1790s, see Gordon Pentland, 'Patriotism, Universalism and the Scottish Conventions 1792-1794', *History* 89 (2004), 340-60.

¹³ Harris, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution*, 43.

¹⁴ Hamish Whyte, 'Mennons, John', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 September, 2004 [<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-64302>], accessed 31 October, 2019.

¹⁵ Maver argues that 'From at least the 1780s, Glasgow's economic base had been opening out to accommodate a wider range of activities, including the increasingly important textile industry', resulting in 'American and West India traders...relinquish[ing] their near-monopoly position among the ranks of urban elites'. 'This was a broadening-out process,' Maver observes, 'rather than the replacement of one social group by another'. See Irene Maver, 'The Guardianship of the Community', 260. For tensions between the economic liberalism and political conservatism of this elite, see also, Irene Maver, *Glasgow* (Edinburgh, 2000), 25.

after the collapse of the American tobacco market at the conclusion of the Revolutionary War. This ideological divergence is significant for a newspaper that projected its initial mission so closely with the economic agenda of these allies in a shared project to establish the city as an industrial hub for the West of Scotland region.¹⁶

I

The activities centred around burgh reform—and the manner in which they were projected in the Scottish press—provides an early illustration of the nation’s commercial elites asserting their autonomy through appeals to the rationality of ‘the propertied middle-class’¹⁷ which made up a sizeable portion of the readership of newspapers like the *Glasgow Advertiser*. Indeed, as Gordon Pentland notes, the Scottish burgh reform movement ‘was moderate, advocating the political participation in municipal affairs by propertied and intelligent citizens’, and ‘aimed at reforming abuses in the internal government of the burghs’. This concern with local government efficiency and middle-class participation was complemented by a desire to expand the parliamentary franchise beyond the control of ‘self-elected town councils’.¹⁸ These concerns for more responsive and representative local government also animated the Glasgow burgh reform movement,

¹⁶ See Alex Benchimol, ‘Let Scotland Flourish by the Priting of the Word: Commerce, Civic Enlightenment and National Improvement in the *Glasgow Advertiser*, 1783-1800’, in Alex Benchimol and Gerard Lee McKeever (eds), *Cultures of Improvement in Scottish Romanticism, 1707-1840* (London, 2018), 51-73.

¹⁷ See Bruce Lenman, *Integration and Enlightenment: Scotland, 1746-1832* (Edinburgh, 1981), 75.

¹⁸ Gordon Pentland, ‘The French Revolution, Scottish Radicalism and the “People Who Were Called Jacobins”’, in Ulrich Broich, H. T. Dickinson, Eckhart Hellmuth and Martin Schmidt (eds), *Reactions to Revolutions: the 1790s and Their Aftermath* (Muenster and Hamburg, 2007), 85-108, at 90. Mennons was admitted as a Burgess and Guild Brother of Glasgow in 1786 after his marriage to the well-connected Jean Steadman, the rapid success of his newspaper from 1783, and close involvement with the city’s business community. See J. G[ourlay], *An Early Glasgow Journalist* (Glasgow, 1929), 5.

concerns which were amplified in 1783 by a dispute between magistrates and the incorporated trades over issues of ‘mismanagement and the “public good”’ in the disposal of town property.¹⁹ The trades in Glasgow during the mid-1780s, according to Hisahi Kuboyama, demanded ‘more power and greater representation on the council’, while criticizing ‘the present method of parliamentary election as “arbitrary & unconstitutional”’²⁰—sentiments that lay behind the Glasgow Borough Reform Society’s support for wider parliamentary reform in 1792.

John Mennons’ *Glasgow Advertiser* became an important Scottish periodical forum for the activities, arguments and debates centred around burgh reform, the abolition of the slave trade, and radical parliamentary reform in the 1789-94 period that sometimes challenged the political views of Glasgow’s commercial and administrative elite. In this period there were three other newspapers operating in Glasgow: the longstanding *Glasgow Journal*, founded in 1741; the *Glasgow Mercury*, established in 1778; and the *Glasgow Courier*, launched in 1791. Part of the *Advertiser*’s strategy for survival in this newspaper market rested on the reliability of its commercial and political intelligence for a practically-minded and business-focused readership, perhaps in no small part due to Mennons’ association with the politically well-connected Lord Provost and Chamber of Commerce president Patrick Colquhoun (the first number of the *Advertiser* was dedication to Colquhoun and the Town Council).²¹ Colquhoun often convened activities for both organisations at the Tontine Tavern and Coffeeroom, the

¹⁹ Kuboyama, ‘The Politics of the People in Glasgow and the West of Scotland, 1707-c.1785’, 161.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 165, 164.

²¹ See *Glasgow Advertiser*, 27 January 1783, no. 1, p. 1.

busy Trongate hub of the city's emerging bourgeois public sphere, listed as the *de-facto* editorial address for Mennons' newspaper during the 1789-94 period. Mennons' shrewdly modest editorial prospectus for the first number of the *Glasgow Advertiser* serves this agenda, highlighting his periodical's utility to Glasgow and Scotland's commercial prosperity, with 'his own interest' being 'materially concerned in the success; and consequently, in the judicious management of his paper'. He linked the improving activities of the new Glasgow Chamber of Commerce with that of his new newspaper, both joined in a shared effort 'to lay a foundation for such general and comprehensive conclusions, as may serve as guides' to 'both the merchant and manufacturer'. Mennons declared that 'he can depend on his own industry and labour in the execution of his work' and, far from advocating a particular ideological agenda or party position, that 'he shall preserve his mind as free as possible from any prejudice, which, without meaning to impose upon the public, might lead him to partial representation of the facts'.²² Mennons would echo this last commitment in another editorial statement some ten years later, following charges of sedition for publishing an advertisement from a local parliamentary reform society.

II

The *Advertiser* devotes considerable attention in the years from 1789-94 to the civic and parliamentary efforts aimed at reforming the administration of, and representation within,

²² [J. Mennons], 'To the PUBLIC', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 27 January 1783, no. 1, p. 1.

Scotland's Royal Burghs. By the mid-eighteenth century 'the Scots burghs nurtured a very strong and independent sense of civic identity,' according to Bob Harris and Charles McKean. 'By the later eighteenth century,' they note, 'the right of the magistracy to represent the sense of the burgh community was under concerted challenge, as signalled very clearly by the upsurge in support for burgh reform in the early 1780s'.²³ The leading Foxite Whig M.P. Richard Brinsley Sheridan's efforts in the Commons to introduce a Scottish burgh reform bill failed in 1787 and 1788, but both attempts had an important symbolic significance, attracted valuable publicity and marked the formal presentation of the petitions from those supporting burghs, allowing the Irish playwright a suitably dramatic stage from which to set out the primary arguments and wider local support for the cause. Glasgow's petition featured in Sheridan's 1787 attempt, as reported by the *Scots Magazine*: 'That which he held in his hand was from the inhabitants of the city of Glasgow, containing near 1500 signatures of men in every view of the highest respectability and independence.'²⁴ Similarly, the 1788 presentation of forty-six supporting burgh petitions to the Commons was covered in another extended report in the *Scots Magazine*.²⁵

Scottish burgh reform appears as a significant topic for the *Advertiser* in the 6 July, 1789 number—just over a week before the storming of the Bastille. Mennons digested the *London Gazette*'s report over two pages under the heading 'SCOTS BOROUGH REFORM', detailing Sheridan's efforts to introduce a bill aimed at ending self-election in civic corporations—those key intermediaries of urban governance—and

²³ Harris and McKean, *The Scottish Town in the Age of the Enlightenment*, 433.

²⁴ See *Scots Magazine*, Oct. 1787, vol. 49, 478.

²⁵ See *Scots Magazine*, Aug. 1788, vol. 50, 376-9.

making, as the report related, ‘Magistrates and Town-council responsible to the burgesses for the administration of the public revenues’. The current system, Sheridan argued, encouraged ‘a waste of the revenues, tyranny, and oppression of various kinds’. The *Advertiser* highlighted a public consensus behind the aims of the bill: ‘The majority of the people of Scotland, except those who were interested in the preservation of the form of corporation-government as it now stood, were friendly to the object of his bill.’ Sheridan links this mandate—based, in part, as the report lays out, on the fifty-two out of fifty-six Scottish burghs that ‘concurred in the plan of reform held out in the present bill’—with the need for equity for those of an equivalent class who enjoyed the right to participate in English local government, so ‘that the inhabitants of North Britain might enjoy the blessings of civil liberty in their full force, equally with the English nation’.²⁶ Clearly aware of the slim chances for progress, Sheridan informed the House that ‘the petitioners would not be discouraged, but would pursue the same course with a manly perseverance; and that he should be ready in another session to renew his endeavours in this cause’.²⁷

Mennons made his editorial position plain in the 7 September 1789 number of the *Advertiser*, introducing a letter the newspaper published from Lord Gardenstone to the

²⁶ ‘SCOTS BOROUGH REFORM’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 6 July, 1789, no. 379, 437-8, at 437. This call for constitutional equalization for Scots was echoed in the Scottish campaign of 1790 to repeal the Test Act, showcased in the General Assembly debate of that year. This debate was reported over eight consecutive numbers of the *Glasgow Advertiser* in May and June, and the repeal case against what Mennons called this ‘unconstitutional hardship’ was strongly endorsed by the newspaper. See [J. Mennons], ‘PARLIAMENTARY INTELLIGENCE’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 2-5 April, 1790, no. 456, p. 220. For an extended discussion of the role of the newspaper in this form of constitutional activism, see Alex Benchimol, ‘The Scottish Press, the Union and Civil Society After 1707: the *Glasgow Advertiser* and the General Assembly Test Act Debate of 1790’, *Scottish Affairs* 27:1 (2018), 82-91.

²⁷ ‘SCOTS BOROUGH REFORM’, p. 438.

Convention of Royal Burghs with the advisory that ‘the following...would not be unacceptable to our readers’.²⁸ Gardenstone’s letter forthrightly makes the case for reform to the recalcitrant landed interest, arguing ‘that the honour and true interest of our landed men in all ranks, are connected with the independence and prosperity of our Burghs’. Echoing the claims of ‘manly perseverance’ on the part of the petitioners in Sheridan’s parliamentary statement, the letter also emphasizes how burgh reform had become Scotland’s great constitutional cause. ‘Let the “perservidum ingenium Scotorum” exert itself in this instance with sense and constancy,’ it observed. Gardenstone’s presentation of the Scottish reformers’ case—‘to abolish the monstrous systems of self-elected Magistrates and Counsellors’; ‘to restore the original just right of election’; and protect the ‘*Common Good*’²⁹—reminds *Advertiser* readers of what is at stake for their civic, regional and national well-being. This is emphasised in material terms, with an implicit focus on its implications for economic improvement that had, by 1789, become a defining feature of North British identity, and one particularly valued in what Mennons announced in his first editorial as ‘the foremost commercial city in Scotland’.³⁰

Gardenstone’s argument for burgh reform also focuses on the wider civic and political ramifications as well, in respect of rights to an equivalent participation in the governance of Scottish urban localities as was in practice south of the Border.

In the same number of the *Advertiser* the moral urgency of this national cause is amplified with an explicit linking of burgh reform with the ‘fermentation of freedom

²⁸ [John Mennons], *Glasgow Advertiser*, 4 Sep.-7 Sep. 1789, no. 396, p. 569.

²⁹ ‘REFORM OF THE SCOTS BURGHS’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 4 Sep.-7 Sep. 1789, no. 396, p. 569.

³⁰ [J. Mennons], ‘To the PUBLIC’, 1.

which now agitates France'. Gardenstone's classical emblem of Scots perseverance is invoked as a redemptive national characteristic—'[t]here is no nation in the world that possesses more, nor, perhaps so much perseverance as the Scotch, except perhaps the Jews'—that, 'with the surrounding examples of a rising liberty, will undoubtedly crown the efforts for a political reform in Scotland with success'.³¹ This faith was echoed in Mennons' reports on the status of this issue in the Commons, with updates in the newspaper's 'GLASGOW' and 'PARLIAMENTARY INTELLIGENCE' sections in 1790.³²

This sustained coverage reached a climax in the 3 June 1791 number, with an extended front page report on Sheridan's motion to reform the Royal Burghs of Scotland. 'After dwelling some time upon the hardships of those grievances, and the necessity of providing a remedy,' the report continued, 'he concluded by moving, [t]hat the petition from the Royal Burghs of Scotland be referred to a Committee'. Dissent from Henry Dundas and Sir John Anstruther (a product of the unreformed Scottish electoral system as M.P. for Anstruther Burghs) was noted, as was support from Charles James Fox, with the *Advertiser* reporting that the 'motion of Mr. Sheridan was then put, and negatived, without a division'.³³ This ignominious parliamentary defeat for the Scots burgh reform cause prompted Mennons, in the 'GLASGOW' section of the same number, to issue a forthright editorial response. 'The motion respecting the Scotch boroughs has again been

³¹ 'STATE OF POLITICS: Operation of Liberty in France on Great Britain and Ireland', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 4 Sep.-7 Sep. 1789, no. 396, p. 574.

³² See 'GLASGOW', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 19 March, 1790, no. 451, p. 183; 'MONDAY'S POST: PARLIAMENTARY INTELLIGENCE', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 5 April, 1790, no. 456, p. 221.

³³ See 'Scots Burghs', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 3 June 1791, no. 575, p. 345.

lost,’ yet, ‘[o]ne great point, however, has been gained; the House is now pledged to enter into an enquiry on that business as soon as the next sessions begin’. ‘The request of nine tenths of the people of Scotland comes with a powerful claim,’ he continued, ‘and when it is considered that the request is moderate and reasonable, we do not see how their purpose can be defeated by argument at last.’ Mennons added that ‘these are not the times for the exertion of *power* against argument’.³⁴ This assertion of a moral basis for the ‘moderate and reasonable’ cause of burgh reform resonates in the *Advertiser*’s coverage of contemporary Scottish efforts to abolish the slave trade and arguments for parliamentary reform. Indeed, the ideological and moral overlap in arguments for burgh and parliamentary reform in particular would constitute a key basis for the newspaper’s provision of a sustained platform for advocates of the latter.

This ideological and moral continuity would feature in notices from the Glasgow Borough Reform Society promoting a spirit of transparency, liberty, and local democracy that sharply contrasted with the discouraging reports on Sheridan’s efforts to facilitate the cause in the Commons. In March 1792 the newspaper highlighted the moral dimensions of the cause, with a meeting of the Glasgow society convened to present ‘an elegant silver medal’ inscribed on one side with core principles of the wider burgh reform movement: ‘All men are by nature free and equal in respect of their Rights; hence, all civil or political distinctions and authority are derived from the people, and can be founded only in public utility.’³⁵ In the April 23 number an item advertising a pamphlet version of Sheridan’s motion for burgh reform is the front page lead,³⁶ followed by

³⁴ [J. Mennons], ‘GLASGOW’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 3 June 1791, no. 575, p. 350.

³⁵ ‘GLASGOW’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 23 March 1792, no. 660, p. 185.

³⁶ ‘REFORM OF SCOTCH BOROUGHS’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 20-23 April 1792, no. 669, p. 266.

extensive coverage of the Commons debate associated with it. This latter report detailed how the issue developed into an argument over a wider ‘reformation in the constitution’ at a time when ‘the Revolution in France was fresh in the public mind’. Now, ‘the new Government substituted in France...was known alone by the advantages it had given to this country’. The report continued that ‘[i]t would not therefore be fair to urge the Revolution as a bar to his motion for a reform in the Scotch Burghs, or to any reform that might be proposed in our constitution, for that Revolution afforded us the best of all opportunities of examining into our defects or grievances, and reforming them in a period of peace and safety’.³⁷ Directly below this item is the result of the Commons vote on Sheridan’s most recent motion, ‘Ayes 27, Noes 69’.³⁸

In response to this latest parliamentary setback, Mennons published the summary resolutions of a recent meeting from the Glasgow Society for Borough Reform as the front page lead item in the next *Advertiser* number. ‘Is it not repugnant to the principles of a free Constitution, that the persons who levy and expend taxes should perpetuate their own power by electing themselves?’, the Society asked. ‘Have not the people who pay the taxes the most just claim to demand the right of electing those who are intrusted with the expenditure of said taxes?’ ‘*Let non-reformers answer these; Facts are stubborn things,*’ the notice insisted, and concluded with the following pledge that would also resonate in the imminent activities of the movement for parliamentary reform: ‘From these considerations the Society enjoin the Burgesses of Scotland, associated for reform,

³⁷ ‘HOUSE OF COMMONS: SCOTCH BURGHS’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 20-23 April 1792, no. 669, p. 269.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 270.

to meet, and constitutionally declare themselves in defence of their rights, and resolve, like citizens of a free country, to renew their applications with redoubled vigour, which, in the end, must ensure success.’³⁹ The lead signatory of these resolutions published in the *Advertiser*, Society President James Richardson, would also sign the Declaration of the London-based Friends of the People, ‘associated for purpose of obtaining a Parliamentary reform’, which would be published in Mennons’ newspaper two weeks later. Richardson and the Glasgow Borough Reform Society would demonstrate their ongoing efforts to improve local government by an offer of ‘A PREMIUM OF A GOLD MEDAL for the best essay upon the properest plan of Police (or good government) which could be adopted for this city’, in the 11 May number of the *Advertiser*⁴⁰ leading efforts to establish a local police force for the city which would culminate in the Glasgow Police Act of 1800.

Debates around the need for a local police force in Glasgow published in the *Advertiser* from 1790 through to 1793 routinely asserted it as a proxy for the wider issue of burgh reform.⁴¹ The campaign to ‘create a policing structure that would be directly accountable to the community’, and not to ‘self-elected councillors’, as Irene Maver has argued, ‘was part of the wider movement for burgh reform which surfaced in Scotland during the 1780s’.⁴² A Police Bill introduced by magistrates in 1788 after industrial riots

³⁹ ‘BOROUGH REFORM’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 23-27 April, , no. 670. p. 273.

⁴⁰ See ‘GLASGOW’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 11 May, 1792, no. 674, p. 305.

⁴¹ See *Glasgow Advertiser and Evening Intelligencer*, no. 436, 22-25 January 1790, p. 57; *Glasgow Advertiser and Evening Intelligencer*, no. 534, 3-7 January 1791, p. 9; *Glasgow Advertiser and Evening Intelligencer*, no. 668, 16-20 April 1792, p. 257; *Glasgow Advertiser and Evening Intelligencer*, no. 674, 7-11 May 1792, p. 305; and *Glasgow Advertiser and Evening Intelligencer*, no. 747, 18-21 January 1793, p. 47.

⁴² Maver, ‘The Guardianship of the Community’, 249, 250.

in the city the previous September, ‘heralded a prolonged period of political infighting between local burgesses and civic leaders’.⁴³ Led by the incorporated trades, the concerns centred around ‘an unrepresentative body [that] could levy taxes and authorise expenditure’ when ‘ratepayers had no control over how the money could be spent’.⁴⁴ This issue illustrates a growing rupture within the Glasgow commercial elite, between a Town Council run by ‘a small, unaccountable oligarchy of colonial traders’ and ‘the new men of wealth’ based in the expanding manufacturing industries of the city.⁴⁵ A compromise scheme was attained in 1792 with magistrates agreeing on an elected Police Commission made up of members from the rival Merchants’ and Trades’ Houses and elected by those two key local constitutional bodies, indicating ‘that civic leaders were not inflexible in their approach to urban management’.⁴⁶

With the latest parliamentary setback to the cause of burgh reform in April 1792 the ideological chasm between the newspaper’s sentiments for political and administrative reform and the conservative constitutional instincts of the British parliamentary majority in London widened, marking the coalescence of a distinctive Scottish reformist public sphere around this issue. This was evidenced in Mennons’ anxiety concerning the success of contemporaneous parliamentary efforts to end the slave trade, an issue of great material and moral consequence in the West of Scotland. A few weeks before Sheridan’s unsuccessful 1792 motion, Mennons lamented the fate of the parliamentary slave trade abolition bill in a manner that recalled his frustration with the

⁴³ Barrie, *Police in the Age of Improvement*, 66.

⁴⁴ Maver, ‘The Guardianship of the Community’, 250.

⁴⁵ Barrie, *Police in the Age of Improvement*, 69.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

failed 1791 burgh reform vote, whilst highlighting the burgh campaign's continued relevance as a democratic corrective to tactical manoeuvring in Westminster. Using the 'GLASGOW' section of the newspaper as his editorial platform, he bluntly observed: 'We will soon have an occasion to observe, whether the voice of the *people* or their *representatives* will preponderate, in the question concerning the Slave Trade, which will in a few days occupy their attention. Four-fifths of the people cry out as loud for its abolition.'⁴⁷

This unusual contemporary linking of the campaign to abolish the slave trade with the ongoing efforts to reform the Scottish burghs was made more explicit in the *Advertiser's* serial re-publication of a 1784 pamphlet from the early phase of the latter movement, 'Letter From a Member of the General Convention of DELEGATES; to the CITIZENS of the Royal Boroughs which have not yet acceded to a Plan of Reform'.⁴⁸ In an extract from the 16 April 1792 number, the writer highlighted the hypocrisy 'that under a constitution of government which boasts of extending the exercise of liberty to the people at large, there are permitted to exist in the Royal Boroughs of Scotland, very corrupt and pernicious institutions of slavery.' 'Communities are here governed,' it continued, 'by men whose nomination, either as Magistrates or Members of Parliament, they have no political connection, over whom they have no controul', citing the tiny electoral bases of Scotland's largest cities, including Glasgow ('The population of

⁴⁷ [J. Mennons], 'GLASGOW', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 23-26 March, 1792, no. 661, p. 202.

⁴⁸ Assessing this pamphlet when it was first published, the *Critical Review* cautiously observed: 'It appears that Scotland has caught the flame of political reform, which, we hope, will never be accompanied with any of those excesses so disgraceful during the progress of religious reformation in that country.' *Critical Review*, Aug. 1784, vol. 58, pp. 149-50.

Glasgow is computed at 50,000, but twenty-nine persons only are entitled to vote in the election of a Member of Parliament!’), as gross illustrations of the system. These ‘violent deprivations of Liberty which are to be found in the Royal Boroughs of Scotland’⁴⁹ also reminded *Advertiser* readers in 1792 of the earlier focus in the burgh reform movement to link the cause for better local representation and administration with parliamentary reform. The latter effort was to be formalised in 1792 with the first General Convention of the Friends of the People in Edinburgh, modelled on the Edinburgh Royal Burgh Convention of 1784 that first gave rise to the national burgh reform movement.

Another extract published a week later argues that the disenfranchised populations of the burghs ‘are made to suffer in reality, an ignominious slavery, with the poverty and depression which naturally belong to that condition’, manifested in ‘the exhausted state of your public property and revenues; in the decayed and depopulated appearance of your towns; in the small extent and languid state of your commerce and manufactures’, stemming from ‘city governments...which have been alternately the instruments of regal tyranny and aristocratical domination’. Making a moral link between unreformed city and burgh administrations and the slave trade, the Letter argued that the former ‘are now also become the vehicles of a certain species of commerce; and your liberties, can you bear it without indignation?’ ‘Your Liberties and those of your brother citizens form the

⁴⁹ ‘A Letter from a Member of the General Convention of DELEGATES; to the CITIZENS of the Royal Boroughs which have not yet acceded to a Plan of Reform (Continued from our Paper of Monday last.)’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 16 April 1792, no. 667, p. 250.

only object of the infamous trade!', the item concludes.⁵⁰ After this item are two pieces directly related to parliamentary efforts to abolish the slave trade: one on House of Commons evidence given by abolitionist petitioners; and the other a summary of evidence produced for the Privy Council relating to the slave trade.⁵¹ The final extract from this 1784 pamphlet featured as a front page lead item in the 4 June 1792 number, and marked out the current efforts to abolish the 'slavery' of the present administrative and electoral system in Scotland's burghs as a distinctive patriotic cause: 'An unanimous and inflexible determination to abolish those systems of slavery which have both disgraced and ruined the Country has now become necessary to preserve to Scotsmen those honourable marks of distinction which their neighbours celebrate with pride, and to which the blood and spirit of their ancestors justly entitled them.'⁵²

III

In April 1792 the House of Commons passed William Wilberforce's motion to abolish the slave trade, but, through a parliamentary loophole orchestrated by Henry Dundas,

⁵⁰ 'A Letter from a Member of the General Convention of DELEGATES; to the CITIZENS of the Royal Boroughs which have not yet acceded to a Plan of Reform (Continued from our Paper of Monday last.)', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 23 April, 1792, no. 669, p. 266.

⁵¹ See 'SLAVE TRADE: Extracts given before the House of Commons on the part of the PETITIONERS for the ABOLITION of the SLAVE TRADE', *Glasgow Advertiser*, no. 669, p. 266; and 'A SUMMARY of the EVIDENCE produced before the COMMITTEE of the PRIVY COUNCIL, and before a COMMITTEE of the HOUSE of COMMONS, relating to the SLAVE TRADE', *Glasgow Advertiser*, no. 669, pp. 266-7.

⁵² 'A Letter from a Member of the General Convention of DELEGATES; to the CITIZENS of the Royal Boroughs which have not yet acceded to a Plan of Reform (Concluded from our Paper of May 21)', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 4 June 1792, no. 681, p. 361.

required a legislative process that would take another fifteen years.⁵³ A month earlier, the *Glasgow Advertiser* published a poem ‘TO THE PEOPLE OF SCOTLAND’ using rhetoric around tyranny and slavery long familiar to the newspaper’s readers from the burgh reform campaign. The last two stanzas stand out as examples of North British enlightened moral protest against overweening authority:

Let virtue then inspire your gen’rous breasts
 With courage to propose your just requests;
 Let heart and hand unite in this great deed,
 From Orkney Islands to the River Tweed;
 Then shall your labours with success be crown’d,
 And Tyranny receive its final wound.

But let not brutal overbooking zeal
 O’er firm undaunted fortitude prevail---
 The virtuous mind disdains fanatic rage,
 That scourge of ev’ry uninstructed age:
 With energy RESPECTFULLY complain---
 A Nation’s voice is never heard in vain;
 And when exerted to obtain redress,
 Must soon those irksome institutes suppress,
 Adapted rather for the banks of the Nile
 Than for th’ enlighten’d Sons of Britain’s Isle.
 W.C.

⁵³ See John D. Brims, ‘The Scottish Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution’, unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Edinburgh, 1983), 156.

Glasgow, March 21st 1792⁵⁴

The issue of slave trade abolition was a far more complex one for the urban-commercial readership of Mennons' newspaper than that presented by the reform of the local administration of Scotland's Royal Burghs. Indeed, as Stephen Mullen has noted, the 'West India interest' within the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce constituted a 'powerful minority' at the body's founding, including the Chairman Patrick Colquhoun and other Directors.⁵⁵ Mullen observes that 'during the early years, the Chamber not only petitioned in support of West India interests but refused as an institution to condemn the economic system based on forced migration and expropriated labour'.⁵⁶ But the West India interest was a minority within the Chamber, and promoting industrialization in West of Scotland often took precedence over sustaining the slave economies of the West Indies, despite their key role in the region's nascent textile industry through the trade in cotton so integral to its expansion. In short, 'the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce was dominated by individuals with [a] contrasting commercial ethos'.⁵⁷

The *Advertiser's* coverage of the slave trade abolition debates reflects this complexity, as well as the commitment to showcase a reasoned and moral indictment of

⁵⁴ 'POETRY FOR THE ADVERTISER: TO THE PEOPLE OF SCOTLAND', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 26 March 1792, no. 661, p. 204. 'W.C.' was most likely the Glasgow poet William Campbell, who was an outspoken opponent of the slave trade and frequent poetic contributor to the newspaper. I am grateful to Professor Gerard Carruthers for alerting me to this attribution. For an example of an anti-slavery poem in the *Advertiser* from 'W. C.', see 'POETRY FOR THE ADVERTISER: THE NEGROE'S COMPLAINT', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 12-16 March 1792, no. 658, p. 180.

⁵⁵ Stephen Mullen, 'The Glasgow West India interest: integration, collaboration and exploitation in the British Atlantic World, 1776-1846', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Glasgow, 2015), 119. See also Stephen Mullen, 'A Glasgow-West India Merchant House and the Imperial Dividend, 1779-1867', *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies* 33:2 (2013), 196-223.

⁵⁶ Mullen, 'The Glasgow West India interest', 120.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

slavery via rhetorical constellation with previous and contemporaneous discussions of burgh reform in the newspaper. A blunt assessment on ‘Slavery in the West Indies’ from the 4-7 September 1789 number immediately follows from a more sanguine analysis of the fate of the burgh reform campaign, where the *Advertiser* ‘anticipate[s], with pleasure, the time when the free Burgesses of Scotland will gain their cause’.⁵⁸ In the former item, the newspaper makes its moral position clear through language that contrasts the risks of West Indian ‘vengeance’ with the affirmative language of ‘freedom’, ‘justice’ and ‘sense’ associated with emancipation.⁵⁹ Less than two years later, in the 22 April 1791 number of the *Advertiser*, a snapshot of this ‘vengeance’ in the French West Indies was reported to readers. ‘Letters are received in Edinburgh, from the West Indies, dated the beginning of February which mention, that the disturbances in Martinique were still very violent,’ with hundreds ‘killed in the skirmishes betwixt the people and the military’.⁶⁰

In the same number, on the following page, Mennons devotes considerable column space to a report on the initial reading of Wilberforce’s slave trade abolition bill in the House of Commons. Wilberforce’s motion is described as a uniquely dramatic moral intervention in a long simmering and now urgent political debate, paralleling the *Advertiser*’s reporting of R. B. Sheridan’s parliamentary motions in support of Scots burgh reform: ‘Mr. *Wilberforce* then rose to open the important business of an abolition of the slave trade.’ ‘He was convinced of the great importance of the question, and felt the present moment to be awful and critical’, amplifying the brief but shocking notice

⁵⁸ ‘STATE OF POLITICS: Operation of Liberty in France on Great Britain and Ireland’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 4 Sep-7 Sep. 1789, no. 396, p. 574.

⁵⁹ ‘Slaves in the West Indies’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 4 Sep-7 Sep. 1789, no. 396, p. 574.

⁶⁰ ‘EDINBURGH’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 22 April 1791, no. 564, p. 252.

concerning widespread violence in the French West Indies. The report emphasized the same conjunction of moral principle with enlightened public policy animating the contemporaneous campaign for administrative reform of the Scottish burghs, and the crucial mediating role of ‘the most ample discussion of the question’, both in the House and throughout the wider nation, ‘being fully convinced that the more it was discussed, the more fully it would appear the conviction of every man, that his motion for an abolition would be founded on justice, humanity, and sound policy’.⁶¹ As if to embody this ‘ample discussion’, the report goes on for three more columns that detail Wilberforce’s evidence of the inhumanity and violence of the slave trade, and his assessment of the material impact of abolition for British trade more widely.

Anticipating the overriding moral case for abolition that would direct so many of the petitions from the West of Scotland published in the *Advertiser* over the next year, the report also plainly reckoned with the economic cost of an end to the slave trade for British workers, traders and consumers, something that would resonate in subsequent debates in the newspaper. ‘His constituents, he said, furnished more for the African market than any other people in the kingdom;’ the report stated, ‘but he should not be doing them justice, if he did not declare that they were willing to sacrifice all their gains arising out of so diabolical and bloody a trade, which all the perfumers in Arabia could not sweeten’.⁶²

This moral frame for the assessment of the commercial implications of slave trade abolition echoes a similar analysis that accompanied the Edinburgh Chamber of

⁶¹ ‘PARLIAMENTARY INTELLIGENCE: HOUSE OF COMMONS: *Slave Trade*’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 22 April 1791, no. 564, pp. 253-4, p. 253.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 254.

Commerce's 1788 anti-slave petition. As Iain Whyte observes, 'The Chamber of Commerce took on board one of the key arguments put forward by defenders of the trade, that it was a commercial necessity.'⁶³ Minutes from the Chamber highlight how the moral case for abolition is seen to override any commercial risk it could entail: 'But even if this were not so much the case as the Chamber is inclined to believe it, the feelings of your petitioners as men, would overbear their opinions as merchants and lead them to sacrifice somewhat of the convenience and profit of commerce to the rights and principles of humanity.'⁶⁴ Notably, the Glasgow Chamber refrained from any such petition—either at this time or later—in support of Wilberforce's Slave Trade abolition bills in 1791 and 1792, reflecting the strong West India interest within the body. This approach did have some notable individual exceptions, however, including David Dale's efforts to lead the Glasgow Society for Abolition of the African Slave Trade. Dale, a founding director of the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce, signed his name to a series of resolutions published in the *Glasgow Advertiser* in April 1791, amongst which included 'the grateful and affectionate sense which the Society entertain' of Wilberforce's 'noble exertions in the cause of JUSTICE and HUMANITY'.⁶⁵

Indeed, the pages of Mennons' *Glasgow Advertiser* reflected the widely shared sentiments for slave trade abolition in the West of Scotland at this time, with column inches recording local and regional public support for the campaign in advance of formal petitioning. This was part of a larger civic and religious effort in Scotland between 1788

⁶³ Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756-1838* (Edinburgh, 2006), 82-3.

⁶⁴ Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce, Minutes, 1788, Edinburgh City Archives, ED005/1/3, p. 245, qtd in Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery*, 83.

⁶⁵ See *Glasgow Advertiser*, 25 April 1791, no. 565, p. 263.

and 1792, with over a third of petitions in the Commons coming from Scotland in 1792.⁶⁶ Reflecting this trend, in 1791 and 1792 the *Advertiser* published numerous announcements and resolutions in support of Wilberforce's parliamentary efforts, including, amongst others, an Honorary degree for the Yorkshire M.P. from the University of Glasgow for the institution's 'HIGH APPROBATION of his exertions for the ABOLITION OF THE AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE'.⁶⁷ In June of 1791, the *Advertiser* reported on the deliberations of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland—both 'as men and as Christians, and as members of the National Church'—to 'overtures concerning the Slave Trade', declaring 'their abhorrence of a traffic so contrary to the rights of mankind and the feelings of humanity'.⁶⁸ In March of 1792 the newspaper reported that the Presbytery of Glasgow resolved to submit a petition to Parliament in support of 'the abolition of the African Slave Trade', joined in this by the Presbytery of Paisley.⁶⁹ In the same number the Presbytery of Edinburgh 'unanimously resolve[d] to petition the House of Commons a second time for the abolition of the Slave Trade'.⁷⁰

The following week the Glasgow newspaper published on its front page a list of resolutions against the slave trade contributed from the Edinburgh Committee for Abolition. The first characterised the trade 'to be highly unjust, inhuman, and peculiarly incompatible with that improved civilization, and those principles of liberty in which

⁶⁶ Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery*, 84-5.

⁶⁷ See *Glasgow Advertiser*, 29 April, 1791, no. 566, p. 270.

⁶⁸ 'EDINBURGH: GENERAL ASSEMBLY: SLAVE TRADE', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 3 June 1791, no. 575, p. 348.

⁶⁹ 'GLASGOW', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 9 March 1792, no. 656, p. 162.

⁷⁰ 'EDINBURGH', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 9 March 1792, no. 656, p. 158.

Britons glory’—rhetoric familiar to its readers from the burgh reform campaign.⁷¹ In an independent report highlighting local Glasgow support for the Edinburgh Committee’s efforts (particularly crucial considering the absence of a petition from the Glasgow Town Council), Mennons noted the following: ‘This afternoon, the petition of the inhabitants of this city for the abolition of the Slave Trade signed by upwards of 13,300 persons, was transmitted to London to Mr Wilberforce, to be by him presented to the House of Commons.’⁷² A week after this report, following a notice from the Presbytery of Hamilton unanimously resolving to petition, the newspaper observed that ‘*One hundred and seventy-seven* Petitions for the abolition of the Slave Trade, have been presented to the House of Commons in the course of *one* month’.⁷³ In the next number Mennons makes the *Advertiser* position clear in an editorial statement that emphasized the need for democratic accountability of the British legislature to Scottish public opinion, and reminded the periodical’s readership of its ongoing support for burgh reform, to end in yet another parliamentary failure the following month: ‘We will soon have an occasion to observe, whether the voice of the *people* or their *representatives* will preponderate, in the question concerning the Slave Trade, which will in a few days occupy their attention. Four-fifths of the people cry out as loud for its abolition.’⁷⁴

That same month the newspaper published a poem submitted by ‘J. S.’ from the industrial area of Bridgeton (‘Bridgetown’) ‘ON the SLAVE TRADE’. The poem emphasizes the importance of faith and moral commitment as guards against commercial

⁷¹ *Glasgow Advertiser*, 16 March 1792, no. 658, p. 173.

⁷² ‘GLASGOW’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 16 March 1792, no. 658, p. 178.

⁷³ *Glasgow Advertiser*, 23 March 1792, no. 660, p. 185.

⁷⁴ ‘GLASGOW’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 23-26 March, 1792, no. 661, p. 202.

expediency, and the desire for an extension of civil liberties characteristic of the popular response to Wilberforce's Abolition Bills in the West of Scotland. 'Come all ye faithful, gen'rous men, / Of Britain's fair enlightened isle', the poem opens, inviting its readers to join the print campaign for liberty evidenced in the pages of the *Glasgow Advertiser* over the last year. 'Join heart and hand, and active pen, / And base oppression make your spoil', the first stanza concludes. In a direct moral challenge to those members of the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce perusing the back pages of the newspaper, the poem continues in the third stanza: 'Say not, "We'll lose our trade and gain," / For our Great Sov'reign will provide; / Not of His goodness dare complain, Who rules immensity so wide'. After bringing together faith and moral action in support of the cause for abolition, the poem concludes by linking prosperity at home to the extension of civil liberties in the West Indies: 'The rights of men must be theirs, / And we for them shall lawful strive, / Who knows but that our weak repairs / May be the only way we'll thrive'.⁷⁵ This message of an active public virtue redeeming the moral compromises of trade through the mechanism of critical publicity would resonate with a large part of Scottish civil society, if not with a majority of the members of the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce. The poem's allusion to the 'rights of men' links the campaign for abolition of the slave trade with that of an earlier component of the burgh reform campaign—improved parliamentary representation for the burgesses and manufacturing population of Scotland's cities⁷⁶—and, taken together with recent events in France, amounted to a

⁷⁵ 'POETRY FOR THE ADVERTISER: On the SLAVE TRADE', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 16-19 March, 1792, no. 659, p. 188.

⁷⁶ For examples of parliamentary reform societies in Glasgow and the West of Scotland that explicitly linked the abolition of the slave trade to a fundamental reform of the House of Commons, see Brims, 'The Scottish Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution', 157-8.

provocative challenge to the commercial and political elite of the West of Scotland. This challenge was amplified only a few months later with the *Glasgow Advertiser's* coverage of the Scottish campaign for parliamentary reform, where the language of constitutional improvement and the discourse of the 'rights of man' converged.

IV

The newspaper's early coverage of the Scottish campaign for parliamentary reform connected this cause with the *Advertiser's* previous (and ongoing) support for burgh reform and the abolition of the slave trade. Indeed, a May 1792 front page re-publication of the declarations from the Whig Association of the Friends of the People in London may have been motivated by the *Advertiser's* support for Scots burgh reform, recently defeated in Parliament on 18 April 1792.⁷⁷ The new society's 'Constitutional objects', drafted by burgh reform parliamentary champion R. B. Sheridan amongst others, called for '*First--To restore the Freedom of Election, and a more equal Representation of the People in Parliament*'; and '*Secondly--To secure to the people a more frequent exercise of their right of electing their representatives*'.⁷⁸ The former was a recently dormant but complementary aim of the early Scots burgh reform campaign to make local government administration more responsive to the needs of the new manufacturing and commercial elites of Scotland's expanding towns and cities, tacitly endorsed in 1782 by no less a

⁷⁷ See Bob Harris, 'Scottish-English Connections in British Radicalism in the 1790s', in T. C. Smout (ed.), *Anglo-Scottish Relations from 1603 to 1900* (Oxford, 2005), 189-212, at 193.

⁷⁸ *Glasgow Advertiser*, 11-14 May 1792, no. 675, p. 313.

civic-commercial leader than Patrick Colquhoun, a prominent opponent of parliamentary reform.⁷⁹ After the latest parliamentary defeat of burgh reform in 1792, some Scottish campaigners ‘began to view parliamentary reform as the only way to pursue their objective’.⁸⁰ Such reformers included Norman Macleod, the Inverness M.P. and champion of burgh reform, both as a recent parliamentary ally of Sheridan and in newspapers like the *Glasgow Advertiser*,⁸¹ who signed the declaration of the Friends of the People. Macleod would lead Scottish efforts in the new campaign as Chairman of the Society for Parliamentary Reform in Edinburgh.

Another Scottish signatory of the Friends of the People declaration was James Richardson, President of the Glasgow Society for Borough Reform, who featured in a *Glasgow Advertiser* item joining up the new campaign for parliamentary reform with the cause of burgh reform and the abolition of the slave trade. In the ‘GLASGOW’ section of the 13-16 July 1792 number, a report marking the ‘ANNIVERSARY OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION’ relates that ‘A number of the FRIENDS of FREEDOM and PEACE, met in Grinton’s Tavern, to celebrate the Anniversary of the French Revolution’. After unanimously electing Richardson as its senior Chairman, the new society listed a number of ‘TOASTS’ that ‘were drank with suitable demonstrations of joy’, including ones to ‘Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Esq.; who has so long and ably contended for the restoration of the undeniable Rights of the Burgesses of the Royal Boroughs of Scotland’, as well as to ‘The Committee of Convention at Edinburgh for

⁷⁹ See ‘Paper V. Letter from the Lord Provost of Glasgow to the Chairman of the Committee of the Association of the County of York, 28 Nov. 1782’, in Christopher Wyvill, *Political Papers*, ii (York, 1794-1802), 84-5.

⁸⁰ Harris, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution*, 77.

⁸¹ See *Glasgow Advertiser*, 14-18 Jan. 1793, no. 746, pp. 34-5.

Borough Reform, and all the independent Burgesses in Scotland, who have had the courage to stand forth, in asserting their injured liberties.’ Toasts were also raised to ‘The speedy Abolition of the African Slave Trade’ and ‘The Friends of the People associated for Parliamentary Reform’, where it was wished ‘their patriotic exertions in due time be crowned with success’.⁸²

Less than two weeks later Mennons published on the *Advertiser*’s front page a notice about ‘a meeting of a Society formed in Glasgow for the purpose of effecting Constitutional and Parliamentary Reform’, assembled at the Prince of Wales Tavern in the city. The item records a series of unanimous resolutions firmly wedding ideological concerns from the burgh and radical parliamentary reform movements, including ones citing ‘just cause to complain of the numberless corruptions and abuses which deform’ the British constitution resulting from ‘the present inadequate state of the Representation of the people, both with regard to the duration of Parliaments, and to the mode in which persons are chosen to serve therein’. The abuses resulting from inadequate constitutional mechanisms cited in these first two resolutions were principal concerns of the burgh reform movement, echoed in the explicit reference to the cause of burgh reform in resolution 7.⁸³ This ideological complementarity may have led sympathetic editors like Mennons to assess radical parliamentary reform as the logical ideological extension of the earlier movement—an assessment that would make him personally vulnerable to state prosecution as the Scottish parliamentary reform movement intensified and extended its reach into the nation’s expanding industrial class.

⁸² See ‘GLASGOW’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 13-16 July, 1792, no. 693, p. 463.

⁸³ *Glasgow Advertiser*, 23-27 July, 1792, no. 696, p. 481.

A November 1792 number of the *Advertiser* carried a front page lead item that marked an historic amplification of the radical parliamentary reform movement in Scotland. The announcement from the ‘Association of Delegates from all the Societies of the Friends of the People in and around Edinburgh’ reflected the explosive growth of the parliamentary reform movement in Scotland, and the risks associated with that growth during a period of loyalist backlash against radical political movements identifying with a revolution across the English channel that had turned more bloody and expansionist. ‘Before September, the Scottish reform societies numbered just two or three,’ Harris notes, ‘by the end of the year, the total had climbed to somewhere between eighty and a hundred, similar in number, in other words, to that of English reform societies by the mid 1790s, but drawn from a considerably smaller proportion.’⁸⁴ ‘Unlike the advanced Whigs and burgh reformers of the summer,’ Harris adds, ‘those who joined during September, October and November 1792 were directly inspired by the French Revolution.’⁸⁵

The item reported that ‘Thomas Muir, Esq.; younger, of Huntershill, rose and having fully stated his reasons, moved That this Convention do agree to a General Convention by Delegates from all the Associations in Scotland, and write circular letters of the opinion of all the Associations relative to the same.’⁸⁶ This attempt to make a national platform for the parliamentary reform movement echoed similar logistical efforts by the Scots burgh reformers almost a decade earlier with their 1784 independent General Convention in Edinburgh, and stood as a watershed moment for those burgh reform

⁸⁴ Harris, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution*, 77.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁸⁶ ‘To the Public’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 23-26 Nov. 1792, no. 731, p. 761.

campaigners who wished to shield their constitutional claims from ‘the taint of innovation and association with the French Revolution, which any broadening of their objectives might cause’.⁸⁷ The motion by Muir, which ‘was universally embraced and applauded’ and to be fully publicized in ‘all the Edinburgh and Glasgow newspapers’, was followed by two resolutions that indicated the high risk for state prosecution that this radicalization of the parliamentary reform movement brought with it. The first established ‘That any person or persons, belonging to the Associated Friends of the People, if found guilty of rioting, of creating or aiding sedition in the country’ will ‘be expunged from the books of the Society’, highlighting the risks associated with a such a precipitous expansion of a movement that had grown, in some cases, outwith the orderly norms of the liberal public sphere represented by such meetings and their careful periodical amplification in the Scottish press. The second resolution in effect anticipated state prosecution for this radical—even if peaceably conducted—constitutional activism, declaring, ‘That any person, acting properly, who may be persecuted and oppressed by the arm of power, be protected by the Society to which he belongs.’⁸⁸

Both resolutions would prove imminently prescient, not least in the defensive reaction of the Glasgow commercial and administrative elite and newspaper editors like Mennons who persisted in providing—at considerable personal risk—a stable periodical platform for constitutional reform activities. Indeed, in February 1793 Mennons was indicted for publishing a seditious notice from a meeting of the ‘SONS of LIBERTY in PARTICK’ in the 19-23 November 1792 number of the *Glasgow Advertiser*. The small

⁸⁷ Harris, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution*, 77.

⁸⁸ ‘To the Public’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, p. 761.

front page item, written by a Gorbals gunsmith named James Smith, defended ‘the whole works of the immortal Author of the RIGHTS OF MAN, THOMAS PAINE’, and suggested that ‘if nations would adopt the practical use of these works, tyrants and their satellites would vanish like the morning mist before the rising sun’.⁸⁹ Mennons was summoned to the High Court of Justiciary in Edinburgh in February 1793, along with Smith as co-defendant, who did not appear. The latter’s absence was a fortunate break for the editor, as it allowed the Lord Advocate to postpone proceedings indefinitely, which resulted in no further sanction.⁹⁰ By contrast, William Johnston, publisher of the radical *Edinburgh Gazetteer*, was summoned to the High Court a month earlier for his newspaper’s coverage of the Edinburgh sedition trial of printers John Morton, James Anderson, and Malcolm Craig. Johnston and his editor Simon Drummond were put on trial and found guilty of ““a false and slanderous representation”” of the sedition trial, with Johnston subsequently divesting himself from the newspaper.⁹¹ James Robertson and Walter Berry, the *Edinburgh Chronicle* printer and publisher, were also convicted after Mennons’ High Court appearance for the publication of a radical pamphlet.⁹²

This period of intensive judicial activity was a dangerous time indeed for editors and publishers of the Scottish press, with newspapers becoming ‘a dominant source for shaping public perceptions of criminal justice’, and their reports acting ‘as a central means through which the spectacle of justice was represented’, as David Barrie and

⁸⁹ *Glasgow Advertiser*, 19-23 Nov. 1792, no. 730, p. 753.

⁹⁰ See Alastair Phillips, *Glasgow’s Herald: Two Hundred Years of a Newspaper, 1783-1983* (Glasgow, 1982), 23-4.

⁹¹ See David G. Barrie and Joanne McEwan, ‘The Newspaper Press, Sedition and the High Court of Justiciary in Late Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh’, 55, 56.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 53.

Joanne McEwan have recently argued.⁹³ Amidst this heated atmosphere, Mennons' editorial notice in the *Advertiser* the week of his scheduled appearance at the High Court was a model of printerly pragmatism. Adding to the present 'disagreeable situation', Mennons wrote, 'his son and two of his principal Compositors have been summoned to appear as evidences in the trial; upon which account as he will have no person remaining behind him in whom he could entrust the management of the newspaper in his absence', thus forcing 'the necessity of suspending next publication until Wednesday', and 'begs his readers will consider that circumstance as a reasonable excuse for adopting such a measure'. Mennons concluded by assuring his readers 'that he is still determined to adhere to that principle of impartiality which should be the characteristic of the Editor of a newspaper'.⁹⁴

In light of this editorial announcement, Mennons' plea for social order less than two weeks after publishing Muir's proposal in November 1792 for a General Convention of Scottish parliamentary reforming societies makes for a revealing comparison. Anticipating the editorial pragmatism of his later announcement the week of his 1793 High Court appearance, Mennons called for responsible behaviour to be maintained by those professing to constitutional reform—perhaps in an effort to protect his newspaper from claims of incitement coming from panicked city officials and the commercial elite that he had long maintained a beneficial relationship with. 'We understand, from good authority, that several respectable manufacturing houses in this city, have lately had considerable orders countermanded,' Mennons reported. 'The effects of that licentious

⁹³ Ibid., 48.

⁹⁴ [J. Mennons], 'GLASGOW', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 28 Jan-1 Feb. 1793, no. 750, p. 70.

spirit which has, of late, too much prevailed among the mechanics and manufacturers in this country,' he continued, 'is likely to have an immediate operation against themselves.' The *Advertiser* editor hoped 'that this valuable class of citizens would be cautious in listening to the turbulent and factious, who, evidently, have in view, under the pretext of remedying evils existing in the Constitution, to bring every thing into confusion, and to subvert all laws and good order.' Speaking to both sides of the present crisis, Mennons emphasized order as well as just administration of the law as the foundation for liberty and prosperity. At a time of widespread backlash against proposals for constitutional reform, it is significant that Mennons emphasized the case for 'remedying evils existing in the Constitution', and cautioned authorities against 'rashly adopting measures' that threaten liberty, with a free press presumably at the forefront of his mind in this regard.⁹⁵ The contemporaneous events in France are left out of Mennons' editorial statement, but they shaped the panicked response of state and civic authorities all over the country to the explosive spread of reforming societies. This period marked the emergence of 'a new kind of political crisis in British politics', as John Barrell argues, and presented the Pitt Ministry—and civic authorities in Glasgow—with the prospect of 'fighting a war on two fronts, against a republican enemy abroad and a small but highly organized network of popular radical societies at home'.⁹⁶

This official anxiety was evident in a front page December 1792 item professing constitutional loyalty from the 'LORD PROVOST, MAGISTRATES, and COMMON COUNCIL of the city of Glasgow'. Signed by Gilbert Hamilton, the Lord Provost and

⁹⁵ [J. Mennons], 'GLASGOW', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 3-7 December, 1792, no. 734, p. 790.

⁹⁶ John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793-1796* (Oxford, 2000), 29.

Secretary of the city's Chamber of Commerce, the statement associated the parliamentary reformers' activities with civil disorder and made clear the severity of the response in store for them—measures broadly cautioned against in Mennons' editorial statement the previous week. The city administration 'resolve[s] to use our utmost exertions to prevent all tumults and riots, and to counteract the mischievous tendency of these meetings and publications, which by unfair representations and false reasoning, promulgate principles subversive of peace and good order' that 'would ruin our flourishing commerce and manufactures, and would involve the kingdom in anarchy, confusion, and misery'. Reflecting the close civic-commercial administrative relationship in Glasgow, the statement added 'that in carrying these resolutions into execution, we will be supported by the corporations and communities of this city, and by the inhabitants who wish for its prosperity and for the safety and protection of their persons and property'.⁹⁷

Mennons provided an ideological counterpoint to this presumed civic-commercial consensus for the constitutional status quo in the same number, reporting on an amendment 'moved, seconded, and supported by several members' at a recent meeting of the Trades House in the city. Unsurprising for a newspaper that had steadfastly supported burgh reform, Mennons held out the possibility of a constitutional third way for his readers contemplating the foreclosure of constitutional innovation. The amendment argued that 'nothing could strengthen the executive power more than a perfect cordiality between governors and governed; and that a well timed reform, both in

⁹⁷ *Glasgow Advertiser*, 10-14 December, 1792, no. 736, p. 801.

Parliament and in the internal government of the Royal Burghs of Scotland, would have a happy tendency to promote that very desirable object'.⁹⁸

The next number featured a front page lead item that more directly challenged the Glasgow civic elite's characterization of parliamentary reform activities as 'subversive of peace and good order', reporting on a series of resolutions from the General Convention of the Friends of the People, held in Edinburgh on 12 December. With Col. Dalrymple in the chair and William Skirving as secretary, the Convention refuted efforts to 'misrepresent and calumniate the FRIENDS of the PEOPLE, as the promoters of public discord, and advocates for an unjust and assured violation of private property'. 'The Members of the Convention will, to the utmost of their power, concur in aiding and strengthening the hands of the Civil Magistrates throughout this kingdom', the item reported. Turning the charges of public disorder directed at them back onto the extra-constitutional actions by civil and state authorities, the Convention contended 'that very great abuses have arisen in the Government of this country, from a neglect of the genuine principles of the Constitution', and that 'these abuses have of late grown to an alarming height, and produced great discontents'. Re-stating the fundamental case for reform, the Convention argued that the 'essential measures to be pursued, in order to remove these abuses' and 'do away with their mischievous consequences' included, firstly, a restoration of 'the Freedom of Election, and an equal Representation of the People in Parliament', and secondly, securing 'the People a frequent exercise of their Right of Electing their Representatives'. Highlighting their peaceful methods of obtaining this

⁹⁸ 'GLASGOW', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 10-14 December, 1792, no. 736, p. 805.

constitutional redress, the Convention proposed ‘the proper and legal method...of applying by Petition to Parliament’,⁹⁹ used by recent ‘respectable’ reform movements in Scotland, including those campaigning to abolish the Slave Trade and the movement for burgh reform.

That the *Advertiser* continued to publish any notices from the radical parliamentary reformers is notable, since, as Harris observes, ‘Dissenting and radical voices struggled... to find a place in the Scottish press from the end of 1792’. ‘Apart from the radical press which emerged in late 1792,’ he adds, ‘only John Mennons’ *Glasgow Advertiser* continued to open its pages to the Friends of the People from this date.’¹⁰⁰ Indeed, throughout the end of 1792 and early 1793 the pages of the *Glasgow Advertiser* enacted a pluralist periodical forum where often the same number featured starkly binary views of constitutional reform, both from those leading reformers calling for radical new expansions of the parliamentary franchise, and prominent civic and business leaders who viewed even the public proposal of such measures as tantamount to a dangerous incitement of disorder.

Illustration of this kind of ideological juxtaposition can be found in another front page item immediately below the resolutions from the General Convention of the Friends of the People in Edinburgh. The item features anti-reform loyalist resolutions from ‘a very numerous Meeting’ held in Glasgow’s Merchants’ Hall, with Provost Gilbert Hamilton in the chair. ‘We, the Merchants, Traders, and Manufacturers, and other respectable Citizens of Glasgow,’ the declaration opened, ‘having seen, with the deepest

⁹⁹ *Glasgow Advertiser*, 14-17 December 1792, no. 737, p. 809.

¹⁰⁰ Harris, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution*, 64.

concern, that attempts have been made to circulate opinions subversive of the dearest interests of the nation, to infuse into the minds of the people fears and jealousies, and to create discontents and disaffection among the unwary, feel it our duty to declare to the world our sincere and firm attachment to our most excellent constitution.’ The meeting declared ‘active assistance to the authority of the lawful magistrate, and the maintenance of the established government’, and pledged to exert ‘our best endeavours to impress on the minds of those, with whom we may have influence, a reverence for, and submission to the laws of the country’. Claiming the mantle of British liberty for the adherence to the rule of law, the meeting professed to ‘cheerfully co-operate with other loyal subjects in strengthening the hands of government, by detecting, and bringing to punishment, those whose measures tend to disturb the peace of the country, and to subvert the constitution’, and added ‘that, by these exertions, under God, Britons will long continue distinguished among the nations as a free, loyal and happy people’.¹⁰¹ The loyalist declaration invited signatures of support to be made at the Tontine Coffeeroom—that key material springboard for the city’s commercial public sphere, listed at the bottom back page of each number of the *Glasgow Advertiser* during this period.

Mennons provided a detailed report on this meeting in the same number of the newspaper, with a more nuanced sense of the debates around constitutional reform than that presented in the front page notice. In particular, he devoted considerable column space to a contribution by a Mr. Stirling, who argued, as a member of the Friends of the People, that he ‘always considered the friends of Reform as the truest friends of the Constitution’, and ‘was conscious the abuse was unmerited’ towards them. ‘He begged

¹⁰¹ *Glasgow Advertiser*, 14-17 December, 1792, no. 737, p. 809.

leave to ask where were these tumults—where the insurrections?’, the *Advertiser* noted. ‘It was known to the meeting there had been none at Glasgow—we had not heard of any in Edinburgh, in fact there had been none in the kingdom,’ the report continued. ‘He was therefore of the opinion, that expressions of this nature ought to be carefully avoided, and he thought that in publishing our regard for the Constitution, we should not lose sight of the idea that a Reform was absolutely requisite.’ His motion of amendment to the declaration published on the front page of the *Advertiser* resonates with the earlier cause of burgh reformers. Mennons reported that Mr. Pattison of Kelvingrove, described as a manufacturer, seconded this motion, as he ‘considered the amendment as wise and temperate; and of the utmost consequence to the interest and manufactures of the country, as contributing to unite both parties together’.¹⁰² Mennons’ selective report of this key local debate on parliamentary reform demonstrated the shared concerns of reformers, manufacturers, and Glasgow’s civic leaders, providing *Advertiser* readers with an unusual opportunity to witness a respectful ideological dialogue that complicates the binary presentation of the issue on the front page.

This kind of dialogue around constitutional reform would become increasingly rare in the newspaper in 1793, with pro-reform and loyalist declarations intent on representing the other side as betrayers of the cause of British constitutional liberty. But even this frictive form of ideological plurality was extremely rare in the Scottish press after 1792. An illustration can be found in two front page items from January 1793. The first emerges from a meeting at the Tontine Tavern by the newly formed Glasgow Constitutional Association, chaired by Lord Provost Gilbert Hamilton. The Association’s

¹⁰² [J. Mennons], ‘GLASGOW’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 14-17 December, 1792, no. 737, p. 813.

principal intent was ‘to check that unwarrantable spirit of Levelling Republicanism’ ‘industriously fomented in this country’ through ‘many publications tending to raise a spirit of discontent among the people’ and ‘disaffection to our present excellent Constitution’. ‘[E]very exertion should be used,’ the loyalist statement concluded, ‘both by the Committee and the individual members, to prevent the further dissemination of all writings tending to alienate the minds of the people from the present Government, and to show the danger arising from the propagation of such pernicious doctrines.’¹⁰³ Directly below this front page notice is a series of resolutions ‘In the cause of REFORM’ from ‘a number of respectable inhabitants’ of the nearby industrial area of Bridgeton (‘Bridgetown’), refuting the charges of the Glasgow Constitutional Association above it. The item, signed by John Smith ‘(Pres.)’ and James Lytle ‘(Sec.)’, asserted that charges of ‘Reformers as tending to overturn peace, good order, and our valuable Constitution’, were, ‘from our connection with such societies... repugnant to truth’. This local reform society defends constitutional activism through the petitioning process. ‘If liberty belongs to Britain this is our right’, it argued, ‘nor can we believe ourselves free men if the executive power prevent such conduct.’¹⁰⁴

The outbreak of war between France and Britain in February 1793 further polarized the debate around constitutional reform in the *Advertiser*, with an added concern for the effects of the conflict on commerce and trade in Scotland. Front page advertisements in March from the pro-reform Scottish Friends of the People, the Friendly

¹⁰³ ‘GLASGOW CONSTITUTIONAL ASSOCIATION’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 11-14 Jan 1793, no. 745, p. 31.

¹⁰⁴ *Glasgow Advertiser*, 11-14 Jan 1793, no. 745, p. 31.

Societies of Paisley, and the Society of the Friends of the People of Darvel, East Ayrshire all protested against the declaration of war with France, highlighting material as well as ideological reasons for their position.¹⁰⁵ In a July number of the newspaper, Mennons reported that ‘the SUBSCRIPTION to the PETITION here for the RESTORATION of PEACE goes on with a rapidity beyond the most sanguine expectation’, and noted that ‘Between *Two and Three Thousand Persons*, on an average, have subscribed each day since its commencement’.¹⁰⁶ A September number reported on the presentation of a petition by Lord Lauderdale ‘from the City of Glasgow, signed by upwards of 40,000 persons, praying his Majesty to put an end to the present war’.¹⁰⁷

The wider issue of parliamentary reform, however, was not entirely ignored in the *Advertiser* during this immediate period after the declaration of war, with two reports in spring numbers. A May 1793 report digested from the *London Gazette* described R. B. Sheridan lodging a ‘Petition from a number of respectable heritors, merchants, manufacturers, &c of the city of Glasgow, praying for a Reform of the Representation of the People in parliament’.¹⁰⁸ Later that same month Mennons published a front page lead item taking up nearly three full pages to report on Sheridan’s and Charles James Fox’s speeches, amongst others, on the reform question. Interestingly, the conclusion to Sheridan’s speech revived the focus on institutional corruption that was such a key plank of the burgh reform campaign, and argued that ‘corruption was the pivot on which the

¹⁰⁵ See *Glasgow Advertiser*, 8-11 March 1793, no. 760, p. 153; *Glasgow Advertiser*, 15-18 March 1793, no. 762, p. 169; and *Glasgow Advertiser*, 25-29 March 1793, no. 766, p. 193.

¹⁰⁶ ‘GLASGOW’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 1-5 July 1793, no. 794, p. 423.

¹⁰⁷ ‘GLASGOW’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 13-16 Sep. 1793, no. 815, p. 597.

¹⁰⁸ ‘TUESDAY’S POST: from the LONDON GAZETTE’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 6-10 May 1793, no. 778, p. 291.

Government turned’, sowing ‘the seeds of inevitable decay and ruin in the British Constitution’.¹⁰⁹

Towards the end of the summer of 1793 the *Advertiser* would initiate what would become a running feature in its ‘EDINBURGH’ section, both throughout that year and into 1794, with reports from the High Court of Justiciary on the sedition trial of Thomas Muir and trials of other members of the Scottish Association of the Friends of the People. The coverage of Muir’s trial, and of fellow reformers William Skirving and Maurice Margarot, serves as a tragic coda to the various narratives of reform featured in its pages from 1789. Indeed, as a non-radical newspaper¹¹⁰ (despite its previous editorial support for burgh reform and the campaign to abolish the slave trade) the *Glasgow Advertiser*, much like its counterparts in the ‘mainstream press in Scotland’, according to Barrie and McEwan, ‘faced a difficult balancing act’ in its coverage of the trials of the so-called ‘Scottish Martyrs’, in that ‘they had to juggle a perceived miscarriage of justice with commercial imperatives and a tough stance on political radicalism’.¹¹¹ The High Court indictment of Muir reported in the *Advertiser*—citing his ‘seditious speeches and

¹⁰⁹ ‘BRITISH PARLIAMENT’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 13-17 May 1793, no. 780, pp. 305-7, at 307.

¹¹⁰ Alastair Phillips speculates that Mennons’ print association with the radical editor and balloonist James Tytler—through, he notes, their Edinburgh collaborations on the [Weekly] *Mirror* and the *Town and Country Almanack*—may have influenced Mennons more than his professions to editorial impartiality at the *Glasgow Advertiser* suggested. See Phillips, *Glasgow’s Herald*, 19. Tytler, who edited the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, was the first person ‘charged directly with the crime of sedition in Scots Law’ at the High Court of Justiciary in January 1793. See Farmer, “‘Subverting the Settled Order of Things’: The Crime of Sedition in Scotland’, in *Political Trials in an Age of Revolutions*, 19-46, at 19. Tytler joined the Society of the Friends of the People in 1792 and was charged with seditious libel for his plan concerning a radical reform of the House of Commons. See Meg Russell, ‘Tytler, James’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 3 January 2008 [<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-27967>], accessed 31 May 2019.

¹¹¹ Barrie and McEwan, ‘The Newspaper Press, Sedition and the High Court of Justiciary in Late Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh’, 58.

harangues'¹¹²—surely served as a cautionary reminder for the editor and publisher of a newspaper who was recently charged with sedition. In addition to this, the sustained publication of notices by Mennons of declarations from the Society of the Friends of the People, including some from Muir himself, meant that the Glasgow newspaper had a direct stake in the expansive notion of sedition argued for in the Lord Advocate's indictment. As the legal historian Lyndsay Farmer notes, 'The trials of the 1790s introduced the crime of sedition into Scots law, but they did not establish the clear parameters of the crime'¹¹³—making the interpretive role of newspapers like the *Glasgow Advertiser* all the more significant.

In the *Advertiser's* 6 September 1793 number Mennons reported the following, after detailing a 'more particular STATEMENT' of the trial in its 'EDINBURGH' section: 'We hear a subscription is to be immediately opened in this city for Mr. THOMAS MUIR, which it is believed will be followed by all the principal towns in Great Britain.'¹¹⁴ Mennons also carried Muir's eloquent self-defence to the charges, which included his statement on the conduct of the trial: 'I demand justice: You are bound to grant it. The record of this trial will pass down to other times. The impartial verdict of posterity will re-judge your decision.' 'But what is that?', he asked. 'In those awful moments, when human passions cease to operate; when the power of recollection assumes its influence—conscience, attended either with approbation or remorse, will pronounce whether you have done right or wrong in my acquittal or in my

¹¹² 'EDINBURGH: HIGH COURT OF JUSTICIARY: TRIAL of THOMAS MUIR, younger of Huntershill', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 30 Aug.-2 Sep. 1793, no. 811, pp. 562-3.

¹¹³ Farmer, "'Subverting the Settled Order of Things'", 26.

¹¹⁴ 'GLASGOW', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 2-6 Sep. 1793, no. 812, p. 573.

condemnation,' Muir observed. He directly challenged the legal basis for the charge of sedition, arguing that the 'records of history, the monuments of former ages, the annals of the present period, all attest that this crime of sedition is of the most ambiguous complexion', and asked 'where in this country has sedition existed?' 'Has property been invaded? Has murder walked your streets? Has the blood of citizens flowed?'¹¹⁵ In short, Muir laid out before the court, and perhaps more importantly, to those deliberating in the Scottish public sphere via reports of newspapers like the *Glasgow Advertiser*, that this was a trial conducted for political ends with the express purpose of stifling initiatives at constitutional reform in the country. In this, Mennons' newspaper, like the wider Scottish press, 'did not provide an unbiased account of what went on in court but rather, through their selection of content, a discursive commentary on judicial proceedings', as Barrie and McEwan note.¹¹⁶

As well as carrying reports on Muir's trial, the *Advertiser* implicitly questioned the procedural basis for its conduct by featuring parallel reports on the opposition Scottish Whig M.P. William Adam's efforts to establish more convergence between Scottish and English legal systems, particularly aimed at curbing the potential for political abuses of jury trials in the former jurisdiction. Such efforts conveyed an indirect critique of the conduct of Muir's trial, and Mennons noted that it 'will no doubt furnish many forcible arguments in support of his motion' for 'the revision of the Scotch laws'.¹¹⁷ This position contrasted with other Scottish newspapers, like the *Caledonian*

¹¹⁵ 'EDINBURGH: HIGH COURT OF JUSTICIARY', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 2-6 Sep. 1793, no. 812, pp. 571-2, p. 571.

¹¹⁶ Barrie and McEwan, 'The Newspaper Press, Sedition and the High Court of Justiciary in Late Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh', 48.

¹¹⁷ [J. Mennons], 'GLASGOW', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 23-27 Sep. 1793, no. 818, p. 621.

Mercury, *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, *Edinburgh Advertiser* and *Glasgow Courier*, which as Barrie and McEwan argue, ‘utilised various rhetorical strategies to present the conduct of the Scottish High Court in as positive a light as possible in the face of English media criticism’.¹¹⁸ The openly radical *Edinburgh Gazetteer*, by contrast, ‘published a barrage of correspondence—including letters from the public and commentaries—that condemned the fairness of the trial, the behaviour of the judges, the strength of the prosecution’s evidence and the partiality of the witnesses’, and served ‘as a repository for English condemnation of the trials’.¹¹⁹ For non-radical newspapers like the *Glasgow Advertiser*, still open to providing a voice for various reform campaigns in its pages, the stacking of the jury and the highly partisan interventions of the judge, Lord Braxfield, together with Muir’s rational dissection of the sedition charges against him, amplified the trial into a shocking official judgment on the possibilities for liberal constitutional reform in Scotland.¹²⁰

In the aftermath of Muir’s trial it was the severity of his punishment—fourteen years transportation—which became a focus for *Advertiser* reports. Muir’s status as a martyr for the parliamentary reform movement, initiated in his London visit that spring with sympathetic Whig parliamentarians, was further facilitated by accounts in the newspaper that highlighted his physical and verbal confinement. ‘Mr. Muir is somewhat better,’ related a December 1793 *Advertiser* report on his transportation to Botany Bay,

¹¹⁸ Barrie and McEwan, ‘The Newspaper Press, Sedition and the High Court of Justiciary in Late Eighteenth-Century Edinburgh’, 49.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹²⁰ For an excellent analysis of the Scottish political trials in this period that provides illuminating comparative context with contemporary English treason trials, see Emma Macleod, ‘The English and Scottish State Trials of the 1790s Compared’, in *Political Trials in an Age of Revolutions*, 79-107.

‘his irons have been taken off; the officers on board the Hulk in which he is confined, shew him every kindness consistent with their duty; he is not permitted to speak to any visitant, unless in the *presence* of one of them’.¹²¹ In the same section Mennons published an extract of a letter by Muir to a friend in Cambridge about his experience that highlights both his stoicism and physical vulnerability. ‘The great lesson we have to learn in this world is submission and resignation to the will of God,’ he wrote. ‘My state of health is poorly,’ Muir noted near the conclusion of the letter. ‘The seeds of a consumption, I apprehended, are planted in my breast. I suffer no acute pain, but daily experience a gradual decay.’¹²²

For loyalists to the British constitution satisfied with the abjected status of a such leading figure of the reform movement, Maurice Margarot’s testimony, at another High Court sedition trial in January 1794, provided an uncomfortable reminder of the selective nature of the charges against those most recently active in the cause for constitutional reform. ‘[I]t appears I am charged with a species of sedition something of the nature of that for which Mr. T. Muir, Mr. Palmer, and Mr. Skirving, have been punished with *transportation*’, Margarot observed in an extended front page lead *Advertiser* report on his trial. ‘[I]t is said, that the meetings lately held were seditious, I would ask, Why?’ Connecting the recent campaign for parliamentary reform in Scotland with earlier campaigns for local electoral and administrative reform, he provided a valuable contemporary account of the wider trajectory of constitutional activism linking both formations that were subject to different legal responses by the authorities. ‘There are

¹²¹ ‘GLASGOW’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 13-16 Dec. 1793, no. 831, p. 804.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 805.

other Conventions in Scotland’, he noted, ‘the Borough Reformers, and the County Meetings, to which last indeed the Lord Advocate himself belonged; but there is a wider difference here, the one are county gentlemen, the other are only composed of tradesmen and such like.’ The *Advertiser* reported how Margarot ‘read resolutions of the society which met in London in 1783, when the Duke of Richmond and Mr. Pitt were the great reformers of that day; and what, said he, should make that sedition in 1794, which, in 1784, was the greatest exertion of patriotism’. ‘At one time,’ he argued, ‘it was legal and constitutional in the Duke of Richmond and Mr. Pitt to declare, That a reform was the only thing to save the country.’ ‘At the present day,’ he explained, ‘I have done no more, and yet it is called sedition.’¹²³

Where the columns of the *Glasgow Advertiser* from 1789 to 1793 were filled with resolutions, reports from meetings and accounts of parliamentary debates associated with the great patriotic Scottish reform campaigns of the late eighteenth century, the pages of the newspaper in 1794 relate a steady stream of items from the Edinburgh High Court that vividly demonstrate for its readers how the spirit of liberal reform was now likely to result in charges of sedition and disloyalty (and in one case, high treason) to the British constitution. Detailed, sustained and often front page coverage of William Skirving and Maurice Margarot’s sedition trials and their custodial aftermath in January and February 1794¹²⁴ were followed with reports on Charles Sinclair’s sedition trial,¹²⁵ Joseph

¹²³ ‘EDINBURGH’, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 13-17 Jan. 1794, no. 840, pp. 33-5, p. 34.

¹²⁴ See *Glasgow Advertiser*, 6-10 Jan, 1794, no. 838, pp. 19-22; *Glasgow Advertiser*, 13-17 Jan. 1794, no. 840, pp. 33-5; *Glasgow Advertiser*, 17-20 Jan. 1794, no. 841, pp. 41-44; and *Glasgow Advertiser*, 7 Feb. 1794, no. 846, pp. 116-17.

¹²⁵ See *Glasgow Advertiser*, 21 February, 1794, no. 850, pp. 116-17.

Gerrald's trial in March¹²⁶ and front page descriptions of debates in Parliament on the trials and sentencing of Muir and Thomas Fyshe Palmer from March until late April.¹²⁷ Coverage of the trial of Robert Watt for high treason occupied column space in August and September numbers, including a final front page item on the trial that spread across seven continuous pages.¹²⁸ Watt's Edinburgh execution in October 1794, only one of two executions for treason in Britain during the decade, was also covered in the newspaper,¹²⁹ as was a follow-up item in November on Watt's account of his life in the days before his execution.¹³⁰

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Such an inundation of reporting on state prosecution, trial and punishment in the pages of the *Glasgow Advertiser* underlined to readers just how dangerous advocating for political reform in Scotland had become by 1794. Even moderate burgh reformers like the Perth merchant John Richardson feared 'entering upon Politics which indeed is not safe to speak upon in this part of the Country with any prudence as the most innocent and meritorious sentiments may be construed sedition', and fatefully added, 'I have no inclination for a voyage to Botany Bay'.¹³¹ These kinds of anxieties from those on the

¹²⁶ See *Glasgow Advertiser*, 7 March, 1794, no. 853, p.149; *Glasgow Advertiser*, 14 March, 1794, no. 855, pp. 164-66; *Glasgow Advertiser*, 17 March, 1794, no. 856 pp. 169-70; and *Glasgow Advertiser*, 21 March, 1794, no. 859, pp. 186-87.

¹²⁷ See *Glasgow Advertiser*, 17 March, 1794, no. 856, pp. 169-170; *Glasgow Advertiser*, 21 March 1794, no. 858, pp. 177-8; *Glasgow Advertiser*, 24 March 1794, no. 859, pp. 185-6; *Glasgow Advertiser*, 26 March, 1794, no. 860, p. 193; *Glasgow Advertiser*, 31 March 1794, no. 861, pp. 201-3; and *Glasgow Advertiser*, 25 April, 1794, no. 867, p. 327.

¹²⁸ See *Glasgow Advertiser*, 25 August 1794, no. 903, p. 529; *Glasgow Advertiser*, 5 September 1794, no. 906, p. 551-2; and *Glasgow Advertiser*, 8 Sep. 1794, no. 907, pp. 555-62.

¹²⁹ *Glasgow Advertiser*, 17 October 1794, no. 918, p. 647.

¹³⁰ See *Glasgow Advertiser*, 3 Nov. 1794, no. 923, p. 686.

¹³¹ Quoted in Harris, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution*, p. 123.

most respectable end of the reform continuum in Scotland remind us of the considerable hazard that Mennons undertook by keeping his newspaper open to the voices of political reform in 1793 and 1794, and for portraying, often sympathetically, those, like Muir and his fellow reformers, who had to endure the severe punishments meted out to them. Not only was Mennons risking another charge of sedition, but he also most probably was provoking the ire of what had been, at the newspaper's founding in 1783, its core readership amongst the commercial and administrative elite of the West of Scotland, who were represented politically during these years of crisis by the stridently anti-reform Glasgow Constitutional Association. Mennons' modest (and courageous) editorial response in 1793 to the charge of sedition against him, that he was 'still determined to adhere to that principle of impartiality which should be the characteristic of the Editor of a newspaper' exemplified—at perhaps the greatest period of internal political crisis in modern Scottish (and British) history—the pragmatic commitment he made ten years earlier to 'engage in the task of informing and instructing his fellow citizens' at the launch of the *Glasgow Advertiser*.¹³²

This task was complicated by the pace of the spread of political information during what Harris calls the 'fraught conditions of politics in 1793-4' in his now seminal *Scottish Historical Review* article on the role of Scotland's newspapers in domestic political reform debates after the French Revolution. '[A] fierce struggle at the level of perception and representation was taking place against the background of an awareness of a newly expanded audience for politics' where newspapers 'had become the principal

¹³² [J. Mennons], 'To the PUBLIC', *Glasgow Advertiser*, 27 January 1783, no. 1, p. 1.

vehicles for the conduct of this struggle'.¹³³ By providing a shared platform for voices on both sides of the ideological divide during these 'fraught conditions of politics', as well as sustaining the key ideological arguments for burgh reform, whilst representing the national moral (as opposed to economic) interest involved in the campaign for the abolition of the slave trade, the pages of the *Glasgow Advertiser* stand as an important historical record for the range of constitutional, moral and political activism carried out in the Scottish public sphere in the 1789-94 period, as well as the increasingly repressive state response to this compressed and sustained period of activism. Through its promotion and portrayal of these campaigns the newspaper also developed an expansive notion of political and social reform for a rapidly modernising commercial public receptive to the principles of constitutional liberty, but clearly divided about the material implications they held for Scotland's democratic identity in the tumultuous final decade of the eighteenth century.

¹³³ Harris, 'Scotland's Newspapers, the French Revolution and Domestic Radicalism', 62.