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A review of

Murray Armstrong, *The Liberty Tree: The stirring story of Thomas Muir and Scotland's first fight for democracy.*

(Edinburgh: Word Power Books, 2014). ISBN: 9780992739225, paperback, 552 pp; £12.99.

"I was," Murray Armstrong writes, in his introduction, "dumbfounded by the ignorance about Muir and the radical movement, even among the Scots." To combat what he perceives as this near void in our historical memory, particularly odd when democracy and independence are now words the very Scottish infants seem to lisp, Armstrong has taken upon himself the weighty burden of resurrecting Muir in Scottish national consciousness.

My opinion is that Armstrong has succeeded outstandingly in his self-imposed task. He has written a book compelling readable for general readers which is also frequently deeply informative for specialists in the field. To help him in this task he has assimilated some of the excellent recent history written about the aborted democratic revolution initiated by the American Revolution in eighteenth-century Scotland. This retrieval of historical knowledge dealing with Scotland's relationship to the values of the Radical Enlightenment, as opposed to the earlier socially conservative and much celebrated Scottish Enlightenment, was initiated by John Brims. The non-publication of his doctoral thesis remains a signal disgrace for Scottish academic publishing. Fortunately such a fate did not befall Elaine MacFarland's very fine, discriminating book about Scottish / Irish relations in this period. More recently we have also had a profound input from English scholars with work of magisterial quality from Bob Harris, John Barrell and John Mee.

Having assimilated this academic historical research, Armstrong has done what not only is obviously an enormous amount of reading in the primary historical sources, but also dredged up a substantial amount of hitherto untreated original material. Prior to retirement he was both a journalist and editor with *The Guardian* and he has adapted these skills to brilliant effect. He has the true journalist's eye for telling detail and a forensic ear for the multitude of contextual voices he has had to deal with. This work's hybrid strength happily stems from its combining historical writing with occasional fictive devices. The frequent dialogues in the book are mainly derived from actual texts, not only from public print culture but personal journals, diaries and letters. The political tumult made it a graphomaniac age. On a limited number of occasions when no textual evidence is available to him, Armstrong makes fictionalised connections which almost always seem properly functional to the narrative and never overwritten or counter-factually indulgent.

Armstrong's biography deals with a Scotsman who was arguably, as both agent and victim was the most iconic British radical figure in the 1790s. This was mainly due to the sensational nature to his trial and sentence, but also because he was the chief radical Scottish emissary in his extensive dealings with English, Irish and French compatriots. The reverberations of his trial were global. Robertson's edition of *The Trial of Thomas Muir* went through multiple editions, not only in America, but in Britain. The imprisoned John Thelwall wrote a poem in his honour, as did Iolo Morganwg.

Muir's initial entrance to this fraught public world was as a prominent participant in the two Scottish conventions held in Edinburgh in 1792. Allegedly designed to support the cause of moderate Borough and Constitutional Reform, the group Muir belonged to held to a policy of more insurrectionary intent. Hence he was charged not with treason but with sedition, a usefully vague term for the atavistic Scottish prosecution. Granted bail he quickly departed Scotland. He went from meetings with the London Corresponding Society to Paris where he befriended Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft and other prominent British radicals who were also part of the audience anxiously viewing Louis XVI's trial. From Paris he travelled to Belfast, which was to become the designated departure point for subsequent Scottish radicals escaping to America. His father, offering to write to President Washington, wished him to sail for Philadelphia and safety. After meetings with William Drennan, and more positively Rowan Hamilton, and possibly steeled by United Ireland strictures, Muir decided to face the Edinburgh music.

He was arrested on landing at Stranraer carrying incriminating United Irish pamphlets given to him by Rowan Hamilton. It is, then, deeply odd that such obviously inflammatory material was not used against him at his trial. Even odder when one considers what most provoked the jury was Muir's promulgation of Drennan's 1792 *Address from the Society of the United Irishmen*. This was a document designed not only to create Scottish support for the Irish cause but also to incite Scotland into similar defiance. In fact, against much moderate reforming opinion, Muir had forced a reading of this document at the Convention; if it caused deep consternation within the hall it caused even greater anxiety to the Scottish loyalist establishment. The British Convention in 1793 caused even greater alarm to them. With, of course, total French victory, very much a possibility for most of the war, nothing caused Pitt's government more anxiety than the notion of different British radical groups encouraging French invasion. In fact two such incidents, albeit abortive ones, at Fishguard in 1797 and, much more dangerously, in Ireland during the 1798 Rebellion. *The Report of the Secret Committee of the House of Commons* published by the Glasgow Constitutional Association is devoted to an extensive list of past and present external and internal incursive dangers. By far the biggest element of the government's constant, profound anxiety stems from Ireland. The predominance of Irish sailors in the fleet provoking a sequence of mutinies in 1797 in almost all the main English ports was resolved by hanging the ringleaders. Almost equally worrying was United Irish infiltration of men and its covert methods into Scotland and, especially virile and tenacious, an Irish radical infection in the industrialising North West of England. Unlike 1916, the purpose of The United Irishmen was not to detach Ireland but to make it a respected, prosperous, equal partner in what the British government believed was a plan for a four nation *federal*, republican state.

Hence Linda Colley's notion of the twelve year war, with the French as crucially central to the integration of the British state, even leaving aside the dark matter of Ireland, seems deeply misguided. To be fair to Professor Colley, however, much of her recent writings seem to be about not essentialist nationalism but about historical inter-relationships. As she has more recently written:

In some countries, at some point, politicians and state intellectuals may succeed in propagating a unitary version of national history that wins widespread domestic acceptance. But such linear and unalloyed master narratives rarely withstand detached scrutiny, and professional historians have increasingly come to regard them with impatience and suspicion.

Montesquieu's concept of the near perfect balance of the British Constitution, so that, relatively, Britain was by far the most liberal eighteenth-century European country, added to its geographically vast military and naval conquests and created in imperial Britain an absolutist sense of its politically righteous omnipotence. It was the traumatic defeat in North America, analogous of what the Fall of Singapore did for Asian Nationalism, that aroused disaffected radical elements in all four British nations to conceive for themselves a similar republican cosmopolitan identity as they questionably believed had transpired across the Atlantic. It is not by any means clear to what extent the four national radical groups consciously articulated a plan for a federal Britain. However, what is empirically the case is the degree to which a deliberate, extensive and supportive crossing of borders by dissenting pro-republican elements took place. As we have seen, the United Irishmen were most militantly proactive. Extremely important is the fact that radical London provided such succour not only for provincial English radicals but also dissidents from Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

If, as Armstrong suggests, Muir is barely perceptible in contemporary Scottish consciousness, it should be little wonder that a whole generation of Scottish radicals, political actors and writers, should be even more obscure. That they are, in fact, significant figures on the British radical movement can be discerned in the fact such scholarly attention as they have received, almost all comes from distinguished English, American and Australian sources.

Though there are now some remarkably good younger Scottish scholars involved in retrieval and reassessment of this lost generation, it has been a subject treated with seemingly calculated indifference by the majority of the Scottish academe. In no small part, there is a primary geographical explanation to this. After the Sedition Trials and the exile of Muir and the other 'martyrs', Edinburgh, indeed Scotland, were non-viable areas for political dissent. The vast bulk of London offered a degree of personal and economic security. A historical analysis of radical Anglo-Scottish London would be extremely revealing and rewarding in terms of the substantial contribution these Scots made

to the British radical cause. Equally important would be scrutiny of the deeply fruitful theological and political links between the Popular church in Scotland the Dissenting church and its educational institutions in England. Then, of course, there also exists the important group of Scottish radicals, mainly writers, who, fearing Australian transportation, fled to America.

Certainly the Australian voyage was one to be avoided. Armstrong provides a brilliant physical description of Muir's hardships endured on a journey from England via Rio de Janeiro to Australia. His political, psychological analysis of the alleged mutiny on board when an inadequate, impotent captain stoked his personal paranoia with unbalanced political fantasies is also outstanding. Nor was the life of the penal colony free of degenerate imperial politics. It was run by the army "The Rum Corps", as an exploitative fiefdom.

Muir escaped due to the fortuitous but fortunate appearance of an American fur-trading ship, *The Otter* which deposited him in California. Thence he made a month long journey through Spanish territory down the Pacific coast and across central America to the Atlantic. American scholars have described Muir's sea journeys as an "odyssey" and indeed, in terms of hardship this is true. However, Muir's odyssey was to end with his worst recurrent nightmare. Transported as a prisoner by a Spanish ship, he was off the coast of Spain when *HMS Indomitable* intercepted them. In the subsequent fight, Muir, not seeking safety below, was frightfully facially maimed by flying splinters, one side of his face was torn apart causing him the loss of an eye and the subsequent need to wear a leather mask was because his teeth were also left permanently exposed. From this point his health went on a downward spiral. He did, however, reach Paris. He was much feted. He conversed with Talleyrand about possible French invasion of Britain and gave him outrageously optimistic estimates of the number of Scots who would take arms against the British government should they invade. He got drunk with technocratic Paine who had designed model French invasion barges. He also fell in with Napper Tandy and consequently out of favour with Wolf Tone.

It is interesting to consider what might have happened had Napoleon maintained his notion of invading Britain and not gone on an imperial junket to Egypt. It is even more interesting to note that a renegade United Irish spy, Turner, was reporting everything to London. He claimed he did this to save a revolutionary Ireland from regressing into the hands of the Celtic Catholic Church. Worse than that was to follow for Muir's anticipations of fraternal, federal relations being forged between Scotland and Ireland. In the year of his death, 1798, Scottish Presbyterian regiments were heavily involved in massacring Irish rebels. They returned to Scotland bearing with them the sectarian politics of the Orange Order. Given this, Muir's last words have a deeply ironic tone:

We have achieved a great duty in these critical times. After the destruction of so many years we have been the first to revive the spirit of our country, and give it a national existence.

Such revival certainly did not happen then. Armstrong's book, however, is an outstanding contribution to bringing Muir and his radical peers back into their rightful place in Scottish consciousness. It is, indeed, an important contribution to not only our historical but our literary awareness.