

**Jon Mee, *Print, Publicity, and Popular Radicalism in the 1790s: The Laurel of Liberty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xiii + 272. £64.99. ISBN 9781107133617.**

Thomas Hardy was not quite sure what to call his new reform group. It met for the first time on 25 January 1792 at a pub in the Strand, and a ‘great deal of conversation was about giving a name to the society,’ he later recalled, ‘whether the patriotic club – the reformation society – constitutional society.’ Each of these names would, in its own way, have been apt for a group devoted to universal suffrage and annual parliaments, but Hardy reports that his own scribble of ‘London Corresponding Society’ (LCS) on the evening’s tickets was ‘immediately adopted.’ And so was born a powerful reform movement that would both reticulate through 1790s Britain and focus modern accounts of the unsteady career of Romantic-era radicalism. To read Hardy’s recollection of the logistics of this birth – securing a pub for the meeting, writing up tickets, ranging around for the society’s name – is to encounter less a deflationary narrative of quotidianity than an engaging account of the material registration of the spirit of the age. What, after all, could be more Romantic (big R) than that? It is the materialization of the energy of late-eighteenth-century radicalism, in ‘public lectures, toasting, tavern debates, and song,’ as well as ‘more mundane and less colourful associational practices, such as day-to-day editorial discussion about what to publish under the LCS’s name,’ that forms Mee’s quarry in *Print, Publicity, and Popular Radicalism in the 1790s*. This new book extends but also redirects Mee’s superb 2011 work, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830*, which examined conversation as both a site of contest and a contested concept, one everywhere tied to political and material contingencies. Where that study ranged across seven decades, his new book focuses on the 1790s, a straitening that allows his shift from ‘conversation’ to ‘print’ to pause over the fine grain of radical culture, bringing into focus figures such as the publisher Richard ‘Citizen’ Lee who have tended to play across the margins of the Thompsonian panorama of 1790s culture.

Mee’s attention to the LCS in particular allows him ‘to situate the complexities of popular radicalism in its everyday business’ (12), though he is careful to insist that 1790s radicalism not be thought of in terms of a ‘coherent ideological code or language’ (5). It is daily practices and not rigid dogmas that Mee investigates, but amidst these practices he does identify a shared belief in the power of print: ‘the societies seem to operate under the spell of “print magic,” that is, a faith that print could liberate mankind simply by bringing ideas into printed circulation’ (8). In order for this magic successfully to represent the will of the people, however, it was necessary to pursue the ‘everyday labours of composition, production, and circulation’ (9), and to think of print ‘as a medium that had to be adapted to circumstances rather than simply left to work its magic’ (109). This emphasis on the hard work of expanding the public sphere might recall Arendt’s conception of ‘freedom’ in *On Revolution* (1963) as the public, associative effort necessary truly to change the social and political organization of a state. Although societies such as the LCS were eventually outlawed by the Pitt ministry, their tireless efforts nonetheless ‘created a new kind of national imaginary that influenced the radicalism of the nineteenth century’ (109).

This broader cultural and political argument about the accomplishments of the radical societies is grounded, in the second section of Mee’s book, on close studies of four remarkable figures from the world of 1790s print culture: Robert Merry, Charles Pigott, Richard ‘Citizen’ Lee, and John Thelwall. Each of these chapters makes for compelling reading on its own, but what unites this cluster, beyond the book’s broader focus on the relation between print and radical sociality, is Mee’s particular interest in those who followed paths beyond, or beside, the rational

reform programs of groups like the LCS. Consider Charles Pigott, the renegade aristocrat, intrepid blackmailer, and political lexicographer who was dead, after a prison sentence, by 1794. Far from the careful arguments for political reform produced by other LCS members, Pigott generated ‘an unstable mixture of personal muckracking and republican principles’ (133). While Paine was calmly explaining democratic principles, Pigott was assailing the ruling classes through scandalous gossip assaults such as *The Jockey Club* (1792). Mee makes the important point that Pigott’s mode of vicious social satire has been overlooked as a ‘contribution to the Revolution controversy’ because *The Jockey Club* ‘is not framed as a treatise on political principles as such’ (138). That ‘Pigott’s name does not easily fit into any heroic account of the development of popular political consciousness’ (147), Mee shows, is precisely what makes him such a fascinating cultural actor, a writer whose alloy of strong argument and ad hominem assault comes closer to William Cobbett’s often unhinged exclamations than Thomas Paine’s usually rational expiations.

With this two-part structure – broad analysis followed by case studies – *Print, Publicity, and Popular Radicalism in the 1790s* offers a dazzling account of the complex, ever-mutable relays between individual aspiration and broader group identification, even as it reveals a sustaining ‘magical faith’ (188) – we might even say a dangerous enthusiasm – that helped to sustain radical societies through the eighteenth century’s turbulent closing decade.

*John Bugg*  
*Fordham University*