

**Mary-Ann Constantine and Dafydd Johnston, *'Footsteps of Liberty and Revolt': Essays on Wales and the French Revolution*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013. Pp. xvii + 330. £24.99. ISBN 9780708325902.**

This volume represents one interpretive dimension of a larger project on 'Wales and the French Revolution', engaged in recuperating the textual record of what was clearly a complex political and cultural encounter, yet neglected by the Anglophone world. As such, the essays here have a difficult, multi-dimensional job to do – making the responses of a periphery relevant to audiences more familiar with centres; taking fragments of evidence and fairly depicting a whole; explaining why somewhere so close geographically and distant linguistically from France merits attention when 'global' histories are focusing on the inverse of those connections across oceans and continents. In the academic context of their own production, the essays also struggle with the boundary between history and literature – the different disciplinary approaches to style and content, that could as well be raised about English or French political songs, ballads and poetry, seemingly particularly at issue when so much of the surviving Welsh output comes in the forms of such literature.

As a result, it must be observed that, despite some high points of very real interest, this is a very uneven collection. Some essays, such as John Mee's on the Welsh-born author and artistic patron Hester Lynch Piozzi, touch on a variety of noteworthy themes (in this case including national and class identities and female solidarities) while finding little to connect directly Wales with Revolution. Others, such as Murray Pittock's discussion of 'What is a national Gothic?' seem to say not very much about Wales, preferring to take examples from the larger corpus of Scots and Irish invocations of the genre. Some other contributions hover awkwardly at the borderline between agitprop and antiquarianism in their enthusiasm for the radicalism of figures of dubious consequence.

However there are a significant number of highlights to note. Caroline Franklin's essay on 'Wales as Nowhere' demonstrates that the country in fact occupied a significant place in literary-political imaginations, often being placed alongside America as a place for utopian new beginnings. Before the Welshman Robert Owen began his practical experiments in utopian living, others had long imagined Wales in print or in private (as did Coleridge and Southey) as the site of escape from oppressive English conditions. Mary-Ann Constantine offers an engaging chapter on those individuals who took their Welshness across the Channel to revolutionary Paris – a mixed group with connections both significant and shady, including for one unfortunate the descent into what would become a textbook case of paranoid schizophrenia. As this figure, James Tilly Matthews, had been imprisoned as a suspected spy throughout the Terror, we might wonder whether his was another case of the trauma of revolution – a key aspect of recent study.

Marion Löffler traces the significant Welsh-language reception and adaptation of the *Marseillaise* through the years of the 1790s when it was a bold and dangerous text to own, let alone to declaim. Several chapters address the overlap and cross-fertilization of old and new Welsh-language cultural production with French news and radical principles: Dafydd Johnston on the new messages in recuperated medieval poems, Ffion Mair Jones on a traditional pantomime-like 'interlude' as a political commentary on the fate of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, and Elizabeth Edwards on 'voices of war' – stark new poetry lamenting the impact of famine and repression in the decade from 1794.

In counterpoint Hywel M. Davies offers a case-study of the iconic 1797 French 'invasion' at Fishguard. It is a veritable treasure-trove of pointers towards wider themes and significances. From the French side, the episode speaks of both the transnational sweep of republican ambitions, and their cold pragmatism: entrusting of the mission to an American

adventurer, bold plans to burn Bristol and paralyse the west coast in support of invasion of Ireland, and the brutal cynicism of sweeping the gaols to provide ‘troops’ most suitable to spread terror of pillage and rape (which, in the few hours they were ashore, they emphatically did). From the Welsh, it was a collision of anxiously mixed solidarities and fears of social subversion, and the ‘legend’ of red-flannel-clad women tricking the French into surrender was born scarce days after the events themselves – raising intriguing questions about how large the kernel of truth in it was. For the English, the landing offered reassurance that Wales was not going the way of Ireland – and created a site of touristic curiosity in the years ahead – while also offering valuable propaganda to reaffirm the ghastly nature of the French regime.

As an historian I am perhaps biased in finding a chapter on striking and unusual events to be amongst the best in the volume, but overall, despite its unevenness, there is much in this collection to draw the attention of anyone interested in the potential for a rounded picture of its focal time and place.

*David Andress*  
*University of Portsmouth*