

John Barrell and Timothy Whelan, eds., *The Political Writings of William Fox*. Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2011. Pp. 320. £12. ISBN 97781842331422.

This edited collection of pamphlets written by William Fox will certainly be of interest to those working in a broad spectrum of 1790s political thought. The editors note that Fox is a bit of an enigma both in terms of his personal life and his writings. Identifying the correct William Fox as author of the pamphlets is an important development since they have mostly been incorrectly attributed to others with the same name. As the Introduction indicates, little is known of Fox's life and identity and his writings are difficult to pin-down. It appears he was a Dissenter but may have been an Anglican; he ran a bookshop but may also have been a wealthy landowner. It is unclear whether Fox ever married, but he did have an interesting ideological connection with publisher Martha Gurney, with whom he collaborated on abolition. He is primarily identified here as a Tory, with hints at liberalism in some of his writings.

This volume contains sixteen pamphlets on topics such as abolition, the French Revolution, the war with France, Jacobinism and the treason trials. Yet Fox cannot be placed in either the radical/reform or the loyalist camp, he was 'an independent thinker' (ix). His writings float intriguingly somewhere in the spaces between more clearly politically delineated texts such as those by Burke and Paine, both of which Fox criticised. Of course, the fragmented and diverse nature of 1790s ideology is well established by historians, with inconsistency within or between writings frequently noted. Those of different political affiliations can be found sharing ideas on subjects such as constitutionalism and abolition, and many recanted from one position to another. Yet, Fox often takes a quite unusual position on contemporary issues developing innovative arguments that, as the editors point out, sometimes strike a particular chord today (xxxii).

Fox's abolition pamphlet was apparently his most popular and widely distributed pamphlet. It points out the hypocrisy in Britain's claims to liberty at home while condoning the enslaving of others abroad. The main aim though is to call for a popular boycott of sugar from the West Indies, which, he believes, would have the effect of seriously reducing the slave trade and slavery. Fox's economic argument creates a causal link between the consumption of sugar and the cruelty of the slave trade and slavery. Sugar is an increasing luxury in Britain but it is stained with human blood. Purchasing and eating sugar is a consumer sin as much as a Christian one imbued with the moral geography of empire identified by historians. Fox clearly believed in the power of extra-parliamentary action in response to the failure of the legislature to abolish the slave trade. He states that the people joining together will have the power to impose their will. The abolition movement was one of the first to promote such mass action and Fox was at the forefront of a new consumer mobilisation.

In his criticism of Paine's *Rights of Man*, Part 2, Fox decides to 'take this bull by the horns, and consider Mr. Paine's merit as a financier' (42). Paine has little such merit largely due to his disregard for the all-important issue of the national debt and the need to protect Britain's commercial interests. Fox takes a loyalist Tory position over reform here and strongly supports the landed interest. But his pamphlet on Britain's war with France in 1793 takes a more liberal turn, condemning Pitt and his government for going to war with France for no clear reason. If, as it claims, Britain does not want to interfere with France's affairs or restore the monarchy, then why join the allies in taking aggressive military action (24)? On the treason trials, Fox takes issue with the government's redefinition of treason to include Barrell's 'figurative treason'. Fox concludes this work with a statement that 'the absurdity of

the new Law of Treason, on principles of common sense, is all which is meant to be discussed' (218). Exploring absurdities in politics and applying common sense thereto can perhaps be identified as the abiding principles behind Fox's approach to the major events of his day.

This is a concise and well-compiled collection that provides useful introductory paragraphs to each text and a lengthy notes section. An attempt at linking Fox's works with those of various other writers of the time would have assisted in continuing the project among historians to identify the ideologies and affiliations of political writers of the 1790s. But that is a considerable task and probably a research project in its own right. As it is, this is a valuable and fascinating collection of writings.

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