THE

SPITHEAD AND NORE
MUTINIES OF 1797

AN ACCOUNT OF REBELLIOUS ACTIVITIES IN
LONDON, THE SOUTH EAST, AND EAST OF
ENGLAND IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Including THE LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY,
TOM PAINE, and MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

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FOREWORD

THE Spithead and Nore mutinies of 1797 didn’t happen in a vacuum. They took place in the context of desperate poverty, corrupt use of state power, and the advent of new enlightened philosophies. This booklet outlines the revolt and rebellion that marked the late eighteenth century, much of it in our Region.

Spithead is an area of the Solent between Gosport on the mainland and Ryde on the Isle of Wight; the Nore is a sandbank at the mouth of the Thames Estuary between Shoeburyness in Essex and Sheerness in Kent, and they were the sites of the two important working class actions that became known as the Spithead and Nore Mutinies.

The mutinies were in fact strikes against seamen’s wages that had remained static for over a hundred years, but which became increasingly unreasonable as high inflation in the last period of the eighteenth century eroded their value even further, and also against the increasingly brutalised working conditions in the fleet.

Today, when contact between workers by email, telephone and social media is accessible and simple, one can only wonder at the organisation that led to the disciplined action of the sailors. Indeed it is worth noting that the eighteenth century equivalent, ships’ flags, led to the red flag being raised in what was probably its first use as a rallying cry for workers.
FOREWORD

The mutinies took place in a political environment that followed the gradual shift in thinking expressed in the ‘Age of Enlightenment’ that challenged established ideas on faith, societal structure and the rights of working people. In SERTUC we are committed to both celebrating our past and learning from it, so this booklet not only outlines the facts of the mutinies but also provides a number of context pieces that demonstrate the changes and influences of the time.

Hence it includes short scene-setting pieces on thinkers and activists (William Blake, Edmund Burke, Robert Burns, Tom Paine, Wolfe Tone, and Mary Wollstonecraft), as well as a description of some of the important events of the time: the American, French and Haitian revolutions, the activities of the London Corresponding Society; and a note on the British Parliamentary system and the role of the monarchy.

To conclude, we must note that this booklet did not write itself. The research and writing was carried out by journalist and writer PETA STEEL to whom I express my sincere gratitude for her commitment and skill.

I know it will add to the knowledge and pride of workers in our Region in our past, and act as a spur to our commitment to ensure a better world for future generations.

MEGAN DOBNEY

SERTUC Regional Secretary

July 2013
ON 15 April 1797 Lord Bridport, the recently appointed commander of the Channel fleet stationed at Spithead, signalled the ships to prepare for sea. Instead the sailors on the Royal George and the Queen Charlotte, later to become the mutineers’ control post, yelled three cheers and followed by 14 other ships ran up their shrouds, a signal which showed their intent not to take orders. The next day the respective ships’ companies had appointed two from each of the crews to represent them in a united action against the Admiralty, and the strike officially began.

The mutiny at Spithead, was to be followed by another at Nore in the Thames Estuary. The two mutinies were handled totally differently with that in Nore, which declared itself a “floating republic”, perceived to be of a more political nature. Arguments for republicanism and better rights for the common man had been raging through Europe; the justice handed out to the leaders at Nore reflected the fears of the establishment at the revolutionary aspects of the men’s demands, and their concern that revolution might take root.

France headed by the Directory which governed it on behalf of the new Republic, was at war with Britain. Their armies were led by the charismatic General Napoleon Bonaparte; his allies included Spain whose navy had been recently defeated at Cadiz where men
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from ships stationed at Spithead, had fought against them. A large enemy fleet had been gathering in the Dutch naval base at Texel and a major battle was envisaged. On 2 March, the Directory instructed its vessels of war to board and seize neutral vessels. At the end of March, the French voted for a new constitution. The Directory also passed a law requiring electors to swear an oath of commitment to the Republic and its constitution; this law would have a widespread impact upon future workers’ organisation in Great Britain.

The fate of the country rested largely on the shoulders of badly paid and poorly treated sailors. The strikes were called after widespread complaints about the lack of pay and the terrible conditions that crews lived in. Men were paid ten shillings a month, the same as under Charles II a hundred years before, which they only received when the ship was paid off at the end of its duty, and often only after several years. Sailors transferred between ships had to provide a ticket from each to prove they had been commissioned to serve on it; frequently they didn’t get one, and the money they should have been paid was pocketed by the ship’s officer. No payment was made to sailors whilst they were in hospital, even if wounded in action. Conditions below deck hadn’t improved over the years with men living amid squalor and dirt. Poor quality of food, stale water and the lack of fresh vegetables and fruit had led to widespread illness and in particular scurvy. Excessive flogging was frequently imposed by officers who had little respect for their men.

New petitions calling for better pay, better food and conditions and better medical treatment were drawn up; others mostly unsigned or undated, and some from individual ships had already been sent to the Admiralty who had ignored them. Letters had been forwarded back and forth between officers, individual
sailors and the Admiralty since early February, but despite the increase in desertions and an intervention by Admiral Pattern who had received one of the earlier petitions, nothing had been done; the new petitions were also ignored. On 27 February a well-reasoned, articulate paper asking for pay in advance and setting out the sailors’ grievances had been sent to Admiral Richard Howe, the previous commander who had been looked on as being more sympathetic to their position, but he too had failed to realise the urgency of its demands.

The Spithead strike was well organised. Many of the men had been recruited to the navy because of the war, and were better educated than those normally inducted or press ganged into service. The ships had been gathered for some time, allowing contact to be made between crews, with disaffection spreading rapidly throughout the ships as men rowed back and forth amongst the fleet. Over several weeks, plans kept well hidden from their officers were drawn up as sailors fought to bring their ill treatment to the attention of both Parliament and the Admiralty. This time they refused to be ignored and took action. Every man in the fleet took an oath to support the cause, electing delegates to represent them. Rules were laid down which regulated how the strike was to be run, officers who had treated their men well were to be unharmed, those who had not were to be sent back to port. Those ships thought to be hesitant at taking action were placed under the guns of others and a red flag, the naval declaration of war, was raised, this time to mark the beginning of the strike. The men at Spithead, aware of the threat from the French declared they were ready to go to war if attacked by the enemy.
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The last two petitions were drawn up: one sent to Parliament called for a Royal Pardon to be granted to the mutineers; the other went to the Admiralty which called for an increase in wages, provisions to be raised to the weight of 16 ounces to the pound as opposed to the existing one of 14, with the two extra ounces presently being retained by the purser to cover leakage and wastage. They asked for measures to be the same as that applied to the commercial trade and that they should be served vegetables instead of flour with fresh beef; and that their ‘necessities’ should not be embezzled. They called for the sick to be better looked after, and that men on returning from sea to be given a short leave to visit their families.

The Government impressed by the manner in which the disciplined strike was run and with the need to keep the navy mollified was to offer concessions, which included awarding graded pay to the wages of the petty officers and seamen, and payments to those wounded in action. These were initially turned down as delegates insisted there should not be any differences in pay on the grounds that they were all serving seamen. Talks between the sailors and the Admiralty became bogged down in misunderstandings, delaying agreement further. Eventually Howe himself intervened making the arguments on behalf of the men to the Admiralty, calling upon it to accept the terms. Fifty nine of the most brutal officers in the Spithead Fleet were dismissed, better provisions were promised, as was a review into their conditions and terms, and improvements in pay. A Royal Pardon was given to all those taking part in the mutiny. The mutiny came to an end earning it the nickname of the “Breeze at Spithead”.

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As the Spithead mutiny came to an end, that of the Nore, an anchorage in the Thames Estuary, began on 12 May when the crew of *The Sandwich* seized control of the ship. Unlike the mutiny at Spithead, communications between the ships at Nore had been more difficult to organise as they were strung out over a long distance and not grouped around in close proximity to each other. As the last dog watch of five bells rang out signalling the beginning of the mutiny, several ships slipped away despite facing gunfire from the remaining ships. This would be the last time such a signal would be used.

This strike was seen from the outset by both the establishment and amongst some of the men themselves, as being more political than that at Spithead, which had concentrated on wages and conditions. The men at Nore represented by delegates declared themselves a “floating republic” electing a seaman, Richard Parker, himself a failed former midshipman and teacher, as its ‘President of the Delegates of the Fleet’. A vociferous, politicised man, Parker was hated by the Admiralty who looked on him as a revolutionary. On 20 May delegates from each of the ships drew up demands which were sent to Admiral Buckner calling for fairer distribution of prize money, shore leave, and changes to the actual Articles of War. These would later be added to by demands for the King to dissolve Parliament, and seek immediate peace with France. They would also call for his abdication.

The ships at Nore, having raised the red flag as had those at Spithead, but in this case establishing the flag’s more political left wing identification, took a more militant approach to their dispute by attempting to blockade London, preventing merchant ships from entering port.
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The reaction from Parliament and the Admiralty, who saw the action as not being a simple demonstration against bad wages and conditions, as had that been at Spithead, was one of outrage. Many of the leading political thinkers of the time such as Thomas Paine, a former exercise man, had done much to spread unrest. His book *Rights of Man* published in 1791, argued that popular political revolution was permissible when a government did not safeguard its people, their natural rights, and their national interests. This had led to William Pitt launching an attack on the radicals that would have disastrous consequences for the men at Nore, and in the future on the taking of oaths. The Government demanded the suppression of the mutiny, leading to the introduction of a bill by the Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger, outlawing the mutineers.

Faced by this opposition, cut off from food and with increasing concern amongst many of the sailors at the hard political line taken by their leaders and in particular Parker, a series of disputes broke out. The mutiny fell apart as plans were drawn up to sail to France, further alienating ordinary seamen who, taking their ships, gradually left the dispute. Retribution in the case of the Nore mutineers was hard and swift, the ring leader Parker, and later 29 men were hanged, others were imprisoned, some were flogged and crews were broken up.

The impact of the two mutinies was to have long term consequences, with the British establishment reacting against the perceived radicalism and spirit of revolution, particularly that personified by Nore. Laws against oath-taking were introduced to combat those that had been introduced in France; these would have widespread ramifications amongst future organisations of workers,
and in particular in the case of agricultural workers in Tolpuddle, Dorset, as it would turn them into martyrs and heroes as they were deported to Australia for taking such an oath.

Within months of the mutinies there would be an ill fated attempt by Irish patriots backed by the French to invade Ireland. There were to be other mutinies, but these would mainly take place in the West Indies: in September 1797, the crew of *Hermione* mutineered, killing almost all of their officers, and on 27 December the crew of the *Marie Antoinette* murdered their officers and took their ship into a French port.

The last big strike was not until September 1931 when the Invergordon Mutiny took place. The largest ships of the fleet staged a ‘sit-in’ protest against pay cuts, which were part of the National Government’s strategy to remain on the Gold Standard. Lower ranks were to be particularly affected by the cuts. In many ways the atmosphere around the strike was comparable to those of Spithead and Nore, with the threat this time perceived as coming from communism. To this day no-one serving in the Armed Forces is allowed to join a trade union or to go on strike. Military Law, which deems strikes and arson in the dockyards as treason takes precedence over civil law. Unions are not allowed to recruit or organise within the services. The law on mutiny and another offence of failing to suppress or report a mutiny, each punishable with death, remained in force until 1998 (some 30 years after the civil Death Penalty was abolished).

Despite the impact of the Spithead and Nore strikes there has been little to commemorate them, or to remind people of the lives and conditions of the sailors. Many of the conditions won by the
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Royal Navy have not been transferred to those in the merchant navy. The crew of the Titanic ceased to be paid once the ship sank. During the Second World War, sailors in the Merchant Navy, many on the Atlantic Crossing and to Russia, had their pay curtailed when their ships were sunk. Many crews in the Merchant Navy still only receive the basic minimum wages.
THE BRITISH PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM

The mutinies at Spithead and Nore and the accompanying public agitation were indicative of a general unrest at the lack of rights amongst the majority of the populace during the 18th and early 19th centuries. The power of parliament and governance lay in the hands of members of two parties: the Liberal Whigs and the Conservatives, elected by only a few people: those of money or estate.

In the early 19th century, few people had the right to vote. A survey conducted in England and Wales in 1780 showed that just 214,000 people – less than three per cent of a population of approximately eight million – could vote. The electorate was even smaller in Scotland. In 1834 only 4,500 men with substantial property or wealth, out of a population of more than 2.6 million people, were allowed to vote.

Members of Parliament were often elected to represent ‘rotten’ boroughs. These were areas which had only a handful of voters but elected several MPs, and other areas where the MPs bought the votes or were backed by people who were landlords or owners of property who could dictate which way people should vote. Large cities such as Manchester, with an expanding population, were not represented at all with others, such as Dunwich in Suffolk with a population of 32 electing two MPs; this changed with the passing of the first bitterly fought over Reform Act of 1832.

Despite so many members of the population being unable to vote, public opinion was still strong and influential. Magazines, papers and circulars were widely read. Satirists such as the artist James Gillray, with
their large followings, could destroy reputations and put pressure on politicians and aristocrats, whipping up public anger and derision against them. The power of the press and the satirist was largely held responsible for spreading discontent in France against Marie Antoinette and playing a large part in getting public support for revolution, something which weighed heavily on the British ruling classes at that time.

Rioting was a familiar form of protest in both towns and the countryside, and particularly in London where it was common for stones to be thrown at the carriages of the wealthy or at those of unpopular politicians and ministers. Thousands took to the streets in 1780 to riot in protest at the granting of more political rights to Catholics. George III (1760-1820) called in the army to suppress the violence after Catholics were attacked and murdered, houses were destroyed and major prisons were burned to the ground. The Bank of England was itself attacked. Over 200 people were killed during what became known as the Gordon riots. Other riots took place over the increase in the price of grain, and during industrial disputes or strikes. Earlier, in the 1760s, silk weavers in London rioted over foreign competition and unemployment caused by the use of new weaving technology.

Pressure for parliamentary reform grew not only amongst the people, but also amongst those running Britain. Country gentlemen with their vast bailiwicks felt angry about the use of patronage at Westminster, and with the increase in industrialisation, manufacturers and businessmen wanted to wield more political influence.

The publication of Tom Paine’s *The Rights of Man* in 1791 led to an upsurge in calls for parliamentary reform. Much of the protest was engendered through action taken by the working classes and the setting up of organisations such as the London Corresponding Society. Workers were seen as the backbone of industrial society and in many ways the relationship between the different social classes was mainly stable leading
to less pressure for a revolution. In France there was a great separation between the classes, with those at the bottom being so downtrodden that a popular uprising was felt to be the only way to improve conditions.

The parliamentary response to calls for more rights was to restrict political protest. Prime Minister William Pitt, faced by unrest at home, revolution abroad and the threat of wars with France, introduced in the 1790s what became known as his ‘Reign of Terror’ implementing a series of legal measures to restrict the activities of political radicals. Political meetings were restricted, treasonable publications were banned, and spies and informers were used. The mutinies at Spithead and Nore, treated in different ways, were indicative of the changes in methods used to deal with unrest, with that at Spithead being seen as being a simple direct call from a group of sailors being subjected to harsh conditions and poor pay, and therefore treated more pragmatically, with no action being taken against them; and the mutiny at Nore seen in more political terms, with the full weight of the law being brought down upon the sailors with hangings, long prison sentences and deportation.

Although the Nore mutineers called for the abdication of George III, the relationship between the King and his subjects was totally different than that between the autocratic Louis XVI and his people. Louis ruled by divine right, George was a constitutional monarch, who had to abide by and not ignore the wishes of his parliament, however much he might have wanted to resist them. They were expected to listen to arguments he might make, though not necessarily to follow them. It was George III’s duty to select who from the victorious party should lead the Government. He was judged to favour his Conservative Ministers, leading to him being accused by the Whigs of being autocratic. Although called a tyrant by the American colonists, George and his Prime Minister Lord Rockingham repealed the hated Stamp Act in 1766 making him initially popular in the country. In 1773, in an effort to quell the growing discontent in America, the then
Prime Minister Lord North repealed most of the customs duties with the exception of the tea duty. George was to say that keeping the tax was “one tax to keep up the right” (to levy taxes). Far from wanting to go to war with America, George had hoped for a political solution and as a constitutional monarch had to bow to his cabinet’s opinion.

However, the relationship between monarch and parliament was fluid at this time. For example, George III opposed the decision of the Government to transfer political power from the East India Company in running India to the Parliamentary commissioners. After the bill had been passed in the House of Commons, George instructed Lord Temple to inform the House of Lords that he would regard anyone who voted for the bill as his enemy. It was subsequently rejected.

On 17 December 1783 Parliament voted in favour of a motion condemning the ‘influence’ of the Monarch in parliamentary voting as ‘high treason’. Temple who had become Minister of State was forced to resign, destabilising the government which, losing its majority and parliament, was dissolved. The subsequent election returned William Pitt the younger with a clear mandate. George believed that his action had proved that he was able to reflect the mood of the country and appoint the correct Prime Ministers. He worked closely with Pitt, supporting him and appointing a number of new Lords, giving Pitt more support in the House of Lords.

Following the French declaration of war in 1793, George gave Pitt support to raise taxes, raise armies and to suspend the right of *habeas corpus*, which was bitterly resented amongst those seeking parliamentary reform and human rights. His only opposition to Pitt came in 1801 with the passing of the Act of Union which saw Ireland united with Great Britain. Pitt wanted to remove some of the legal disabilities which applied to Catholics, George opposed this on the grounds that emancipation of Roman Catholics would violate his coronation oath in which he promised to maintain Protestantism.
THE Spithead and Nore mutinies were staged by sailors fighting for better pay and conditions; they were heavily influenced by the demand for emancipation and civil rights that people throughout Europe were demanding. The French Revolution and the American War of Independence had changed people’s concepts of government and their rights to self rule. One of the people who had played a major role in making people fight for better rights was the English writer and philosopher Tom Paine.

*The Rights of Man* (1791), written in defence of the French revolution and *Common Sense* (1776) a pamphlet advocating American independence, are seen as being amongst the greatest influences on political thought. *The Rights of Man* is still considered a template of modern Government constitution.

Paine, born in 1737 in Thetford, Norfolk was educated at the local grammar school and worked in a series of jobs which included being an apprentice corsetmaker, an excise man, and excise officer. He moved to London to become a teacher, where he met Benjamin Franklin who persuaded him to emigrate to America.

He settled in Philadelphia, becoming a journalist, and in 1776 published *Common Sense*, attacking the British monarchy, arguing for American independence and calling for a republican government. Such was the affect of the book that John Adams was to say that “without the pen of the author of *Common Sense*, the sword of Washington would have been raised in vain”. During the following war, he served in Washington’s army, and wrote several articles and pamphlets supporting the introduction of republican democracies.

In 1787 he returned to Britain, continuing to write on political issues.
TOM PAINE

Four years later he wrote what would become one of the most radical and influential books to be written: *The Rights of Man*. Paine’s book, written to repudiate Edmund Burke’s attack on the French revolution, attacked hereditary government and called for equal political rights. He advocated that all men aged over 21 years should be given voting rights, which he believed would result in the House of Commons passing laws which favoured the majority and not just the ruling few. Paine called for the introduction of progressive taxation, family allowances, old age pensions, maternity grants and the abolition of the House of Lords.

The Government response to his book was to immediately ban it. Paine, wanting to make sure his ideas received the widest readership, granted the right to publish the book to anyone who wanted to. It was printed as cheaply as possible and, although banned, over 200,000 people in Britain brought it within the next two years; by the time he died in 1809 over 1,500,000 copies of the book had been sold in Europe. Charged with seditious libel, and having escaped to France, Paine was tried and convicted *in absentia* in 1792. Despite not speaking French, he became a French citizen and was elected in 1792 to the French National Convention. To the surprise of many he opposed the execution of Louis XVI, and was himself imprisoned. He was kept in prison under the threat of execution from December 1793 to November 1794, during which time he worked on *Age of Reason*, a book which questioned the truth of Christianity, criticised the Old Testament and the Gospels and advocating deism, promoted freethinking and reason. The book received widespread approbation in Britain with effigies of Paine being burnt in the street, and his supporters stigmatised as infidels.

Released from prison following the intervention of the American Minister James Monroe, Paine moved back to America in 1802 where he remained despite the furore caused by the book, until his death in New York on 8 June 1809. Because of the unpopularity of his anti-Christian ideas only six people attended his funeral.
EDMUND BURKE

TOM PAINE wrote *Rights of Man* in response to the Irish born politician, philosopher and writer Edmund Burke’s attack on the French Revolution. In 1790 Burke, described as the ‘father of modern anglo-conservatism’, published a pamphlet *Reflections* in which he attacked the concept of a popular revolution and the overthrow of monarchy. Pointing to the Magna Carta as being the oldest reformation of law, he argued in favour of national tradition. To Burke the idea of the introduction of a new form of Government was abhorrent. He believed that property was essential to human life, and that people desired to be ruled and controlled.

Initially Burke, although condemning the level of violence, had seemed in favour of the French revolution, but in 1789 he turned against it following the march of Parisian women on Versailles to seize and compel the King and his family to return to Paris. In 1791 he wrote *A Letter to the National Assembly* in which he called for external forces to reverse the revolution, and attacked the personality cult of the late revolutionary philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. Burke’s attacks on the revolution caused widespread controversy within his own party, leading to its eventual break up. Burke’s anti revolution stance surprised many people as he had supported American revolutionaries in their fight for independence.

Burke was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1729 and educated at Trinity College. He moved to England to study law, but gave it up to become a writer, establishing a reputation for his sense of irony. He would later serve as a prominent Whig MP and as Paymaster General. In 1757 he published a treatise on aesthetics, described as his only pure philosophical work which drew him to the attention of leading European philosophers such as Immanuel Kant. He joined a circle of leading intellectuals and artists which included Oliver Goldsmith, David Garrick, Joshua Reynolds and Edmund
EDMUND BURKE

Gibbon who described him as: “the most eloquent and rational madman that I ever knew”.

On becoming an MP his maiden speech received praise from William Pitt the Elder who said the Commons should “congratulate itself on acquiring such a member”. He drafted bills on controversial subjects such as allowing juries to have the right to determine what could be caused ‘libel’; and in 1772 was instrumental in getting the Repeal of the Corn Laws Act through the Commons. In 1774 Burke opposed restrictions on Irish Trade and spoke against the penal laws against Catholics.

On 19 April 1774, opposing the way that the King and his parliament led by Lord North governed the American colonies, Burke made a speech calling for the repeal of the tea duty declaring “leave America if she has taxable matter in her, to tax herself”. On 22 March 1775 he called for peace, warning the Government that the colonists were unlikely to back down if faced by force, arguing that the British were fighting “the American English” on behalf of a German King, to destroy the colonists’ “English liberties”. His attack on the way that Britain governed its dominions was reflected later in 1786 when he called for the impeachment of Warren Hastings, the former Governor General of Bengal, for allowing and participating in the looting of India by the East India Company and for failing to protect the way that Indians had governed and managed their provinces.

But when it came to the French Revolution, Burke took a totally different stance supporting Britain’s war against France on the basis that they were supporting the monarchy in a civil war, refusing to recognise the conflict as being a war against the nation of France itself. Years later Karl Marx and Winston Churchill would both refer to his dichotomy, with Marx attacking him as an “out and out vulgar bourgeois”, and Churchill described him as on “one hand being a foremost apostle of Liberty, on the other as the redoubtable champion of Authority”.

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EDMUND BURKE

In 1770 he had written in *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* “when bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall one by one, an unpitted sacrifice in a contemptible struggle”.

He died in 1797.
THE LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY

THE London Corresponding Society was another of the groups that grew up around the late 1700s calling for parliamentary reform. It was profoundly influenced by Tom Paine’s Rights of Man. It was founded in 1792 by Thomas Hardy, a shoemaker, and eight others at the Bell Tavern in London. The Society called for annual parliaments and universal suffrage for men.

The Society turned to recruitment as its major means of organising and propaganda, creating divisions, with each expected to recruit up to 30 men mainly from the lower middle and working classes. Nore mutiny leader Richard Parker, a former teacher, was one of those drawn to the Society. Many of the political aspirations of the strikers were similar to those called for by the LCS. Each member, meeting weekly, paid a small due. Once a division had been formed they were expected to elect two delegates to send to a General Committee. They in turn appointed an executive committee along with a secretary and a president, who like the GCs met weekly. Political discussions and communications with other radical groups came high on the agenda. Trade unions would later adopt the organisational system set up by the LCS as the model for their own structures.

Other similar societies had grown up through much of the industrialised areas such as Manchester, Sheffield, Nottingham and Derby which the London Corresponding Society linked up, or corresponded, with.
THE LONDON CORRESPONDING SOCIETY

The society passed a series of resolutions which were printed as handbills and distributed to the public, some attacking the Government’s foreign policy. By May 1793, 6,000 members of the public had signed a petition supporting LCS resolutions. The first major conflict with the Government came at the end of 1793 when supporters of parliamentary reform in Scotland, led by Thomas Muir, organised a convention in Edinburgh. Two delegates Joseph Gerrald and Maurice Maragot were sent by the LCS but they and other leaders of the convention were arrested and tried for sedition. Several, including Gerrald and Maragot, were sentenced to 14 years transportation.

It was during the 1790s that the concept of the strike, and that of the general strike, appeared amongst the British working class movement, following French proposals for strikes by workers, first advocated during the revolution.

In 1791 the French philosopher Volney’s essay *Rains of Empires* on the philosophy of history, advocated the split between church and state, and the establishment of a general assembly of nations. In Chapter 15 titled *The New Age*, Volney called for a general strike by the “productive elements” against the idle class. This was reprinted in England and distributed by the London Corresponding Society. Despite the translation and support for the book, there was no attempt to stage a general strike, though the impact of the proposals as far as strikes were concerned did have ramifications as far as the Nore mutineers, who had more contact with the LCS, were concerned. Hardy in particular was affected by the proposals.

The LCS under Hardy, John Horne Tooke and John Thelwall responded by trying to organise another convention, but were arrested and charged with high treason and imprisoned in the Tower of London. The trials of the three men began at the Old Bailey on 28 October 1794. They were accused of organising meetings where people were encouraged to
disobey King and Parliament. The prosecution was unable to provide any evidence that Hardy and the others had actually done so, and the Jury found them not guilty.

In 1794 in an attempt to crush the call for parliamentary reform the Government suspended Habeas Corpus enabling them to detain prisoners without trial. Despite this, opposition increased with a series of public meetings and King George III's carriage was stoned as he travelled to open parliament. Two Acts were introduced which were an extension of the treason laws with the Treasonable Practices Act and the repressive Seditious Meetings Act 1795. These limited the numbers of people attending meetings to 50, and required a magistrate’s license for lecturing and debating halls where an admission was charged and discussions, or corresponding, took place. LCS member John Binns was arrested and successfully defended in 1797 when accused of using seditious words.

It became increasingly difficult for the Society to organise parliamentary reform gatherings. In 1799 Parliament passed a Corresponding Societies Act making it illegal for the London Corresponding Society to meet. As a result the organisation came to an end.
THE

AMERICAN WAR

OF

INDEPENDENCE

THE American War of Independence was a revolution. It was a political rising of 13 British colonies against unfair taxation and laws imposed by the ruling British Government, and was to become a fight for independence.

Tom Paine played a major part in establishing the basis for the demands laid down by the colonialists as they called for freedom from the British. Paine, with the help of Benjamin Franklin, had settled in America in 1774. His pamphlet *Common Sense* published in 1776, advocating independence and republicanism, became a best seller. John Adams was to say that “without the pen of the author of *Common Sense*, the sword of Washington would have been raised in vain”.

The major grounds for the revolt came following the decision by the British Government to raise monies, to fund their wars against France and costs incurred because of the Indian wars, by imposing the Stamp Act of 1765. The colonists argued that as British subjects, they could not be taxed without representation and that any such attempts by Parliament to do so were illegal and unconstitutional. The British refused to listen to them, and after shiploads of tea – the Boston Tea Party – were destroyed in 1773, imposed martial law, ending self-government in Massachusetts. The colonialists replied by expelling all royal officials and setting up their own Provincial Congresses to pass their own local laws; they continued to recognise the British Crown and their position in the British Empire. But in 1775 the British Governor and head of the British army General
Thomas Gage, learning that weapons were being gathered in Concord, sent his army out to destroy them. Local militia took on the soldiers and the first shots in what became the American War of Independence were fired.

Troops, backed up by the navy who blockaded the coast, were sent to reinstate British rule; the colonialists responded by appointing George Washington to raise and lead armies to fight what had become a British invasion. Pleas to the British Government to intervene ended when a royal decree declared members of Congress to be traitors. On 4 July 1776 the United States Declaration of Independence written by Thomas Jefferson was endorsed unanimously by the 13 states. The rule of George III was claimed to be tyrannical and therefore illegitimate. All the points made in the Declaration referred to the manner in which George III had acted in a tyrannical way and in total disregard of the wishes of the people.

The first movement of the war saw the British losing Boston in 1776, but they managed to capture and hold New York City. Congress itself had to flee from Philadelphia when the British captured the city in 1777, later withdrawing a few months later.

The first major victory of the Americans in capturing the British Army at Saratoga, saw the French entering the war as allies of the United States in 1778. Combining forces the new American/French army defeated and captured a second British army at Yorktown in 1781, thereby effectively ending the war. Attempts by the Americans to extend the war into Quebec, Canada, and into the Floridas in the South were rebuffed. A peace treaty signed in 1783 confirmed the separation of the United States from the British Empire, the first time that Great Britain had received such a defeat.

The new nation, set up under a banner of republicanism and based in many ways on that proposed by Tom Paine in his various writings later to be reflected in the Rights of Man (1791), was seen as championing many of the liberal ideals upheld by the European Enlightenment, and in the case
of the Declaration very much of those of the British philosopher John Locke. The opening words of the Declaration of Independence, itself drawn up by a five man committee which included Jefferson, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, avowed that “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness”. It went on to outline that it was the purpose of Government elected by the people to secure these aims, and that it was the right of the people to get rid of the Government if it did not pursue them or if it exceeded its powers.
THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND THE WARS AGAINST BRITAIN

THE French Revolution which ran from 1789 to 1799 had a great impact on people not only in France but in Europe and in Britain where the new ideas of emancipation and civil rights had a profound effect upon the common person. The Nore strikers led by Richard Parker were to call for the setting up of a Republic and would threaten to take the Nore ships to France.

French society with its rigid rules of absolute monarchy, feudal and aristocratic and religious privileges, was transformed by a popular revolution as the people of France took to the streets. Left wing groups of politicians took power, throwing out the old regimes introducing new enlightened policies such as equality, citizenship and inalienable rights, ideals which still form the centre of the French constitution. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was proclaimed in 1789; the Republic was introduced in 1792; and the following year the King was executed. A Convention, elected by universal suffrage was set up along with a revolutionary tribunal to run France.

The Revolution saw the rise of politicians such as Robespierre and his Jacobin Party, as the Committee of Public Safety run mainly by their dictat (which was to jail Tom Paine) established a ‘Reign of Terror’ which lasted from 1793 to 1794, during which thousands of people were killed. Amongst those executed were many of the politicians and supporters of the Revolution who had opposed Robespierre. In 1794, the Jacobins were
THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

overturned by the Convention and Robespierre and his followers were executed. A Directorate was set up which assumed control of the French State in 1795 holding power until 1799, when it was replaced by a Consulate under Napoleon Bonaparte.

As the Republic sought to establish its existence, a series of wars broke out which began in 1792, and which initially resulted in victories for the French in Italy, the Low Countries and territories west of the Rhine. France was continuously at war with Great Britain from 1793 to 1802 when the Treaty of Amiens brought a short peace before the outbreak of the Napoleonic wars. In February 1797 the British Fleet in which men from Spithead and Nore had served, fought in the Battle of Cape St Vincent, successfully blocking an attempt by a large Spanish Fleet to join the French.
THE mutinies at Spithead and Nore took place as the country faced a threat of the invasion of Ireland, with a large naval force gathering at Texel in Holland in preparation for a joint Dutch and French expedition in support of a rebellion led by Wolfe Tone and his outlawed Society of United Irishmen.

An earlier expedition consisting of 43 sailing ships and 14,000 men under General Lazare Hoche and accompanied by Wolfe Tone sailed from Brest in December 1796. The French Directory had ordered the fleet to land a large force at Bantry Bay to link up with the United Irishmen and drive the British out of Ireland. This was expected to be the first stage of an eventual invasion of Britain, the ships were forced to return to France after one of the worst storms recorded since 1708 hit the fleet breaking it up, driving ships off their course and making it impossible to land the soldiers. The French lost 12 ships, some captured, others wrecked. The army which was intended to lead the invasion was subsequently split up and sent to fight in other wars. Tone himself returned to France.

The decision taken by the French Directory to support the rebel Irish was a natural progression of their own beliefs in republicanism and revolution and seen as strategic sense in their wars against the English. Leading the Irish was Wolfe Tone, described as the father of Irish republicanism, one of the founding members of the United Irishmen. Born in Dublin in 1763, Tone studied law at Trinity College, qualifying as a barrister from King’s Inns at the age of 26; continuing to practice at the
WOLFE TONE

Inns of Court in London. In 1790 he wrote a pamphlet attacking the administration of Ireland by the Marquess of Buckingham; another essay *A Northern Whig* written the following year on Ireland sold over 10,000 copies. Its publication came as the principles of the French Revolution were finding acceptance in Ireland, and particularly amongst the Ulster Presbyterians. Tone, an Anglican, criticised those who were prepared to accept a constitution that aimed at Catholic emancipation and parliamentary reform without severing ties to England. Realising that eventually they would have to fight to get self rule, Tone argued in favour of all the religions in Ireland acting together to get grievances redressed.

The Society of United Irishmen was founded in Belfast in October 1791 by Tone, Thomas Russell, Napper Tandy and others, seeking to unite Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter in what was initially planned as political opposition. The Dublin branch was founded in November. Although the original group of founders in Belfast were all Protestants (Tone and Russell were Anglican, and the others Presbyterian), many of the members who would take an active part in the eventual uprising were Catholics.

Tone was heavily influenced by the French lawyer and revolutionary Georges Danton and by Tom Paine, whose beliefs expressed in *Rights of Man* and *Common Sense* appeared in the Declaration of the United Irishmen of 1798, which called for a ‘complete and radical reform of the representation of the people in parliament’ and ‘the abolition of bigotry in religion and politics, and the equal distribution of the rights of men through all sects and denominations of Irishmen’.

In 1794 the Society became an Association adopting a series of oaths outlining their desire to overthrow British rule and establish an Irish Republic. British retaliation was swift as the Government took a series of measures to suppress opposition, arresting several of the United Irishmen. The organisation was temporarily broken up. Tone himself moved to America and then on to France where he was commissioned as an adjutant-
WOLFE TONE

general in the French Army. He was responsible for issuing a proclamation that all Irishmen taken prisoner whilst fighting for the British should be shot. He urged the French to invade Ireland claiming that there would be a general rising of the people in support.

With the failure of the landings, English retaliation was harsh with the imposition of martial law in March 1798. Houses were burned down, people tortured and murdered; the newspaper of the United Irishmen The Northern Star was suppressed and their leaders imprisoned. Outraged at the religious bipartisanship, the government launched a ‘divide and rule’ policy seeking to turn the Protestants on the Catholics by holding the latter responsible for the rebellion. The Roman Catholic Church itself remained opposed to the insurrection and supported the Crown throughout the rebellion, as it did officially through many of the following troubles in Ireland.

On 22 August 1798, a new invasion was attempted to try and help the United Irishmen who had risen two months earlier in opposition to the harsh measures imposed and were being thrashed by British forces. In only two areas had the insurgents been able to make progress: in Wicklow by forcing the British to commit substantial forces to the area (the Irish would finally surrender in October), and in Wexford in the south east where they seized control of the county until June when some 20,000 troops poured into the area and defeated them. Napoleon unlike Hoche was less sympathetic to the Irish, and was launching his campaign in Egypt, resulting in the French Directory only being able to muster enough troops and ships to make only a number of small raids on the Irish coast. During the course of these raids, only one under General Humbert was able to invade successfully at Castlebar in Connacht before being defeated; Tone’s brother was captured and hanged; Napper Tandy’s raid on Donegal ended in disaster. Tone was himself captured, having turned down a chance to escape when the French ship The Hoche on which he was sailing surrendered.
WOLFE TONE

Despite wearing a French uniform, Tone was treated as a traitor and on 10 November was found guilty by court martial in Dublin. His pleas to be shot were turned down and he was sentenced to be hanged on 12 November. He attempted suicide by cutting his throat and died on 19 November from loss of blood.

The United Irishmen continued with their fight until the failure of Robert Emmet’s uprising in 1803. The Act of Union passed in August 1800 creating the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland had taken away a measure of autonomy granted to Ireland’s Protestant Ascendancy, a response to the rebellion which was perceived to have been caused not only by the United Irishmen but because of the failure by the Ascendancy to rule justly. Gradually religious discrimination against the Catholic majority was abolished though economic sanctions remained, continuing to play Protestant against Catholics.

The setting up of the Young Ireland movement in the 1840s was the first attempt since the collapse of the United Irishmen to resurrect their non-sectarian ideals. But the alliance was never regained as Protestants were drawn closer to the British as they became scared of the growing political power of the Catholic majority. In the end the republican resistance to British rule in Ireland was mainly mounted by the Catholic population.
THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

The influence of the French revolution spread not only through Europe but also led to uprisings amongst slaves in areas previously governed by the French and their allies. By far the most effective was that staged by slaves in Haiti who rose up in 1791, finally driving their white masters out in 1803, leading to the creation of the independent Republic of Haiti, the only such revolution to create a new country.

Haiti, or the colony of Saint-Domingue as it was previously named, was the richest colony in the West Indies producing two thirds of France’s overseas trade. It was also the greatest market for the African slave trade. The population was made up of whites, mainly French who comprised planters and artisans and shop keepers. The planters were fiercely independent of France, and leaned towards an independent country to be based on a slave nation governed by white males; the poorer whites were more loyal to France, but remained committed to slavery. The rest of the country was made up of free persons of colour, who leaned towards independence, and were also pro-slavery; and some 500,000 slaves who lived under cruel and barbaric conditions; of these 100,000 were domestic slaves, with the other 400,000 being used as field hands. There was also a large group of runaway slaves called the maroons who lived in small villages and keeping alive their African traditions had led previous revolutions.

The French Revolution of 1789 was the spark which lit the Haitian revolution; there had been several earlier attempts at rebellions with one of the most important led by the slave Mackandal taking place in 1759 which ended in failure, with hundreds of slaves being brutally killed. On 26 August 1789 the newly convened Estates General passed the Declaration of
THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

the Rights of Man and Citizen stating that all citizens were equal. This was seized on by representatives of slaves, as the Government tried to keep news of it reaching the colonies.

In 1790, the General Assembly in Paris passed legislation giving colonies a relatively free hand to run their local affairs, including giving more powers to the proprietors and less to the poorer whites. At the same time it called for free persons of colour to be given citizenship. This was resisted by the Haitian white assembly. The first open black rebellions began in August 1791 and were to last for the next 12 years; these were the first to challenge French rule and slavery. In September the National Assembly rescinded the rights of free blacks and mulattos prompting them to also rise against the whites, the decision was overturned in March 1792 by a new Legislative Assembly reinstating their rights, but at the same time ignoring the slavery issue.

The slave revolt had become open warfare with plantations in the north destroyed and white owners killed. The leaders, some of whom were maroons, found themselves allying themselves with the French republican forces as civil war broke out as the administration sided with the monarchists. The slaves had been promised their liberty if they fought alongside the republicans. On 29 August 1793, slavery was abolished in the colony. In June 1794 the British, aided by Spain, invaded the island to put down the slave rebellion in order to protect their own slave colonies and seize the island’s wealth. Most fell victim to yellow fever and the invasion was defeated. Toussaint, who had emerged as one of the most charismatic and able revolt leaders pledged his support to the French and in 1796 was appointed Governor, drawing up plans for an autonomous black led state. By January 1802 he had become head of a semi independent country. Napoleon seeing this as a threat invaded the island later that year with some 20,000 troops intent on catching Toussaint and re-establishing slavery. Toussaint was betrayed by one of his own men, captured and sent off to
THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION

Paris where he died in prison. The struggle for independence continued and by late 1803 the North and South areas united and defeated the French. Toussaint’s deputy Dessalines declared himself Emperor and proclaimed the country’s independence. He was assassinated in 1806 with the country being divided by rival successors. But the grounds had been laid for the birth of a free nation. The revolution in Haiti had a knock on effect itself. In 1795 Tula, the leader of slaves on the Dutch Caribbean colony of Curacao, led a rebellion calling for the same rights as granted to those slaves on Haiti by the French, pointing out that as the French had defeated the Dutch, the same laws should apply. He was defeated and executed, the fight for liberty continued until mid-1863, when most slavery was abolished.
WILLIAM BLAKE

WILLIAM BLAKE, the poet, printmaker, painter and engraver was the writer of the words of *Jerusalem*, which has become synonymous with the trade union and working class movement. Much of his poetry reflected the need for rebellion against the establishment, and in particular the Church of England. Against slavery, he was concerned at the negative effects of the industrial revolution, and was disappointed with the results of the American and French revolutions which he thought had replaced the monarchy with an ill-run money-making form of regime.

Born in Soho, London in 1757, his father was a hosier and the family were dissenters. Blake was educated at school until he was 10 years old, and at home by his mother. Showing early signs of artistic talent, having started engraving documents of Greek antiquities purchased for him by his father, he was enrolled at art school; during this time he also began to write poetry. In 1772 he was apprenticed to the engraver James Basire, who two years later sent him to copy images from Gothic churches. In 1779 Blake became a student at the Royal Academy, where he rebelled against the style of fashionable artists such as Rubens, supported by the, then, Academy President Joshua Reynolds. He was to show his work at the Academy on six occasions.

Blake’s first political action came in June 1780 when, swept up with the emotion of the mob, Blake joined those rioting outside Newgate Prison in response to a parliamentary bill revoking sanctions against Roman Catholics. The Gordon Riots led to George III’s government introducing legislation aimed at quelling riots and to the setting up of the police force. The words “The Prisoners have been freed by the authority of his Majesty King Mob” were daubed on the walls of the prison. Afterwards the term ‘King Mob’ was used to describe “an unruly fearsome proletariat”.

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WILLIAM BLAKE

Blake’s first collection of poems were published in 1783 and a year later, following his father’s death, he and James Parker opened a print shop. He began working with the radical publisher Joseph Johnson who was a major influence and friend of philosophers, scientists and writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, whose book *Original Stories from Real Life* Blake illustrated. Although Blake met most of Johnson’s friends there is no evidence that he actually met Wollstonecraft. In 1793, Blake published *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* in which he condemned chastity and marriage without love and defended the right of women to have complete self-fulfillment.

In 1800, following his marriage, Blake moved to Felpham in Sussex, accepting a job to illustrate the works of William Hayley, and it was here that in 1804 he began writing *Milton a Poem* published in 1808. The first words of *Jerusalem*, ‘And did those feet in ancient times’ was a short poem from its preface, one of his collection known as the *Prophetic Books*. The inspiration came from the story that a young Jesus and his uncle Joseph of Arimathea had travelled to England and visited what became Glastonbury Abbey during his years in the wilderness. It reflected a story in the Book of Revelation which described a second coming, wherein Jesus established a new Jerusalem; this was used by the Christian churches as a metaphor for heaven as a place of universal love and peace. Blake used it to describe how a visit by Jesus would have created a ‘brief’ heaven in England at a time when it was blighted by the ‘dark satanic mills’ of the Industrial Revolution. Blake’s words would later in 1916, during the First World War, be set to music by Sir Hubert Parry.

It was whilst working on the poem that he ran into trouble with the law in 1803, when following a fight with a soldier, he was charged with ‘uttering’ seditious and treasonable charges against the King. He was cleared by the Chichester Assizes, who ruled that evidence had been made up.
WILLIAM BLAKE

He returned to London and began to write and illustrate *Jerusalem*, published in its entirety in 1820. In 1826, he was commissioned to provide a series of engravings for Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Although work on this was caught short by his death in 1827, the few watercolours and seven engravings he left have been hailed as being amongst his greatest work. Blake had shared Dante’s distrust of materialism with its corruptive nature of power and had relished the opportunity to portray the imagery of Dante’s work. He was still working on the Dante series on the day he died.
MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT was one of the first women to write and fight for women’s rights. In 1792 she wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in response to Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man*. She argued that women were not inferior to men, and that lack of education was responsible for them seeming to be so. She stated that women and men should be treated as ‘rational beings’ and advocated a social order that was founded on reason. An earlier book *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, published in 1790, had won her overnight success as she responded to Edmund Burke’s critique of the French Revolution.

Wollstonecraft was born in 1758 and became a philosopher and writer of novels and treatises; she was author of a history of the French Revolution, a travel book and a children’s book. As a very young woman, who had witnessed the ill treatment of her mother by her father, who’d also robbed her of an inheritance, Wollstonecraft had come under the influence of John Arden, a philosopher, and Fanny Blood with whom she set up a school, in a dissenting community in Newington Green. The school failed after the early death of Blood, leading Wollstonecraft to become a governess with an Anglo-Irish family; her only children’s book *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788) reflected her experiences. Railing at the lack of professional opportunities open to women she returned to London determined to become an author.

Aided by the liberal publisher Joseph Johnson, she found work writing reviews for his magazine, and having learnt German and French, translating texts. It was through him that she met Tom Paine and the philosopher William Godwin, with whom at the time she was not impressed. Her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* found her instant fame, earning her comparisons to the theologian Joseph Priestley and to Tom
Paine himself, whose own reply to Edmund Burke would be published the following year. In 1792, partly in response to Paine’s *Rights of Man* and in furtherance of her own earlier published arguments, Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. This established her reputation and became her most famous and influential work.

In many ways the book, though arguing in favour of equality, was looked on as being controversial in that she criticised women for being too sensitive and being too susceptible to their feelings, therefore harming their own chances of advancement. She argued that reason and feeling should work together and not separately. The book also laid out plans for an education system with boys and girls, both rich and poor, being educated together and studying the same curriculum. Unlike Paine who argued that rights of man should apply to all, poor and rich, Wollstonecraft aimed her arguments at the middle class, going so far as to suggest that the poor after the age of nine, should go to separate schools from the rich.

In December 1792, after an ill-judged affair, she moved to Paris arriving just before the guillotining of Louis XVI. She was determined to test the ideas that she had promoted in *Rights of Woman* in this exciting new society in which several women, such as Madame Roland, had become leading figures. She fell in love with Gilbert Imlay, an American, eventually becoming pregnant and giving birth to a daughter Fanny. She continued writing and in 1794 wrote a history of the early stages of the French Revolution, *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*.

On the declaration of war on France by Britain, and with French politics embedded in its ‘reign of terror’, many of the British living in France, although supporting the revolution, were arrested or found themselves in imminent danger. Imlay had protected Wollstonecraft by registering her as his wife. Others such as Tom Paine were not so fortunate and were arrested; some were guillotined.

Calling herself Mrs Imlay to stop her daughter being branded as illegitimate, she returned to London in 1795 in pursuit of Imlay who had
MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

deserted her. After a suicide attempt she endeavoured to win back Imlay’s affections by travelling with her daughter and nurse to Scandinavia to try and recoup losses he had made on failing business transactions. The trip resulted in another book *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* published in 1796, this would make a particular impression on William Godwin, who wrote that she had displayed a genius “which commands all our admiration”. Another suicide attempt would be made on her return.

It was after this particular incident that she returned to literary society and began a relationship with Godwin which turned into a passionate affair, and then into marriage before the birth of her second daughter Mary. News that she had not been married to Imlay, despite portraying herself as being so, lost the couple many friends, and having advocated the abolition of marriage, Godwin himself was criticised for getting married, losing them even more supporters. The birth of Mary Godwin, the future Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein* and wife of Percy Shelley was to lead to the death of Mary Wollstonecraft who died of septicaemia, 10 days later on 10 September 1797.

Following her death, Mary Wollstonecraft’s reputation came under attack. Following the publication by William Godwin of his *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in which he referred to her sex life and suicide attempts, he would also give the impression that her deep feelings were balanced by his reasoning, in many ways saying that the way in which she lived her life were in opposition to the those that she had put forward in her book. Arguments over the impact she had on women’s writing and philosophy have continued, and with the rise of the women’s movement and feminism she was heralded by writers such as Virginia Woolf who described her work as being “immortal”. She has inspired feminism in other areas, with the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, the Indian economist, identifying Mary Wollstonecraft as a political philosopher whose work she drew upon in *The Idea of Justice* (2009).
ROBERT BURNS

THE Scottish poet and lyricist Robert Burns, widely regarded as leader of the Romantic Movement, was an inspiration to the founders of liberalism and socialism. A cultural icon in Scotland, he wrote not only in the Scottish language but also in the Scottish dialect of the English language, ensuring that his poems and songs found a large audience throughout the world. A staunch egalitarian, his poems and songs reflected the lives and injustices of the ordinary people of Scotland, and his themes included republicanism and radicalism, earning him fame and followers amongst reformers and revolutionaries. His two poems *Birthday ode for George Washington* and *Is There for Honest Poverty* ('A Man’s a Man for a’ That') in particular reflect his views on the American and French revolutions.

The Act of Union in 1707 had seen a gradual stripping away of Scottish identity and Scottish independence. The Scots under Bonnie Prince Charlie had been beaten at Culloden in 1746. Burns wrote at a time when the English were enforcing a series of measures to suppress the clan system and to ban the wearing of tartan. The language of the Scots was already being eroded with those in the South more frequently speaking English. Burns’ poetry in many ways not only defied this convention but also touched on class inequality, the Church and the State.

Burns was born in Alloway, South Ayrshire, Scotland in 1759. His parents were tenant farmers and much of Burns’ childhood was spent living in poverty, leaving him with a premature stoop and a weak constitution. He was educated by his father, a self taught man and then eventually at an ‘adventure school’ in Alloway where he learnt Latin, French and mathematics. In 1773 he became a full time labourer, receiving intermittent education. He began several love affairs which led to his first songs. The family was to move around as his father took over various tenancies. His
ROBERT BURNS

earliest letters date back to 1779 when he joined a country dancing school in Tarbolton, and it was here in 1781 that he was initiated into the masonic lodge. He moved temporarily to Irvine, North Ayrshire to train as a flax dresser, but this came to an end when the flax shop burnt down during New Year celebrations. He returned to Tarbolton but following the death of his father and the failure of attempts to keep the farm going, moved to Mauchline where he was to embark on a series of affairs which would see the birth of one daughter to his mother’s servant and the beginning of a relationship with Jean Armour who became pregnant with twins. They were, despite family opposition, to marry and have nine children, of which only three survived infancy. Other affairs would follow, many of them gendering more poems and songs. Facing financial problems, Burns accepted a friend’s offer of a job in Jamaica as a bookkeeper on a slave plantation, but turned it down and went to Edinburgh. Six years later he was to write *The Slave’s Lament* in protest at slavery. The abolitionist movement was then just beginning.

In 1786 he travelled to Edinburgh, where his poetry found success and he made friends with some of the leading men of letters, making a lasting impression on the the young Walter Scott, then only 16. He also formed a close friendship with Nancy McLehose, then separated from her husband and wrote *Ae Fond Kiss* in farewell to her when she attempted a reconciliation with him. The first volumes of his songs and poetry were published during the two years he spent in Edinburgh. At that time Scots who argued against the English Crown were being deported, and Burns himself could have been deported but he had carefully worded his work to ensure that it would be difficult for authorities to accuse him of writing against the state.

He returned to Ayrshire resuming his relationship with Jean Armour, taking a lease of a farm. He also trained as an Exciseman and was appointed to duties in customs and Excise in 1789. In November 1790 he
ROBERT BURNS

wrote *Tam O’Shanter* and was offered and refused a newspaper job in London, and the prospect of becoming a candidate for the newly created position of Chair of Agriculture at the University of Edinburgh.

He gave up the farm and moved to Dumfries, contributing over 100 songs for *The Melodies of Scotland*, and others to George Thomson’s *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs for the Voice* and to James Johnson’s *The Scottish Musical Museum*. It was this work which established him as the leader of lyric poets.

Burns was now wealthier and more established than he had ever been but this did not stop him outraging some of the establishment by expressing support for the French Revolution, and advocating for reform in his own country. His health began to suffer and he fell into depression. He died on 21 July 1796.

His reputation, already established, increased as his work became widely published both in this country and abroad. Politicians and working class activists have turned to his poetry in support of their causes. His song *Auld Lang Syne* is synonymous with marking New Year festivities worldwide, and his poems and songs including *A Red, Red Rose*, *To A Mouse*, *Tam O’Shanter* and *Ae Fond Kiss* are still spoken, sung and played. Burns clubs have been established worldwide and Burns Night on 25 January is celebrated throughout the world with the eating of a haggis, the playing of the bagpipes and the address (poem) written to the haggis. President Abraham Lincoln was in 1864 invited to attend a Burns night, his hosts insisted that he should send a toast if he could not attend. Lincoln composed and sent a toast. To this day Burns’ influence on American literature is reflected in the work of leading writers. J D Salinger used a misinterpretation on *Comin’ thro’ the Rye* in his book *Catcher in the Rye* and a line from his stanza *To A Mouse* appeared in John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*. The singer/songwriter Bob Dylan claimed that the lyrics of *A Red, Red Rose* had the biggest effect on his life. Burns has become the ‘peoples’ poet.
Robert Burns

of Russia, with his influence surviving both Tsarist and Soviet Russia. In 1956 the USSR honoured Burns by producing a stamp with his face. He is still popular in Russia.

In Scotland numerous monuments have been erected to him, as they have been in other countries such as America, Australia and New Zealand. On 24 September 1996, Jimmy Knapp, then General Secretary of the RMT, launched the new ‘Burns Line’ running between Girvan, Ayr and Kilmarnock. His face appeared on the Clydesdale Bank £5 note between 1971 and 2009, on the other side was a small picture of a mouse and a red rose. He now appears on the front of their £10 note. In 2009 he was chosen as the greatest Scot by the Scottish public.