Wales and the French Revolution

‘Footsteps of Liberty and Revolt’
Essays on Wales and the French Revolution

Edited by
Mary-Ann Constantine
and Dafydd Johnston

University of Wales Press
‘A Fishguard Fencible’, 1797, artist unknown
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‘We are generally dismissed with loud applause and with the cry of “Vive la Nation. Toujours le tiers État!” . . . We were stop’d by similar inquiries, and as we travers’d along we found that we did not outrun the footsteps of Liberty and Revolt.’

George Cadogan Morgan, France, July 1789
Wales and the French Revolution

The French Revolution of 1789 was perhaps the defining event of the Romantic period in Europe. It unsettled not only the ordering of society but language and thought itself: its effects were profoundly cultural, and they were long-lasting. The last twenty years have radically altered our understanding of the impact of the Revolution and its aftermath on British culture. In literature, as critical attention has shifted from a handful of major poets to the non-canonical edges, we can now see how the works of women writers, self-educated authors, radical pamphleteers, prophets and loyalist propagandists both shaped and were shaped by the language and ideas of the period. Yet surprising gaps remain, and even recent studies of the ‘British’ reaction to the Revolution remain poorly informed about responses from the regions. In literary and historical discussions of the so-called ‘four nations’ of Britain, Wales has been virtually invisible; many researchers working in this period are unaware of the kinds of sources available for comparative study.

The Wales and the French Revolution Series is the product of a four-year project funded by the AHRC and the University of Wales at the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies. It makes available a wide range of Welsh material from the decades spanning the Revolution and the subsequent wars with France. Each volume, edited by an expert in the field, presents a collection of texts (including, where relevant, translations) from a particular genre with a critical essay situating the material in its historical and literary context. A great deal of material is published here for the first time, and all kinds of genres are explored. From ballads and pamphlets to personal letters and prize-winning poems, essays, journals, sermons, songs and satires, the range of texts covered by this series is a stimulating reflection of the political and cultural complexity of the time. We hope these volumes will encourage scholars and students of Welsh history and literature to rediscover this fascinating period, and will offer ample comparative scope for those working further afield.

Mary-Ann Constantine and Dafydd Johnston
General Editors
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Preface

This collection of essays comes out of a four-year research project at the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, which set out to explore the impact of the French Revolution and the subsequent wars with France on the culture of Wales. A range of fascinating texts is being published as part of the Wales and the French Revolution Series, which is discussed further in the Introduction below. This volume, however, is devoted to consideration of some of the broader themes of the period, and to many of the extraordinary people who played their part in shaping perceptions of Wales’s place within Britain, Europe and the wider world.

The image on the cover of the volume is a water-colour study made by the twenty-three year old J. M. W. Turner on a seven-week tour of north Wales in 1798. From its alarming, weirdly lit mass of shapes and colours emerge, with a little concentration, the bulk of Caernarfon castle, troubling symbol of defence (against whom?) in times of war, and the skewed masts of ships, linking Wales to the conflict on the seas. The pull of the picture is both back into history and outwards into current affairs: both past and present are challenging and bloody. That complex pulling and meshing of different loyalties with and against new and inherited identities (Welsh, British, ‘Citizen of the World’, republican, Dissenter, loyalist, Volunteer) is explored, in a variety of different contexts, in the contributions published here.

We are hugely grateful to all our authors, therefore, and to the people and institutions that have made the work possible. The AHRC and the University of Wales have between them funded four years of intense research; the National Library of Wales, repository of many of the period’s most interesting texts, has been a pleasant second home to many of us. We are especially grateful to the Library for the use of several images in this volume, and to Tom Lloyd and Martin Crampin for the delightful ‘Fishguard Fencible’ who guards the entrance to this book. Thanks go also to the director and staff of the University of Wales Press for their enthusiasm and practical support for this project from the very beginning. Members of our Advisory Panel have been generous with time and ideas – some have contributed essays here – and