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Terrorists, anarchists, and republicans: the genevans and the Irish in times of revolution

by Richard Whatmore, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2019, 512 pp., $39.95/£34.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780691168777

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BOOK REVIEWS

Terrorists, anarchists, and republicans: the genevans and the Irish in times of revolution, by Richard Whatmore, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2019, 512 pp., $39.95/£34.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780691168777

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In this magisterial and engrossing book, Richard Whatmore recounts the extraordinary story of New Geneva. A utopian political project planned by dissident expatriate Genevan revolutionaries at Waterford, on the south east coast of Ireland, New Geneva instead became a barracks for British troops, before being converted into a squalid gaol for the imprisonment and torture of republicans among the United Irishmen. What started out as a great hope for the future of a free politics in the late eighteenth century ended as a by-word for the British state's capacity for brutality and oppression.

At one level *Terrorists, Anarchists, and Republicans* is a splendidly readable narrative history – indeed, a frequently gripping tale – of just how this came to pass. Of how the democratical *représentants* at Geneva, drawing (albeit dubiously) on the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, initiated an attempted revolution in 1782, only to be defeated by the magistrate faction, which with the backing of France expelled the revolutionary elements and in turn relinquished Geneva's political independence to French control. Of how the expatriate *représentants* looked to re-found what they took to be the true spirit of republican Geneva elsewhere, and how Waterford in Ireland came to be seen as an ideal location for the project: a free state founded in the territory of what they believed to be a free monarchy, which conveniently provided armed defence from France. Of how that project ultimately failed, thanks to the infighting and corruption of its architects, and of the compromises and defeats generated by the collision of utopian ideas with political reality. Of how the rise of Irish republicanism in the 1790s – in the wake of the French Revolution, and the radical reconfiguration of republicanism as a political project that it engendered – came to be identified by the British state as a major threat, and hence was met with vicious repression.

But *Terrorists, Anarchists and Republicans* is much more than just a well-recounted narrative history: it is simultaneously an exploration of the great intellectual shifts taking place in political thought in the late eighteenth century, and of the direct consequences of this for concrete political events – and vice versa. For despite superficial similarities, the Genevan dissidents of the 1780s and the Irish republicans of the 1790s were from different intellectual worlds, and travelling in different political directions. The Genevan revolutionaries were, in a sense, attempting to go *backwards*: to the ideal of small-state republics, protected from the corruption engendered by excessive commercial interactions, and relying on the patriotism of a virtuous citizenry, in order to maintain self-government and thus independence and liberty. But this was a vision of politics that by the end of the eighteenth century was firmly on its way out. As early as 1748, Montesquieu in *The Spirt of the Laws* had claimed that not only was republicanism of this variety fit only for small states, but that small states were doomed in the face of the military and economic power of the new, large, law-governed monarchies. As Whatmore's previous book *Against War and Empire* explored in detail, despite republican theorists' best attempts to resist Montesquieu's grim predictions for the viability of small republics in a world of large states, by the end of the eighteenth century the writing was well and truly on the wall.[1] The ending of Genevan independence at the hands of French power

[1]Richard Whatmore, *Against War and Empire: Geneva, Britain and France in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

was merely a dramatic confirmation of a process that many observers had by then come to see as inevitable. The experiment at Waterford was a last gasp attempt to deny the political logic of a Europe dominated by large states – and its failure was indicative.

The choice of Ireland for such an experiment was, however, particularly significant, insofar as that nation was in the midst of its own protracted engagement with another aspect of the new logic of interstate power politics centrally in play by the late eighteenth century. Geneva had long been a commercial republic, and Waterford was selected in part because in the opinions of the projectors its geographical situation offered plentiful opportunities for future economic prosperity, and thus for the long-term success of New Geneva. But this failed to reckon with the longer-term realities of Ireland's economic, and thus strategic, relationship to Britain.

The dissident Genevan republicans were avowed enemies of the French monarchy, and on the basic logic of an enemy's enemy being a friend, the British had no immediate opposition to the project at New Geneva, and the Swiss exiles even had political and financial support at various points from powerful figures, such as the Irish-born William Petty, Earl of Shelburne, who served as Prime Minister from 1782–3. In the early-mid 1780s fanciful republican schemes in some corner of Hibernia posed no conceivable threat to British power or domestic stability. But the Irish economy as a whole was a very different matter. In the era of what David Hume called 'jealousy of trade', i.e. when reasons of commerce became reasons of state, and international competition fused military with economic imperatives, the Irish economy – its low wages and cheap produce in particular – was perceived as a direct threat to the mercantile interests that held significant sway in British policy-making. The threat of free trade with Ireland was widely perceived as dangerous to the commercial interests of Britain, and the question of the appropriate political relationship between the two states was thus fraught with difficulty. The Scots, desperate for access to markets and following the merciless English repression of the trading scheme at Darien, had voluntarily given up their political independence via the 1707 Act of Union in order to achieve access to more extensive British trade. Many argued that the results had been of unquestionable economic gain to the Scots. But should Ireland be allowed to follow suit, if this meant damage to the English economy, and to mercantile interests in particular? The dominant answer from London was no.

English repression of Irish economic development – the overt application of the logic of jealousy of trade – sowed important seeds for growing Irish resentment, domestic political dissatisfaction, and ultimately a desire to be free from British rule. As Whatmore shows, however, Irish republicanism underwent a radical transformation, such that the politics of the United Irishmen in the 1790s was markedly different from what had preceded this in the 1780s. A crucial difference was the fact of the French Revolution, and the subsequent military conflict this had unleashed on the Continent. The Irish revolutionaries of the 1790s sought to make explicit cause with the new French state, ideologically and militarily. The republicanism they took inspiration from looked forwards, to the new model of *large* republics as now exemplified by France, and not backwards, to the classical model of small republics of the sort that the expatriate Genevans had fancifully hoped to found at Waterford. But this in turn ran up directly against the logic of international power politics. Not only was Republican France the main military rival to Britain, embroiled in a series of destabilising conflicts across Europe, but the threat of the spread of *that* kind of politics – of its capacity for internal insurrection leading to the over-spill of military aggression internationally – constituted, from a British perspective, an existential threat that needed to be stamped out everywhere. Furthermore, any prospect of an independent republican Ireland, able to unleash its cheap goods on markets previously dominated by British producers, simply could not be tolerated. When the United Irishmen openly rebelled in 1798, the repression from the British came swiftly, and with merciless brutality.

In Whatmore's final analysis, the French Revolution emerges as neither – as it is often still held to be – the founding of modern politics, nor a decisive step in the direction of democratic self-rule as we would come eventually to know it. On the contrary, he urges us to see it very much as it was seen by many of its historical contemporaries: as a short- and long-term political failure. Short-term, because it ended in the military despotism of Napoleon. Long-term, because the version of

republicanism it offered was in practical terms indelibly bound up with internal violent repression and external military aggression – and it was *against* this mode of politics that the constitutional law-governed states of Europe came to define themselves (whether they remained formal constitutional monarchies or not). As Montesquieu predicted, and the failure of New Geneva illustrated, the future belonged entirely to the large states of Europe – but which renounced, rather than embraced, the legacy of 1789.

As Whatmore puts it, 'the radical argument' of his book 'is that nineteenth-century intellectual life began with an acceptance of the *failure* of the French Revolution'. The emergence of Britain as the dominant power – previously thought to be on the brink of collapse, but now unquestionably in the ascendent – meant that thinkers of the nineteenth century 'became interested in Britain's purported capacity to maintain, to defend and to export both liberty and moderation.' Whilst sceptics 'continued to search for alternative means to a better world', nonetheless 'at the end of Enlightenment, the Britain that emerged from experiments like New Geneva, and from the brutal destruction of domestic republicans, set the terms for nineteenth-century political argument across most of Europe' (350). Radical or otherwise, Whatmore's argument strikes me as entirely correct. The overall result is a book whose values and successes are manifold, and which constitutes essential reading not only for those who wish to understand the politics and history of Genevan and Irish republicanism, but for anyone attempting to understand the foundations of modern European politics – and hence of the world that we still inhabit.

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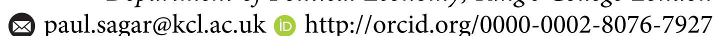
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Conservatism: the fight for a tradition, by Edmund Fawcett, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2020, 544 pp., £30.00/$35.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780691174105

What is conservatism? Respected journalist Edward Fawcett tackles this question in this lengthy politico-intellectual history. *Conservatism* is an ambitious and eminently readable work anda considerable improvement over comparable histories in a surprisingly underpopulated field. Fawcett surveys conservative politics and thought in America, Britain, France, and Germany from the Age of Revolutions to the present day. He sees both commonalities and differences between national traditions. Common to all four are the two overlapping theatres of ideological conflict – that with liberals and that within conservatism.

Conservatives who had accepted liberal modernity have battled for control over it with liberals and social democrats. In terms of political power, these conservatives have been hugely successful. After a first phase of early nineteenth-century opposition, conservative parties have been the dominant political force in the liberal West. Their principal mode of politics Fawcett describes as a 'stylistic tradition of prudent management' (66–7). Conservatives are the politicians the electorate entrust to make liberal capitalism function effectively and efficiently, with liberals and social democrats viewed as liable to screw things up one way or another.

The other ongoing conflict is the ideological one between liberal conservatives and their illiberal critics. The latter have their origins in opposition to the French Revolution, and are virulently critical of liberalism, democracy and often capitalism. The debate between liberal and illiberal conservatives is over whether liberal democratic capitalism should be compromised with at all.One refrain