

POST-LAPSARIAN HUMAN BEINGS

Conflicting Energies: Essays on the Revolution in France and Literary Cultures in English (1789-1822) by Bernard Hickey. Lecce: Milella Editore, 1991.

Few events in modern history have had such influence as the French Revolution. As Bernard Hickey says in the foreword to his collection of essays «It became a model for European nations convinced of the virtues of representative government, in the search for an ordered, more just society». The revolution in political, social and philosophical thought that began in the 18th century, and culminated in the French and American revolutions have, for better or for worse, shaped the world that we know today.

The English-speaking world was profoundly shaken by the French Revolution for two important reasons. Firstly because of Britain's proximity to France itself, their centuries old conflict of interests, and the inevitable sensitivity that either of the countries must feel to turbulent events in the other. Secondly because of the example the Revolution offered to Britain's growing empire, both in its old Celtic possessions and its newer, globally scattered acquisitions. Professor Hickey's first essay, «The Orators» begins with an examination of some political reactions in Britain in the 1790s. Sub-titled «Richard Price and Edmund Burke», the essay concentrates mainly on the latter, the development of his political opinions and reactions to them. Richard Price, a prominent dissenter, was naturally an enthusiastic supporter of the Revolution, optimistic that it would have favourable consequences in Britain. What is perhaps surprising is that this approval was not confined to the victims of injustice and discrimination such as the dissenters, but was general throughout the country. Even the king and his government were pleased at the sudden apparent weakening of France as a military power. This peculiar alignment of Price and the establishment in welcoming the Revolution serves to emphasize Edmund Burke's unexpected failure to do the same. Burke was a Whig, famous for having supported the American Revolution and for a lifetime's devotion to the cause of social change. His reply to Price's demagogic, pro-France «Discourse» was deeply controversial. His fears were justified by subsequent events, as Wordsworth and Coleridge were to find out (dealt with in a later essay). The Terror has remained in the minds of the English for as long as the Revolution itself and there is no doubt that literature has contributed to this with Dickens and Baroness Orczy featuring most prominently in a whole genre of popular historical novels that have reinforced the views of English xenophobes and monarchists for generations.

Professor Hickey deals at scrupulous length with Burke's more controversial side. His opposition to religious freedom, his ardent monarchist outbursts, his tendency to fall back on sneers in argument, his anti-democratic views and his ungentlemanly rudeness to Mary Wollstonecraft are all set out, yet it is clear that these are all «despites» or «althoughs». It is in his denial that Burke was an envious person that Professor Hickey comes out with one of his more eccentric phrases; «envy» he declares, is «a major fault

of post-lapsarian human beings». Perhaps Professor Hickey was inspired by Burke whose eloquence he defends. Burke is also praised for being «Hibernian-English», for his passion and, most important of all, for being right. Professor Hickey concludes that «Burke's own devotion to the House of Commons was magnificently justified in 19th century terms, while the record of his oratory enshrined the values of parliamentary tradition».

The second essay deals with «The Lunar Society», a pro-Revolution group of scientists, writers and thinkers who suffered at the hands of the mob for their views. The three members singled out for study are Joseph Priestley, Erasmus Darwin and Josiah Wedgwood. It is at this point that the collection begins to justify its subtitle of «Literary Cultures in English» since this essay and the subsequent ones contain many verse extracts. Much of the verse will be unknown to all but the specialist reader, for whom it is probably included. Not only verse, but lengthy quotations fill up a good proportion of the book, possibly up to thirty per cent in total, which sometimes makes for difficult reading as gaps, indentations and style changes break the reader's concentration. This is not helped by the fact that there are several places where lines seem to be missing or are repeated, so that sometimes the sense of the passage is quite seriously affected.

The wholesale inclusion of poems seems at times rather unnecessary; in the fourth essay, «Years of Hope and Despair», five poems from «Poems dedicated to National Independence and Liberty» appear in full, followed two pages later by Blake's «Jerusalem». Since the essays seem to be written for a fairly knowledgeable readership which is likely to have access to these particular poems, their publication in this volume is a little unkind to trees. «Years of Hope and Despair» is concerned mainly with William Wordsworth and his well-known horror at the turn events took subsequent to the Revolution. Wordsworth's disenchantment with republicanism and his conversion to establishment figure reappears in the last essay «The Inheritors», with Browning's poem «The Lost Leader» opening the attack on the turncoat Laureate. Professor Hickey makes the interesting point that Wordsworth was not only regarded as an apostate by the English poets who followed him, but was also increasingly seen as an imperialist cultural tyrant in the wider English-speaking world by those who did not recognise the Lake District, or any poems inspired by it, as having any relevance to themselves. As Professor Hickey says, it is ironic that the poet whose work had once been inspired by Revolution wrote poetry that has become symbolic to many of cultural and imperial tyranny.

V.S. Naipaul's 1964 article «Jasmine», which draws attention to the incongruity of poems about daffodils to people who have never seen one, demonstrates the increasing recognition that non-British English-speaking writers have been demanding, and receiving, since the fifties. Both Naipaul and Hickey, the first born in Trinidad, the second in Australia, are from countries that were once English colonies. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that the common characteristic of ex-colonialism can be spotted in those figures who are dealt with most favourably in the essays. Indeed, one begins to suspect that to the antipodean eye, Burke, the «Hibernian-English» orator, benefits much from his origins, just as Wordsworth suffers for his. Appropriately, then, an essay is devoted to Toussaint Louverture; «the leader of Haiti's slave army in one of the most remarkable acts of liberation in all history» (Paul Foot, *The Independent* on Sunday,

London, 11.8.91). Toussaint has been largely forgotten, overshadowed perhaps by the Duvalier years in most people's view of Haiti, yet he certainly achieved remarkable victories which brought independence to the country and an end to slavery. He defeated the French, the Spanish and British armies and brought freedom and independence to the Haitian slave army he led. Although the French decided to abolish slavery in 1794, Napoleon recognised the wealth that the slave plantations brought to France and in 1802 sent an army to win back Haiti and reinforce slavery. Paul Foot believes that the revolutionary songs sung by Toussaint's army, including «The Marseillaise», so demoralised and confused the French soldiers, that it contributed to their defeat. Toussaint was eventually tricked into negotiations with the French who promptly arrested him and took him to France where he died in prison. This led Wordsworth, still on the side of the angels at this stage, «to write perhaps his finest sonnet. It is seldom taught in schools, since there is not a single reference to daffodils.» (Paul Foot). Clearly Foot, Hickey and Naipaul should get together. Wordsworth is not alone in owing Toussaint inspiration, other writers listed by Professor Hickey who have dealt with the Haitian rebellions include Alejo Carpentier, C.L.R. James, Derek Walcott and Aimé Césaire.

The longest essay deals with the effects of the French Revolution on the penal colony founded in 1788 in «Botany Bay», from which the essay takes its title. As Professor Hickey is quick to point out, the Revolution could have no direct effect on the colony, but there were plenty of indirect effects. The need to set up a penal colony in Australia was because North America was no longer available as a dumping ground for involuntary undesirables. A new type of transportee was also appearing: the political prisoner. Inspired by the French Revolution, the Irish and Scottish agitated and were transported for their pains, bringing with them the songs and ballads of their native lands. This is doubly favourite Hickey territory. Not only are the first prisoners brought to Australia victims of English imperialism, but they are the ancestors of generations of Australians who will be denied political and cultural autonomy in a continent designated a colony. At times the need for the essays to justify their «Literary Cultures in English» subtitle leads to the uncomfortable juxtaposition or tacking on of songs and poems. This is the case in this essay, which gives details of the ballads the Irish prisoners brought with them and how they were adapted to circumstances in Australia. In common with the Toussaint Louverture essay there is also a section about «The Legacy in Literature» which in the «Botany Bay» essay discusses the work of two twentieth century writers, R.D. FitzGerald and Thomas Kenneally, who have written about the near rebellion and rebellion that took place in the colony in 1800 and 1804 respectively. In many ways this is the most interesting essay in the collection because it provides information about a situation that eurocentric writers and readers often know little about; it will clearly be of interest to the growing number of people reading and studying Australian literature.

Despite the common theme of the French Revolution the essays are quite varied in theme and it is unlikely that they will all appeal to everyone. The first two essays are of interest to students of 18th century English history, though the information contained in them could probably be obtained more comprehensively from one of the relevant books listed in the ample bibliography at the back of the collection. Similarly the essays on Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron and Browning are interesting in that they

offer a quick survey of the Romantic poets' attitudes to the French Revolution, but it is information widely available elsewhere. For people interested in a brief history of Toussaint Louverture the quoted article by Paul Foot is very clear, though without Professor Hickey's literary legacy section. «Botany Bay», as I have said, is interesting for European readers, though I think its connection with the French Revolution is a little tenuous. What Professor Hickey *has* succeeded in doing is to bring together a large body of writing, poetry in particular, which relates to European colonialism and the struggles against it. Opposition to colonialism and injustice, whether coming from Englishmen or from the colonised themselves may have been encouraged by the French Revolution, but it can hardly have been its only inspiration or the American Declaration of Independence could not have happened in 1776. Perhaps what the essays and the works quoted in them are really about is the post-lapsarian desire of people to run their own lives.

B.P.