

# 'Liberty has an Asylum': John Jebb, British Radicalism and the American Revolution

ANTHONY PAGE

*University of Tasmania*

## Abstract

Through a close examination of how a leading English radical perceived the conflict between colonies and parliament, this article adds to our understanding of the process in which the American Revolution influenced the ideology and confidence of British radicals. The example set by the Americans encouraged John Jebb in his agitation for radical religious, educational and political reform, and led him to advocate universal manhood suffrage. Jebb imagined that America was a bastion of enlightened civic virtue, an impression strengthened by his acquaintance with the first American minister to Britain, John Adams.

Historians have traditionally depicted British opinion as largely unified in opposition to the American Revolution. A greater awareness, however, is developing of the vigorous ideological debate that erupted in Britain, characterized by philosophical and theological divisions between pro-government imperialists and radical 'Friends of America'.<sup>1</sup> This article seeks to add to our growing understanding of how the stance taken by the American colonies affected the development of British radicalism through a close examination of John Jebb (1736–86), a particularly energetic and prominent Rational Dissenter and political activist.

I wish to thank Harry Dickinson, R. K. Webb, Wilfrid Prest and Damien Powell for their helpful and encouraging comments during the process of writing this article.

<sup>1</sup> J. C. D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty 1660–1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World* (Cambridge, 1994) [hereafter Clark, *Language of Liberty*]; H. T. Dickinson, *The Politics of the People in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York, 1994); J. G. A. Pocock, *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776* (Baltimore, 1979); idem, *Virtue, Commerce and History: Essays in Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985) [hereafter Pocock, *Virtue*]; idem (ed.), *The Varieties of British Political Thought 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 1993); Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995); John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976); Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York, 1988); John Phillip Reid, *Constitutional History of the American Revolution*, 4 vols. (Madison, WI, 1986–93).

In the years following the accession of George III in 1760 there were some in the British parliament who opposed certain specific government measures with respect to America, but there was no effective formal opposition to the doctrine of parliament's sovereignty over the colonies. This fact, in conjunction with the surge in vocal loyalism that followed the outbreak of hostilities in 1775, has led some historians to believe that the British people followed their parliament in being largely supportive of imperial policy. Thus, Peter Thomas has claimed: 'There was no fund of goodwill in Britain towards the colonies, and an almost universal belief in Britain's right to exercise full sovereignty over them through parliament.'<sup>2</sup> It has long been recognized that some articulate Rational Dissenters voiced sympathies for the Americans, but these have often been written off as a 'hothead minority' who had little support outside their friends and congregations.<sup>3</sup> Recent studies of public opinion, however, point towards a more divided Britain with urban Rational Dissenters and artisans forming a vocal and solid core of support for the colonists.<sup>4</sup> Far from being an isolated and irrelevant intelligentsia, the leading lights of Rational Dissent were well connected, widely respected and influential.<sup>5</sup>

Harry Dickinson has correctly observed that 'the American Revolution had a much greater impact upon the British friends of America than has been generally recognized.'<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the colonists exerted a profound influence upon both the ideology and confidence of British radicals. Between 1760 and the 1790s there was a shift from a country to a radical critique of the prevailing political order. Prior to the 1760s British critics argued that the remedy for perceived political corruption was more frequent elections and a redistribution of parliamentary seats to the large counties and populous towns. The American cry of 'no taxation without representation', however, led British radicals to consider the nature of representation. The result was a shift in emphasis away from the traditional appeal to the historic rights of Englishmen towards calls for wider representation based upon natural rights. The American Revolution also provided British radicals with a tremendous source of inspiration. In standing up for their rights the colonists seemed to have demonstrated

<sup>2</sup> Peter D. G. Thomas, *British Politics and the Stamp Act Crisis* (Oxford, 1975), p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (1982), p. 181; see also, Colin Bonwick, *English Radicals and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> James E. Bradley, *Popular Politics and the American Revolution in England: Petitions, the Crown and Public Opinion* (Cambridge, 1986); idem, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism: Nonconformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1990); idem, 'The British Public and the American Revolution: Ideology, Interest and Opinion', *Britain and the American Revolution*, ed. H. T. Dickinson (1998) [hereafter Dickinson, *Britain and American Revolution*], pp. 124–54; John Sainsbury, *Disaffected Patriots: London Supporters of Revolutionary America, 1769–1782* (Montreal, 1987) [hereafter Sainsbury, *Disaffected Patriots*]; H. T. Dickinson, 'The Friends of America': British Sympathy with the American Revolution', *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain, 1775–1848*, ed. Michael T. Davis (2000) [hereafter Dickinson, 'Friends of America'], pp. 1–29.

<sup>5</sup> John Seed, '“A Set of Men Powerful Enough in Many Things”: Rational Dissent and Political Opposition in England, 1770–1790', *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 140–68.

<sup>6</sup> Dickinson, 'Friends of America', p. 20.

that ancient civic virtues could be revived, and that political reform could be undertaken without a descent into anarchy.<sup>7</sup> In his use of both historical and natural rights arguments to support universal manhood suffrage, John Jebb provides a particularly sharp insight into the process of this ideological change and shows how the American Revolution helped to radicalize an influential Englishman.

## I

Jebb began his career as a clergyman and academic at Cambridge in the 1760s where he taught mathematics and philosophy, and acted as university examiner. Critical study of the Bible led him to reject the Trinity as a theological invention of the early Church. He attracted the disapproval of university authorities when he proceeded to deliver lectures on the Greek New Testament in which he aired his Socinian views. In the early 1770s Jebb became a leading figure in organizing the Feathers Tavern petition, which requested that parliament remove the requirement that Church of England clergy subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles. When it became evident that the efforts of the petitioning clergy were to no avail, Jebb turned his attention to education reform, seeking to broaden the curriculum and introduce annual examinations for all students. But Jebb became increasingly marginalized at Cambridge, a situation exacerbated by his open support for the American colonists. In 1776 he moved to London to undertake the study and practice of medicine, and proceeded to make his mark on radical politics.

Late eighteenth-century radicals began to campaign for reform of the House of Commons. They demanded more frequent elections, redistribution of electorates and a broadening of the franchise.<sup>8</sup> During the 1770s a number of writers had suggested that the British people should form political associations in order to petition for reform. As the conflict with the colonists dragged on and Britain found itself at war with France, dissatisfaction spread. In these conditions a popular movement calling for parliamentary reform developed at the end of 1779.<sup>9</sup> Starting in Yorkshire under the inspiration of Christopher Wyvill, it soon spread to Westminster where more radical views were soon propagated. At this point Jebb published *An Address to the Freeholders of Middlesex* in which he put forward the radical argument that the people could, through forming a national convention of delegates from county political associations, force the corrupt House of Commons to reform itself. According to Herbert Butterfield, this tract contained 'the extreme statement – indeed we might say the most comprehensive statement that was made at this

<sup>7</sup> See 'Introduction' in Dickinson, *Britain and American Revolution*, pp. 18–20.

<sup>8</sup> John Cannon, *Parliamentary Reform 1640–1832* (Cambridge, 1973).

<sup>9</sup> Ian R. Christie, *Wilkes, Wyvill and Reform: The Parliamentary Reform Movement in British Politics, 1760–1785* (1962) [hereafter Christie, *Reform*]; Eugene C. Black, *The Association: British Extra-parliamentary Political Organization 1769–1793* (Cambridge, MA, 1963).

time – of the doctrine and programme of the Association, as the radical leaders understood it'.<sup>10</sup> Jebb dismissed petitioning as ineffective and declared that 'the people' should 'new-model the constitution, and punish, with exemplary vigour, every person with whom they have entrusted power, provided, in their opinion, he shall be found to have betrayed that trust'. To such strong words Jebb added that the people could go further and change the contemporary form of government.<sup>11</sup> The simple but radical constitutional goal Jebb advocated for the Association movement was 'equal, annual and universal representation of the Commons'.<sup>12</sup>

Jebb proceeded to pursue this goal by helping Major John Cartwright to form the Society for Constitutional Information in April 1780. Its aim was to disseminate *gratis* short pamphlets and extracts from classic texts in order to enlighten Englishmen as to their constitutional rights. Jebb played a key role in the Westminster Committee, a centre for metropolitan agitation presided over by Charles James Fox. Jebb also drafted the influential *Report of the Sub-Committee of Westminster* (1780), which drew attention to the inequities of electoral distribution. The latter set forth demands that became the basic platform of British radicalism until the mid-nineteenth century: equal electorates, annual elections, universal manhood suffrage, secret ballot, abolition of property qualifications for MPs and salaries for MPs.<sup>13</sup>

When the first American minister to St James's Palace, John Adams, arrived in London in 1785 he told Jebb: 'I have long wanted to Communicate with some of the enlightened Friends of Liberty here . . . and I know of none who merit the Character better.'<sup>14</sup> This recognition of Jebb's important role in the reform movement was echoed twenty-seven years after his death by the conservative critic John Nichols, who wrote: 'No name is better known among the advocates for Parliamentary Reform, than that of Dr. Jebb.'<sup>15</sup> While he is referred to in contemporary studies of the religious, educational and political controversies, however, an extended modern study of Jebb has yet to find its way into print. This probably owes much to the fact that he was primarily an agitator and organizer. Rather than invest his energies in penning a major political treatise, Jebb preferred to write pamphlets, chair committees and encourage others to support his favourite causes. Nevertheless, Jebb provides an excellent subject through which to study ideas in their context. While he did not

<sup>10</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *George III, Lord North and the People* (1949), p. 191.

<sup>11</sup> John Jebb, *Address to the Freeholders of Middlesex* (December 1779), in *The Works: Theological, Medical, Political and Miscellaneous of John Jebb, MD. FRS., with a Life of the Author*, ed. John Disney (3 vols., 1787), ii. 461, 469. Volume 1 is divided into two parts with separate pagination. The first part (John Disney's memoir of Jebb) is hereafter cited as: *Life of John Jebb*. The second part is simply cited as: Jebb i. The other two volumes are cited hereafter as: Jebb ii and Jebb iii.

<sup>12</sup> Jebb ii. 482, 490, 486, 483.

<sup>13</sup> 'Report of the Sub-Committee of Westminster' (May 1780), in S. Maccoby, *The English Radical Tradition, 1763–1914* (New York, 1957), pp. 34–9.

<sup>14</sup> Massachusetts Historical Society, Adams Papers, John Adams to John Jebb [hereafter 'JJ'], 21 Aug. 1785.

<sup>15</sup> John Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century* (7 vols., 1813), ii. 711, 571–2.

make a significant original contribution to the history of ideas, his politics were grounded in a distinctive religious and philosophical disposition. Thus, a study of Jebb's life and work illuminates some of the ideological origins and nature of radical activism in late Enlightenment Britain.

There has been heated debate over the origins of British radical thought. Traditionally historians pointed to the influence of John Locke's contract theory of government upon a rising middle class.<sup>16</sup> Others have characterized eighteenth-century critics of government as fundamentally conservative and backward-looking – inspired by John Milton's 'Good Old Cause' and the myth of the ancient constitution.<sup>17</sup> More recently, Jonathan Clark has argued that political opposition to an Anglican-dominated 'confessional state' was rooted (and could only be rooted) in theological dissent.<sup>18</sup> Jebb can (and has) been used to support all three views. A self-confessed disciple of Locke in religion, philosophy and politics, he worked hard to increase the political participation of the 'middling sort'. At the same time his writings were drenched with appeals to the historical rights of freeborn Englishmen and the virtues of their ancient Saxon constitution, so much so that Gerald Newman has argued that 'Cartwright and Jebb were not only agitators but historical folklorists'.<sup>19</sup> Finally, Clark has assumed that Jebb the Socinian, who walked away from the Church of England, is obvious evidence for his thesis that radicalism was an outgrowth of heterodoxy.<sup>20</sup> My study of Jebb suggests that there is truth in all three perspectives, while attempting to sketch a more sympathetic and subtle picture of his ideology.<sup>21</sup> In doing this I have emphasized the important influence of David Hartley's seminal *Observations*

<sup>16</sup> For contemporary statements of this view see: Isaac Kramnick, 'Religion and Radicalism: English Political Theory in the Age of Revolutions', *Political Theory*, v (1977), 505–34; idem, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America* (Ithaca, 1990); Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> The foremost exponent of this view in relation to the British context is J. G. A. Pocock, 'Machiavelli, Harrington, and English Political Ideologies in the Eighteenth Century', *William and Mary Quarterly*, xx (1965), 549–83; idem, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975); idem, 'The Machiavellian Moment Revisited: A Study in History and Ideology', *Journal of Modern History*, liii (1981), 49–72; idem, *Virtue, Commerce and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985); idem, 'Conservative Enlightenment and Democratic Revolutions: The American and French Cases in British Perspective', *Government and Opposition*, xxiv (1989), 81–105; idem (ed.), *The Varieties of British Political Thought 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 1993); see also Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1967) [hereafter, Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*].

<sup>18</sup> J. C. D. Clark, 'Eighteenth-Century Social History', *The Historical Journal*, xxvii (1984), 773–88; idem, *English Society, 1688–1832* (Cambridge, 1985) [hereafter Clark, *English Society*]; idem, *Revolution and Rebellion* (Cambridge, 1986); idem, 'On Hitting the Buffers: The Historiography of England's Ancien Regime. A Response', *Past and Present*, cxvii (1987), 195–207; idem, 'England's Ancien Regime as a Confessional State', *Albion*, xxi (1989), 450–74.

<sup>19</sup> Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History 1740–1830* (1987), p. 183.

<sup>20</sup> Clark, *English Society*, pp. 312–15.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Page, 'Enlightened Patriot: John Jebb and Dissent in England, 1760–1785' (PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 1999) [hereafter Page, 'Enlightened Patriot']; idem, 'Enlightenment and a "Second Reformation": The Religion and Philosophy of John Jebb (1736–86)', *Enlightenment and Dissent*, xvii (1998), 48–82.

on *Man* (1749). A friend of Jebb's father, Hartley sought to marry an unorthodox Protestant belief in universal salvation with determinism and a hedonist moral philosophy. Hartley's utilitarian theory of the mind was to exert a profound influence on subsequent English philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham and Joseph Priestley.<sup>22</sup> It led Jebb to espouse, in an English Unitarian version, the Enlightenment's confident belief in the potential for physical and moral progress. It was Jebb's combined theological and philosophical position that enabled him to reject orthodox theology without fear of undermining Christianity. Indeed, he believed that only a purified and enlightened Christianity could win the genuine assent of men and women in the modern age. To support his religious, educational and political reform efforts, Jebb freely appealed to historical rights, natural rights and utilitarian arguments without doubts about coherence or consistency. He was able to do this because of his particular determinist philosophy and unflagging faith in Divine Providence. God, he believed, could not have designed a universe in which right and utility were not in harmony.<sup>23</sup>

## II

Jebb commenced his academic and clerical career at Cambridge under a new king. Britain had victoriously concluded the Seven Years War, and new stresses and strains were entering politics, including an increase in extra-parliamentary agitation. The duke of Newcastle and some of the old Whig families who had dominated government for forty years found themselves in opposition, and began to claim that Scottish and 'Tory' advisers were guiding and misleading the king.<sup>24</sup> A storm erupted when the government began to prosecute the charismatic John Wilkes for publishing a libel against the king. Popular protest in support of Wilkes also championed the cause of the American colonists who were complaining against the heavy-handed attempt to tax them.<sup>25</sup>

The election for a new high steward of Cambridge University in 1764 became a heated battle between government and opposition. As chancellor of the university, Newcastle used all the influence he could muster to ensure that his nominee narrowly defeated the ministerial candidate,

<sup>22</sup> R. K. Webb, 'Perspectives on David Hartley', *Enlightenment and Dissent*, 17 (1998), 17–47; Richard C. Allen, *David Hartley on Human Nature* (New York, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> Page, 'Enlightened Patriot'. See also: Naomi C. Miller's entry on Jebb in the *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals*, ed. Joseph O. Baylen and Norbert J. Grossman (4 vols., Salem, NH, 1979–88) [hereafter *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals*], i, 259–65; Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman: Studies in the Transmission, Development and Circumstance of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II until the War with the Thirteen Colonies* (Cambridge, MA, 1959), pp. 370–3; John Gascoigne has written an excellent forthcoming entry on Jebb in the *New Dictionary of National Biography*.

<sup>24</sup> In a sense the main parliamentary distinction that developed was between those Whigs who would do the king's bidding and those who expected the king to leave government in their hands: Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989), p. 345.

<sup>25</sup> George Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty* (1962).

Lord Sandwich. Against this background Jebb married in late 1764, and with an eye to future promotion it was in his interests to tread lightly with respect to politics. Yet he chose to campaign for Newcastle with a 'zeal [that] appeared preposterous in the eyes even of the party which I served'.<sup>26</sup> Even at this early stage it was evident that Jebb's commitments went further than loyalty to the old Whig magnates, and extended to the extra-parliamentary radicalism that was forming around Wilkes and the American cause. During this time Jebb failed in his efforts to be appointed Professor of Arabic. While his abilities as a tutor and moderator of examinations were widely respected, Jebb's theological and political opinions had become controversial. To counter criticism of the government a loyal address by the university to the crown was voted upon in March 1769. Jebb was one of only two dons to cast votes against.<sup>27</sup> Such actions earned Jebb a reputation as 'a professed and eager defender of Mr. Wilkes'.<sup>28</sup>

The widespread extra-parliamentary nature of agitation associated with Wilkes and America in the 1760s marks it out as a new departure in English politics.<sup>29</sup> Jebb's outspoken opposition to government policy betrays an early interest in and commitment to radical politics. This is further indicated by his first acquaintance with Thomas Brand-Hollis (1719–1804) in 1767.<sup>30</sup> Thomas Brand was a close friend of Thomas Hollis (1720–74), the republican antiquarian whose name Brand adopted when he inherited Hollis's estate. Quiet and abstemious, Hollis has been described as an 'extraordinary one-man propaganda machine in the cause of liberty'.<sup>31</sup> Having inherited wealth, he spent it in printing, ornamenting and disseminating 'Commonwealthman' literature (by the likes of Milton, Harrington, Locke, Sidney, Molesworth and Trenchard), especially to his correspondents in America. Brand and Hollis had both been raised as Dissenters, and they spent time together during two visits to the continent between 1748 and 1753, where they met *philosophes* such as Voltaire, D'Alembert and Rousseau. These travels only strengthened their intense patriotism and reverence for the English libertarian heritage.<sup>32</sup> Thomas Brand was a follower and joiner, and after Hollis's death he seems to have looked to Jebb as his political guide. In many ways he acted as Jebb's lieutenant during the radical agitation of the early 1780s, and the Society for Constitutional Information was designed to carry on the work of his late mentor and benefactor.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>26</sup> British Library, Add. MSS 35,658, fo. 1, JJ to Lord Hardwicke, 22 Jan. 1769.

<sup>27</sup> *Life of John Jebb*, pp. 24–5.

<sup>28</sup> British Library, Add. MSS. 35,640, Thomas Rutherford to Lord Hardwicke, March 1769.

<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Rogers, 'Urban Opposition to Whig Oligarchy, 1720–60', *The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism*, ed. Margaret C. Jacob and James R. Jacob (1984) [hereafter Jacob, *Origins of Radicalism*], p. 165.

<sup>30</sup> *Life of John Jebb*, p. 235, Thomas Brand-Hollis to John Disney, 12 March 1786.

<sup>31</sup> Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, p. 40.

<sup>32</sup> Caroline Robbins, 'The Strenuous Whig: Thomas Hollis of Lincoln's Inn', *William and Mary Quarterly*, vii (1950), 406–53.

<sup>33</sup> Colin Bonwick, 'Thomas Brand-Hollis (1719–1804)', *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals*, i. 61.

## III

Jebb imagined America to be a bastion of religious liberty. In the early 1770s he was a prime mover in the failed campaign to remove the requirement that Anglican clergy subscribe to a belief in the orthodox creed. During this time Jebb corresponded with Samuel Henley, an acquaintance who had sailed out to Virginia as an Anglican priest. As minister to a congregation of Cambridge Dissenters in 1768, Henley had become a Socinian. Convinced that he could legitimately interpret the Thirty-Nine Articles with a degree of latitude, Jebb supported Henley's application for ordination in the Church of England.<sup>34</sup> In 1770 Henley arrived in Virginia to take up a chair at the College of William and Mary. He soon became a stubborn opponent of efforts to appoint a bishop for the colony. In this he found powerful support among the Virginian gentry, and the British government decided to withdraw support for the proposal.<sup>35</sup>

It was a different story, however, when Henley attacked bigotry and argued for a complete separation of church and state in a sermon before the House of Burgesses. This was a provocative move in light of the increasing popularity of itinerant Baptist preachers. Many in the Virginia establishment were offended by this lecture on religious liberty. They were even more incensed when Henley proceeded to publish the sermon with a dedication praising John Jebb as an example to the Virginians.<sup>36</sup> The Whig gentlemen who governed Virginia were happy to use anti-authoritarian rhetoric against episcopacy, but they were still attached to the social order associated with and promoted by the Church of England. Henley offended many moderate Anglicans and was subject to a 'heresy hearing' in which his Socinian views were clearly revealed. He subsequently lost an election for the position as rector of Burton. He continued to harangue the members of the Burton vestry for the next two years, and made himself increasingly unpopular with the Virginia establishment. His ambitions frustrated, in an ironic twist Henley sided with the British when rebellion broke out and fled the colony on a Royal Navy ship. There is, however, no record of any contact with Jebb upon his return to England. Henley's example illustrates the complex role played by religion in the years before the war. The proposed appointment of an American bishop was identified as part of an authoritarian imperial policy. Yet most of the Virginian establishment (and thus many who rebelled) remained theologically and socially conservative.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Fraser Neiman, 'Letters of William Gilpin to Samuel Henley', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, xxxv (1971–2), 159–69.

<sup>35</sup> Jack M. Sosin, 'The Proposal in the Pre-Revolutionary Decade for Establishing Anglican Bishops in the Colonies', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xiii (1962), 84.

<sup>36</sup> Samuel Henley, *The Distinct Claims of Government and Religion, Considered in a Sermon Preached before the Honourable House of Burgesses, at Williamsburg, in Virginia, March 1 1772* (Cambridge, 1772). This pamphlet was printed at Cambridge and possibly guided through the press by Jebb (Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1982) [hereafter Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*], p. 222).

<sup>37</sup> Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, pp. 181–240.

Jebb saw America as pointing the way to a more enlightened future for the whole world. In light of the exertions of Samuel Henley, he reflected:

The Americans, I am sensible, have much to learn with respect to religious liberty. We have been, I trust, of service in this particular; we have brought forth the principles of their and our adversaries into full view, and have exhibited the form of true Protestantism, which they may improve by, if they please.<sup>38</sup>

Following the end of the conflict, Jebb praised the support for religious toleration enshrined in the American state constitutions, and in particular that of Maryland. In 1783 he eagerly assumed that American reality conformed to constitutional rhetoric: 'The exertions of the human intellect are there unfettered by those iniquitous restraints which dishonour European climes: every man, therefore, lives in charity with his neighbour, and the rage of proselytism is unknown.'<sup>39</sup>

#### IV

When it became evident that the efforts of the Feathers Tavern petition to reform the Church of England were doomed to fail, Jebb turned his attention to improving the quality of education provided at Cambridge for the clergy and politicians of the future. In 1773 he first proposed that the University hold annual examinations of all students (including the sons of the aristocracy). This was defeated by the narrowest of margins. The defeat was generally ascribed to a combination of fear that the power of the colleges would be undermined and deep prejudice against Jebb on the part of some heads of houses.<sup>40</sup> As hostilities broke out in America Jebb found himself increasingly isolated and frustrated at Cambridge. In contrast, his close friend and collaborator, Theophilus Lindsey, had left the Church to establish a Unitarian chapel in London. This became a haven for religious and political dissenters.<sup>41</sup> The example set by the Americans, and his association with their supporters in London, boosted Jebb's confidence and commitment to radical reform during personally trying times.

Benjamin Franklin called his favourite dining group at the London Coffee House the 'Club of Honest Whigs'. Founded in the early 1760s, this group was an intellectual engine-room of opposition to the administration and support for America. Its members were predominantly Dissenters, with a large contingent of clergy and schoolmasters. The core members were leading Dissenters such as the philosopher Richard Price,

<sup>38</sup> *Life of John Jebb*, p. 96.

<sup>39</sup> JJ, 25 Oct. 1783, in *Address to the Volunteers of Ireland*, Jebb ii. 544–5.

<sup>40</sup> D. A. Winstanley, *Unreformed Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1935).

<sup>41</sup> G. M. Ditchfield, 'The Subscription Issue in British Parliamentary Politics, 1772–79', *Parliamentary History*, vii (1988), 45–80.

the moralist and political writer James Burgh, and the famous polymath Joseph Priestley.<sup>42</sup> It is probable that Jebb's friend, Theophilus Lindsey, dined with the club when he took up residence in London, as he was closely connected with both Priestley and Franklin.<sup>43</sup> On 17 January 1775 Lindsey related that 'I dined yesterday . . . with Drs. Price, Franklin, Priestley, and Mr. Quincey: no bad company you will say. We began and ended with the Americans.'<sup>44</sup> Did Jebb attend the Club of Honest Whigs? It is clear that he had had at least some contact with Thomas Hollis's band of Real Whigs in the late 1760s. If Lindsey began attending the Club of Honest Whigs when he settled in London, it seems reasonable to speculate that Jebb accompanied him when visiting the capital. On 5 February 1775, a few weeks after he had dined with the Honest Whigs, Lindsey informed a friend that: 'Mr. Jebb has been with me a fortnight', and was 'miserable in the Church trammels – never does any duty – and will quit as soon as ever he can.'<sup>45</sup> Perhaps at this time (with troops drilling in Hyde Park before embarking for America), Jebb found encouragement among like-minded company on a Thursday evening at the London Coffee House. It seems likely that he began to dine each fortnight with the Honest Whigs once he moved to London.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Jebb was evidently acquainted with Benjamin Franklin, to whom he wrote a letter of introduction for two young friends who were to visit Paris. The American 'first inquired particularly after Dr. Jebb' and 'seemed much pleased' with Jebb's 'noble sentiments on the American war'.<sup>47</sup> Jebb's visits to London, where he could dine with friends and meet eminent intellectuals, must have contrasted sharply with life at Cambridge, where his career prospects had been frustrated by entrenched conservative opponents.

In 1774 the Americans were hoping for a British Revolution that would reconstitute the government, but they had limited support among the British electorate.<sup>48</sup> Yet there were encouraging signs of support from leading Rational Dissenters, and reaction to the Quebec Act, which recognized French Civil Law and the Catholic Church in Canada, saw a revival of flagging pro-American sentiment. Jebb read Francis Maseres's

<sup>42</sup> Verner W. Crane, 'The Club of Honest Whigs: Friends of Science and Liberty', *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxiii (1966) [hereafter Crane, 'Club of Honest Whigs'], 210–33.

<sup>43</sup> Lindsey noted in May 1774 that 'Dr. Priestley leaves us on Sunday night – to my great concern and distress – I have seldom missed a day seeing him . . . he has been my most singular friend and promoter of my ease and interest' (Dr Williams's Library, Lindsey–Turner correspondence, Theophilus Lindsey to William Turner, 5 May 1774).

<sup>44</sup> Crane, 'Club of Honest Whigs,' p. 222; H. McLachlan, *Letters of Theophilus Lindsey* (Manchester, 1920) [hereafter McLachlan, *Letters of Lindsey*], p. 79.

<sup>45</sup> Dr Williams's Library, Lindsey–Turner correspondence, Lindsey to Turner, 5 Feb. 1775.

<sup>46</sup> Jebb's former student, friend and biographer, John Disney, did so when he settled in the metropolis – in Feb. 1783, he went with Andrew Kippis 'to the Club at London Coff[ee] Ho[use] which was the first time after my election. The Meeting large, and agreeable' (Dr Williams's Library, MSS, John Disney, 'Diary', 6 Feb. 1783).

<sup>47</sup> John Baynes, 'Journal', 27 Aug. and 15 Sept. 1783, attached as an appendix to Samuel Romilly, *The Life of Sir Samuel Romilly* (1842) [hereafter Romilly, *Life*], p. 447.

<sup>48</sup> Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of Opposition to Britain, 1765–1776* (New York, 1973) [hereafter Maier, *Resistance to Revolution*], pp. 246–63.

tract attacking the Quebec Act and later described it as a 'shame to patriotism'.<sup>49</sup> In the autumn of 1774 the Continental Congress addressed the British people, warning that the government sought control over American lives and property so that it could 'with greater facility enslave you', and expressed the hope that the British people would elect a parliament 'of such wisdom, independence and public spirit, as may save the violated rights of the whole empire'.<sup>50</sup> Toward the end of the year public opinion seemed impressed by the firmness of the American stand. But hopes that a new parliament would address colonial grievances were dashed when Lord North called a surprise election to take advantage of relatively passive public sentiment in September 1774. The general election witnessed few heated contests and returned a favourable outcome for the government.<sup>51</sup> Dissenters were disappointed by the result. A former student assured Jebb that the new parliament would have its work cut out dealing with America, and speculated that in the future Britain would be a province in the 'Empire of America'.<sup>52</sup>

Reflecting upon his own brushes with authority, Jebb hoped that the Americans would act positively. Following the 1774 election he wrote to a friend that a 'very sensible letter in the *Ledger* of yesterday, shows the absurdity of petitioning for redress; the most vigorous measures are best; the English Ministry must feel, before they will repent'.<sup>53</sup> A further fault of petitions, he added, was that the length of time they took to organize, submit, and be discussed allowed the government 'an opportunity of trying their usual arts of conquering by division'.<sup>54</sup> He had not yet seen the 'Address' by the Congress, but hoped the Americans would 'go the whole ground at once, and yet leave matters open for an accommodation. The only way to avoid bloodshed is for the Americans to show their resolution in the first instance'.<sup>55</sup> In December he reiterated his desire that the Americans pursue their demands through peaceful and legal means, such as a complete suspension of trade.<sup>56</sup>

Jebb's dissatisfaction with the Church and increasing alienation at Cambridge, set against the background of rebellion in America, led him to resign from his Church livings in the summer of 1775. Cambridge 'swarms' with Tories, he complained, unopposed by 'prostitute' and 'slumbering Whigs'.<sup>57</sup> At the age of forty he moved to London and began to attend medical lectures while studying as an apprentice at St. Bartholomew's Hospital. By 1779 he had established a private

<sup>49</sup> 'Treatatus' [JJ], 2 Aug. 1785, Jebb iii. 387.

<sup>50</sup> Maier, *Resistance to Revolution*, p. 249.

<sup>51</sup> Sainsbury, *Disaffected Patriots*, p. 69.

<sup>52</sup> Dr Williams's Library, Blackburne-Lindsey correspondence, Thomas Blackburne to JJ, 14 Oct. 1774.

<sup>53</sup> Letter dated 17 Nov. 1774 cited in *Life of John Jebb*, p. 86.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Letter dated 3 Dec. 1774 cited in *ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>57</sup> JJ to [?], 26 Oct. 1775 cited in *ibid.*, p. 109.

medical practice and was beginning to devote his spare time to political agitation.

When John and Ann Jebb left Cambridge in the summer of 1775 their thoughts were preoccupied with the outbreak of war in America, which they 'supposed must be decisive of the liberties of both countries'. In July, Jebb wrote of the American situation: 'I now begin to despair of an accommodation; that country however will be free, and this must go backwards, perhaps to its original state of barbarity.' On the brighter side, he reflected, the American rebellion meant that 'Liberty has an asylum on that continent', adding, rather optimistically, that 'the abominable slave trade will, I trust, be abolished'.<sup>58</sup> For some years after the Declaration of Independence, British radicals continued to hope that some form of compromise could be reached which would preserve the Empire. In 1780 Jebb still hoped that a federal union with the American states was possible.<sup>59</sup> But eventually the reality of independence had to be accepted. When the American envoy, John Adams, visited London and moved in radical circles in late 1783, after the end of the war, the best that could be hoped for was the establishment of friendly relations and the swift resumption of mutually beneficial commerce.<sup>60</sup>

## V

In challenging the authority of the British parliament the Americans and their supporters drew upon natural rights arguments and the radical Whig and Dissenting traditions. The American patriot Benjamin Rush wrote to an English friend in 1774: 'We are enraged at our being considered the "subjects" of the House of Commons.'<sup>61</sup> The right to participate in the legislative process was not a dry and unemotional notion for the likes of Rush and Jebb. The thing that distinguished English culture, they thought, was that independent men had the *right* and *duty* to make their own laws.<sup>62</sup> Conflict between parliament and the colonies encouraged examination of the theory and practice of this cultural assumption. The American colonies already had a relatively broad popular involvement in their governance and they confronted a stark choice between the authority of their own colonial assemblies and that of a parliament elected in Britain. As a result there was little need to theorize about the nature of representation during the Revolution. For the Americans it was essentially a matter of liberating themselves from the authority of the British parliament, and then formally drafting their various state constitutions in which many (including many white males) were excluded from the

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>59</sup> Jebb ii. 484.

<sup>60</sup> McLachlan, *Letters of Lindsey*, p. 86.

<sup>61</sup> Benjamin Rush to Granville Sharp, 9 July 1774, in John A. Woods, 'Correspondence of Benjamin Rush and Granville Sharp', *Journal of American Studies*, i (1967), 8.

<sup>62</sup> Jack Green, 'The American Revolution', *The American Historical Review*, cv (2000), 93–102.

franchise. Some British thinkers, however, both geographically and culturally closer to the seat of authority, were led to examine the nuts and bolts of their electoral system. In doing so, some began to advocate universal manhood suffrage in works that had a profound influence upon Jebb.<sup>63</sup>

One of the earliest and most important tracts to question the structure of the British electorate was Obadiah Hulme's *Historical Essay on the English Constitution* (1771). The book has been described by one historian as 'a powerful polemic, resting on and drawing all its authority from a mountain of historical and pseudo historical fact'.<sup>64</sup> Hulme claimed that since the Norman Conquest, and especially since the Revolution of 1688, legislative innovations had caused a 'total change in the spirit and temper of our government'.<sup>65</sup> Government and the House of Commons had at length become captive to the interests of the monarchy and aristocracy, and thus laws were made in favour of those 'rich in land'. 'Much has been writ about patriotic kings, and patriotic ministers,' he thundered, 'but give me leave to tell the good people of England, that it is all PATRIOTIC NONSENSE.'<sup>66</sup> The only remedy for the 'present discontents' was a return to the Anglo-Saxon constitution in which representation was more equal and parliaments elected annually. 'Where annual election ends, there Slavery begins', he declared, arguing that 'constitutional clubs' should be formed in each parish to pass resolutions calling for the reform of parliament.<sup>67</sup> As Christopher Hill has observed, the *Historical Essay* had 'a remarkable vogue' and radicals propounded its basic ideas until it became a pillar of Victorian historiography.<sup>68</sup>

In his *Political Disquisitions* (1774–5) James Burgh was more democratic and more precise in discussing the means by which reform could be effected. A Dissenter, schoolmaster and friend of Richard Price, he had been calling for political and moral reform since the late 1740s. Burgh had initially placed his faith in the prospect of a 'patriot king', but with the accession of George III he became increasingly disillusioned with those who wielded political power. Like many of his contemporaries, the debate over representation occasioned by conflict between the colonists and parliament led him to explore the radical implications of Locke's contractual theory of government. In his *Political Disquisitions* Burgh outlined three main grievances: that parliament was unrepresentative; that the political process was corrupt; and that elections were too infrequent. 'Every man', he argued, 'has a life, a personal liberty, a character, a right to his earnings, a right to a religious profession and worship according to his conscience.' Thus, the franchise should be based upon personality

<sup>63</sup> Clark, *Language of Liberty*, pp. 143, 310, 338–9.

<sup>64</sup> Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History* (1987), p. 185.

<sup>65</sup> Obadiah Hulme, *An Historical Essay on the English Constitution* (1771), pp. ii–iv.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* iii. 79–147, 150.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* iii. 161.

<sup>68</sup> Christopher Hill, 'The Norman Yoke', in *idem, Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution in the Seventeenth Century* (1958), pp. 111–12.

rather than property.<sup>69</sup> Hulme did not address the issue of what to do if parliament ignored public pressure to reform. Burgh suggested that a national convention consisting of delegates from county assemblies could force parliament to reform.<sup>70</sup> It was this idea that Jebb was to state more explicitly during the political crisis of 1780.

The arguments of Hulme and Burgh inspired the British supporters of America at a time when loyalist support was widespread. Hulme had argued that London would have to take the lead in mobilizing a movement of reform associations. In the summer of 1775 the former schoolmaster, Thomas Joel, a passionate supporter of the Americans and freedom of the press, formed the London Association in order to rally pro-American sentiment. George III's proclamation that the American colonies were in a state of rebellion was aimed at suppressing such dissent within Britain. Six days after the proclamation Jebb wrote to Lindsey requesting 'facts' as to the nature and authenticity of the London Association, from which he had received a circular letter. 'I am heartily disposed to exert all my powers in support of so just a cause,' he wrote, 'I think it my duty at present to argue in support of our invalid rights, regardless of a proclamation, which on all occasions and in all companies I treat with the most marked contempt.'<sup>71</sup> The London Association was composed largely of tradesmen, and its championing of revolutionary principles and the ancient constitution only succeeded in encouraging a surge of loyalist support for the government. There is no indication that Jebb became involved with this group, which maintained a 'precarious existence' until it dissolved in February 1777.<sup>72</sup>

While organized support for the Americans was not forthcoming, the 'friends of liberty' kept up a vocal criticism of the government. In the year when independence was declared, Richard Price published his enormously popular *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty*, in which he called for moral and political reform in Britain. In the same year John Cartwright published *Take Your Choice!* in which he called upon the British people to support their American cousins. Cartwright passionately argued that the remedy for political corruption was to base elections for the House of Commons on universal manhood suffrage. This radical measure, he claimed, would be a revival of ancient Saxon practice.<sup>73</sup> It was on the strength of their common views that Jebb and Cartwright struck up an abiding friendship. Both believed that the conflict tearing the Empire apart was caused by an unrepresentative British government. Cartwright described Jebb as the 'friend of my bosom and pattern of my

<sup>69</sup> James Burgh, *Political Disquisitions* (3 vols., 1774–5) [hereafter Burgh, *Political Disquisitions*], i. 24, 38. Burgh took his democratic arguments from Locke and probably Joseph Priestley's more theoretical *First Principles of Government* (1768); Christie, *Reform*, p. 55.

<sup>70</sup> Burgh, *Political Disquisitions*, i. 6.

<sup>71</sup> Dr Williams's Library, *Illustrated Life of Priestley*, fo. 204, JJ to Theophilus Lindsey, 29 Aug. 1775.

<sup>72</sup> Sainsbury, *Disaffected Patriots*, pp. 106–13.

<sup>73</sup> John Cartwright, *Legislative Rights of the Commonality Vindicated, or Take Your Choice!* (1776; 2nd edn. 1780).

conduct'.<sup>74</sup> For his part, Jebb acknowledged that 'the incomparable publications of Major Cartwright' had led him to support universal suffrage.<sup>75</sup> In a sense, Cartwright became the pen and Jebb the leading organizer of the London radicals centred on the Society for Constitutional Information.

British radicals envisioned America as a repository of the robust, masculine, virtuous and independent spirit they thought was fading away in England. In August 1782, Jebb wrote:

To American resistance, I owe, under heaven, that I now enjoy the freedom of my person, . . . I remember the time when I gloried in the name of Englishman. Whatever was generous, manly, and humane, seemed, by nature, associated to that much loved sound. I thought it virtue to believe, that my country was the peculiar care of heaven; and my ear hung delighted on the accents that pronounced her praise. It is, therefore, with pain inexpressible, that I now behold a nation, once ruled over by the immortal Alfred, the birth-place of Milton, and Hampden, and a Sidney, dishonoured and degraded by deeds of foul injustice; sunk in inglorious luxury and ease; unmindful of its former generous spirit; eager, at the call of despotism, to destroy the liberties of its more virtuous brethren; incapable of being roused, by the thousand dangers that surround her, and the fair example of her sister kingdom, to defend her own.<sup>76</sup>

The American Revolution could be seen as of universal importance. Jebb congratulated Benjamin Franklin on the end of 'a contest that, for seven years, agitated my mind with feelings not to be described'.<sup>77</sup> He thought that in the 'glorious institutions' of America 'the human species will, at last, obtain an asylum; and every individual be permitted to enjoy a larger proportion of civil and religious liberty, than hath been indulged in any age or clime'.<sup>78</sup> After his migration to America in 1784, Walter Pollard, a young barrister and member of the Society for Constitutional Information, continued to correspond with his friend Thomas Day, and to pass on his respects to Jebb. Pollard soon became disillusioned by the degree to which the American reality failed in comparison to his idealistic pre-conceptions. Day claimed to have been less 'subject to enthusiasm than some of my friends' when it came to the nature of American virtue and liberty.<sup>79</sup> Jebb, no doubt, was one of those enthusiastic friends – a man for whom America was a living model of civic virtue.

## VI

Herbert Butterfield once argued that Britain came close to revolution in 1780.<sup>80</sup> This view has since been discredited. Despite the strong language

<sup>74</sup> *The Life and Correspondence of Major Cartwright*, ed. F. D. Cartwright (2 vols., 1826), i. 165.

<sup>75</sup> John Jebb, *A Letter to Sir Robert Bernard, Chairman of the Huntingdonshire Committee* (1781), in Jebb ii. 509.

<sup>76</sup> 'Alfred' [JJ], 26 Aug. 1782, Jebb iii. 341–2.

<sup>77</sup> *Life of John Jebb*, p. 188. For Franklin's favourable reception of the letter see Romilly, *Life*, p. 449.

<sup>78</sup> 'Laelius' [JJ], [Oct.?] 1782, Jebb iii. 361.

<sup>79</sup> British Library, Add. MS 35,655 fo. 252, Thomas Day to Walter Pollard, 1 Aug. 1785.

<sup>80</sup> H. Butterfield, *George III, Lord North, and the People* (1959).

used by Jebb and his fellow radicals, they remained middle-class reformers committed to the rule of law. Nevertheless, their argument that the Commons should represent individuals rather than the interests of property had radical implications – something borne out by the reaction of mainstream Whigs such as Edmund Burke and Lord Rockingham. In 1780 Jebb had suggested that parliament should be reformed in order to free the House of Commons from crown and aristocratic manipulation and allow it to represent the will of ‘the people’. Few in Britain’s governing classes, however, shared his desire for radical reform. When William Pitt drew up a moderate reform bill, Jebb angrily observed that its rejection of ‘the principle of universal suffrage, shews that he either understands not or denies the existence of [the people’s] primary rights’.<sup>81</sup> Pitt’s ministry, however, had won the support of a clear majority in the general election of 1784. The prime minister’s moderate politics and focus upon economic reform were in accord with the mood of a war-weary nation.<sup>82</sup>

With the English reformers fragmented and losing support, Jebb encouraged the Irish reformers to set an example. He wanted to see them both shake off colonial rule and reform their own House of Commons. In a private letter he expressed a hope that the Irish Volunteers would ‘shake the Aristocracy to its centre’, after which ‘the tyranny of the Church must give way’, and there would be nothing left to ‘obstruct complete success’.<sup>83</sup> Jebb envisioned a profound moral and political ‘reformation’, which would have encouraged religious pluralism and placed greater political and social power in the hands of the ‘middling sort’. The degree to which Jebb’s enlightened thought moved beyond traditional Commonwealth patriotism is illustrated by his attitude towards Ireland.

Having won free-trade concessions from Lord North’s administration, and inspired by the Americans, Henry Grattan and the Irish ‘Patriots’ went on to demand legislative independence for the Irish parliament. Such demands had widespread support in Ireland, particularly among the volunteer militias that sprang up to meet the threat of French invasion. After years of supporting Irish rights on the opposition benches, the Rockingham Whigs had no choice but to grant independence when they found themselves in office in early 1782.<sup>84</sup> In the euphoria following Grattan’s victory, appeals to natural rights became more frequent. This led some of the leading parliamentary patriots in Ireland to sound a note of caution. Grattan himself suggested that ‘the populace differ much and should be clearly distinguished from the people’.<sup>85</sup> Such resistance to any extension of the franchise, however, only made the radical reformers more

<sup>81</sup> Linen Hall Library, Joy Papers, JJ to Henry Joy, 18 May 1785.

<sup>82</sup> M. D. George, ‘Fox’s Martyrs: The General Election of 1784’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, xxi (1939), 133–68.

<sup>83</sup> Linen Hall Library, Joy Papers, JJ to Henry Joy, [1785?].

<sup>84</sup> Jebb was pleased to see that the Rockingham ministry’s stance towards Ireland was ‘liberal’ (National Library of Ireland, F. S. Bourke collection, JJ to John Forbes, 13 April 1782).

<sup>85</sup> Cited in W. E. H. Lecky, *A History of Ireland* (abridged by L. P. Curtis, 1972 [1892]), p. 207.

critical of the Irish aristocracy, the Church of Ireland and the British-appointed ministry.<sup>86</sup>

Jebb's father held clerical livings in Ireland and had undertaken some of his early education within the Pale. In the early 1780s Jebb had several Protestant Irish correspondents.<sup>87</sup> With such contacts it is not surprising that he met with Irish Patriots who visited London.<sup>88</sup> In 1783 Jebb was given the opportunity to address the Irish publicly when the Ulster Volunteers wrote to the earl of Effingham, Richard Price, Cartwright, Christopher Wyvill and Jebb requesting advice on parliamentary reform.<sup>89</sup> Jebb told the Volunteers that 'the power of delegation appears to me to be as extensive as the obligation of bearing arms for the common defence'.<sup>90</sup> Jebb anxiously awaited the outcome of the Volunteers' next meeting, believing that the fate of reform in England and Scotland was dependent upon events in Ireland.<sup>91</sup>

The question of Catholic political rights was the thorniest issue confronting the Irish reformers. Jebb revealed the extent of his commitment to universal manhood suffrage in arguing that Catholics should not only be enfranchised, but should be allowed to stand for parliament. His stance was rooted in a belief that priestly religions like Catholicism and Anglicanism would lose support in an atmosphere of complete religious freedom.<sup>92</sup> Prior to their National Convention, Jebb addressed a letter to the Volunteers urging the 'Third Estate' to force reform upon an Irish House of Commons dominated by the 'voice of the aristocracy and the inclinations of the crown'. The substance of the letter was a plea for recognition of the civil and political rights of the Catholic majority. Jebb pointed to the way religious toleration had benefited America. If Catholics were left to live like slaves, he warned, 'you will impair your own title to the blessings of liberty, and must expect to live, for generations, in little less than a state of actual hostility with the majority of your countrymen'. Jebb optimistically declared that:

<sup>86</sup> Jacqueline Hill, *Patriots to Unionists: Dublin Civic Politics and Irish Protestant Patriotism, 1660–1840* (Oxford, 1997) [hereafter Hill, *Patriots*], p. 166.

<sup>87</sup> Hill, *Patriots*, p. 169; R. B. McDowell, *Irish Public Opinion 1750–1800* (1944), p. 91; Neil Longley York, *Neither Kingdom nor Nation: The Irish Quest for Constitutional Rights, 1698–1800* (1994), pp. 120–1.

<sup>88</sup> National Library of Ireland, Dobbs Papers, JJ to Francis Dobbs, 25 Jan. and 7 April 1782; National Library of Ireland, F. S. Bourke collection, JJ to John Forbes, 8 Jan. 1785.

<sup>89</sup> A selection of the replies was later published as *A Collection of Letters which have been Addressed to the Volunteers of Ireland, on the subject of Parliamentary Reform by the Earl of Effingham &c.* (1783); both Wyvill and Jebb also published their own letters separately: *Letters addressed to the Committee of Belfast on the Proposed Reformation of the Parliament of Ireland, by the Rev. Christopher Wyvill* (1783); John Jebb, *Letters Addressed to the Volunteers of Ireland, on the Subject of Parliamentary Reform* (1783), Jebb ii. 517–54.

<sup>90</sup> JJ, 13 Aug. 1783, reprinted in *Address to the Volunteers of Ireland* (1783), Jebb ii. 520.

<sup>91</sup> National Library of Ireland, Dobbs Papers, JJ to Francis Dobbs, 15 Aug. 1783.

<sup>92</sup> JJ, 14 Aug. 1783, in *Address to the Volunteers of Ireland*, Jebb ii. 530; JJ to Archibald Hamilton Rowan, 5 March and 29 Sept. 1785, cited in A. H. Rowan, *Autobiography of Archibald Hamilton Rowan* (Dublin, 1840), pp. 128, 131.

when under the influence of mild and equal laws, human industry shall be generally excited and encouraged, and that monster intolerance, the bane of human happiness, shall be banished from the state, is it not reasonable to conclude, that religious prejudices also will give way, and truth extend her salutary empire over the minds of men, in proportion as the light of science, the constant concomitant of an enlarged intercourse with our species, shall prevail?

Jebb suggested a conference in Ireland with the leading Catholics to resolve differences, because if 'the maxims of past ages be adhered to, human sagacity can see no end; at least, no end that can be contemplated with pleasure'.<sup>93</sup> The National Convention, however, quickly resolved to omit discussion of Catholic suffrage from its deliberations, and as a result the Irish Parliament easily dismissed its reform petition as a sectarian document.<sup>94</sup> Despite their military display and some colourful radical rhetoric, the Volunteers of Ireland proved to be loyal, law-abiding and, most importantly, Protestant. Jebb's advice, however, demonstrates his mature commitment to universal manhood suffrage and his use of America as an example of the beneficial effects of religious toleration and broad political participation.

## VII

Faced with a powerfully entrenched religious and aristocratic establishment and a populace that was either politically conservative or apathetic, Jebb increasingly placed his hopes on America. This was a common sentiment among British radicals.<sup>95</sup> In Jebb's case it was encouraged by his experience of a meeting of minds with John Adams in the last year of his life, and the opportunity this afforded to discuss the constitution of the new nation. Adams, the Massachusetts lawyer, Dissenter and spokesman for the Revolution, presented Jebb with a personal example that reinforced his idealistic view of America.

Adams first met Jebb during a quick visit to London in November 1783.<sup>96</sup> From the start he had a high esteem for Jebb, whom he thought 'one of the best Citizens of the little Commonwealth of the just upon Earth'.<sup>97</sup> Along with his wife and daughter (both named Abigail, the daughter referred to as 'Nabby'), Adams settled in London in 1785. He

<sup>93</sup> JJ, 25 Oct. 1783, in *Address to the Volunteers of Ireland*, Jebb ii. 536, 540, 543–9.

<sup>94</sup> Thomas Bartlett, *The Fall and Rise of the Irish Nation: The Catholic Question 1690–1830* (1992), p. 107; R. B. McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution, 1760–1801* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 318–20.

<sup>95</sup> Michael Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1997) [hereafter Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals*].

<sup>96</sup> Page Smith, *John Adams* (New York, 1962) [hereafter Smith, *Adams*], pp. 581–4; Jebb presented Adams with some SCI pamphlets, Massachusetts Historical Society, Adams Papers, JJ to John Adams, 27 Nov. 1783. Also, at this time John Disney records that he 'supped at the London Coffee House Club, when Messers Adams and Jay were there' (Dr Williams's Library, Disney, 'Diary', 13 Nov. 1783).

<sup>97</sup> Massachusetts Historical Society, Adams Papers, John Adams to Mr Stockdale, 31 Jan. 1784.

was greeted with respect by the king but lampooned by the loyalist press. While enjoying the social and artistic scene, the Adams family frowned upon the extravagance and licentiousness of fashionable society. Abigail thought the nobility decadent and 'totally depraved' in comparison to the 'virtue and morality' that could be found among the middle classes.<sup>98</sup> She wrote home that 'I am . . . so old fashioned as to prefer the society of Dr. Price, Dr. Jebb and a few others like them to the midnight Gamblers and titled Gamesters'.<sup>99</sup> Abigail seems to have derived much comfort from the company of Ann Jebb. Nabby told her brother that 'Dr. Jebb, who has visited your father several times since we arrived, and who is of his opinions I believe in Politics, brought his Lady to see Mamma this morning. She is also a great Politicianess, which consequently pleased Mamma.'<sup>100</sup> The sober New Englander and his wife found themselves at ease with the earnest middle-class Rational Dissenters of London. Theophilus Lindsey described Adams as 'a grave but agreeable character'.<sup>101</sup> In 1813 Adams listed Jebb among those he was acquainted with between 1785 and 1788, noting that 'Unitarianism and Biblical criticism were the great Characteristicks of them all. . . . All professed Friendship for America, and these were almost all who pretended to any such Thing.'<sup>102</sup>

During his time in London Adams was thinking hard about the future political system of his new nation. In Jebb he found a learned and enthusiastic friend with whom to discuss constitutional issues. An insight into the substance of their conversations has been preserved in a few letters they exchanged by way of formally setting out their ideas. The exchange reveals the degree to which Jebb was committed to an enlightened conception of civic virtue, whereby all adult taxpaying males would exercise political rights and duties.

The *Report* that Jebb drafted on behalf of the Westminster Committee had advocated the payment of elected representatives. This reflected John Cartwright's view that MPs should receive 'no higher emolument at most than reasonable wages'.<sup>103</sup> But Jebb's discussion with Adams reveals that he clearly had reservations. He expressed approval of the 36th Article of the Pennsylvania constitution, which declared:

As every freeman to preserve his independence (if without sufficient estate), ought to have some profession, calling, trade or farm . . . there can be no necessity for, nor use in establishing offices of profit . . . but if any man is called into public service, to the prejudice of his private affairs, he has a right to a reasonable compensation. And whenever an office . . .

<sup>98</sup> Cited in Smith, *Adams*, p. 714.

<sup>99</sup> Abigail Adams Snr., 15 Sept. 1785, cited in Smith, *Adams*, p. 184.

<sup>100</sup> Abigail Adams Jr to John Q. Adams, 31 July 1785, cited in *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. L. H. Butterfield (6 vols., Cambridge, MA, 1963–93), vi. 216.

<sup>101</sup> McLachlan, *Letters of Lindsey*, p. 86.

<sup>102</sup> John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 25 June 1813 cited in *The Adams–Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Cappon (2 vols., Chapel Hill, NC, 1959), ii. 334.

<sup>103</sup> Cartwright, *Internal Evidence* (1784), p. 25.

becomes so profitable as to occasion many to apply for it, the profits ought to be lessened by the Legislature.<sup>104</sup>

Adams objected that the phrase ‘offices of Profit’ was ambiguous, and that the article was contradictory. On the one hand, it seemed to be saying that ‘all who serve the Public should have no Pay’. He thought this was inspired by ‘vulgar Avarice’, and argued that, as ‘Public offices in general require the whole time and all the attention of those who hold them . . . they must then starve with their Families unless they have ample fortunes’. Without salaries for public service, ‘the Poor and Middling ranks would be excluded and an Aristocratical Despotism would follow’. On the other hand, the article allowed for the granting of ‘reasonable compensation’, which left the system open to corruption because it would encourage politicians through ‘the Hypocritical Pretence of Disinterestedness’ to ‘excite Enthusiasm among the People’ for granting them rewards. Adams was in favour of establishing reasonable and regulated salaries. ‘Mankind will never be happy’, he wrote, ‘nor their Liberties secure until the People shall lay it down as a fundamental Rule to make the support and reward of Public offices a matter of justice and not gratitude.’<sup>105</sup> Adams suggested that the ‘dangerous enthusiasm’ for George Washington had been stimulated by his serving without pay, whereas he should have been paid for his services like the other generals – ‘the People should have too high a sense of their own Dignity even to suffer any Man to serve them for nothing’.<sup>106</sup>

Jebb replied that the Pennsylvanian article was not contradictory, but seemed to be saying that where an individual could perform his public duties without ‘any considerable detriment to his private fortune, or injury to his family, no recompense is due’. His position was close to that of Benjamin Franklin, who in expounding the virtues of the 36th article declared that ‘Persons will play at chess by the hour without being paid for it. . . . Deciding causes is in fact only a matter of amusement to sensible men.’<sup>107</sup> Jebb took issue with Adams’s claim that public offices *in general* consume all the time and attention of those who hold them. Positions such as Justices of the Peace, the lower magistracy, and officers in the militia required no prior training and could be fulfilled in addition to the citizen’s usual employment. He conceded that the ‘Governor’ should be granted a ‘very honourable allowance . . . during his continuance in office’. For a member of the ‘House of Assembly’, he thought that ‘Independency of fortune is . . . certainly a proper requisition, yet I agree it ought not to be required by law’. But he was confident that ‘Free Citizens will naturally elect independent characters to represent them.’ For Jebb, the ‘nature of the office, and mode of appointment’ were

<sup>104</sup> *The Constitution of Pennsylvania*, 28 Sept. 1776, Article 36.

<sup>105</sup> Massachusetts Historical Society, Adams Papers, John Adams to JJ, 21 Aug. 1785.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* 10 Sept. 1785.

<sup>107</sup> Romilly, *Life*, p. 447, extracts from John Baynes, ‘Journal’, 27 Aug. 1783.

important factors. He had no objection to 'reasonable emoluments' being attached to 'such offices as are necessary in a well constituted state' like the judiciary, bureaucracy and armed forces. But the pay should not be so great as to draw too many men away from the agriculture and commerce that provide the nation's wealth.<sup>108</sup>

Adams suggested that Jebb's view was close to David Hume's ideal political system, which distinguished between a salaried administration and unpaid magistrates and legislators. But Adams continued to insist that in addition to the executive all members of the legislature and the magistracy should be provided with a salary in proportion to their duties, as 'one of the best securities to Liberty and Equality'.<sup>109</sup> To some extent, no doubt, this difference of opinion reflects the fact that one man was a practising doctor who devoted his spare time to political agitation, while the other was fully employed as an appointed representative of a new nation. Yet it also reveals how committed Jebb was to seeing the British state governed by virtuous and independent citizens. He hoped to awaken his fellow Englishmen to a realization that, while it was an obligation imposed 'by the Law of Nature' that a man 'pursue the means of acquiring an independent income, yet it is also every freeman's duty to bear his portion of the Public burdens, and in either just rotation, or according to other prescribed rules to perform those services which the welfare of the state requires'.<sup>110</sup> Adams had a greater sense of the practical difficulties inherent in establishing a republic, and later reflected that during the 1780s 'the Organization of a free Government was a subject . . . as little studied by Burke, Fox, Hartley, Price and Jebb as by Turgot, Rochefoucault, Condorcet and Franklin'.<sup>111</sup> It would seem that the points of difference between the two men could be explained by Jebb's more optimistic view of human nature. Jebb shared the faith in progress that was a hallmark of the Enlightenment. His combination of Unitarianism, determinism and a hedonist moral philosophy enabled him to read the work of *philosophes* in a positive light. He praised the mechanistic conception of the world and attack upon priestcraft advanced in Holbach's *Système de la Nature* (1770), while dismissing his atheism as an extreme reaction prompted by the corrupt state of French Catholicism.<sup>112</sup> In contrast, Adams reflected his New England Puritan heritage in remaining sceptical of the supposed 'rapid Progress of the Mind to perfection', which had been 'the common Place Topick of Declamation for half a century'.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Massachusetts Historical Society, Adams Papers, JJ to John Adams, 13 Sept. 1785.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, John Adams to JJ, 25 Sept. 1785.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, JJ to John Adams, 13 Sept. 1785.

<sup>111</sup> Cited in Joseph Charles, *Origins of the American Party System* (1956), pp. 68–9.

<sup>112</sup> Jebb ii. 168.

<sup>113</sup> Cited in Zoltan Haraszti, 'John Adams Flays a *Philosophe*: Annotations on Condorcet's *Progress of the Human Mind*', *William and Mary Quarterly*, vii (1950), 250; see also the chapter on 'John Adams' in Bernard Bailyn, *Faces of Revolution: Personalities and Themes in the Struggle for Independence* (New York, 1990), pp. 1–21.

After discussing the issue of salaries, Adams wrote: 'I wish to continue our disquisitions concerning the American Constitutions, because I think many things require amendment, and I hope for Lights and aids from you in maturing them.'<sup>114</sup> Unfortunately, Jebb's ill health and death soon terminated these discussions. Adams was one of the most systematic of thinkers in the republican and Harringtonian vein. He believed that a natural aristocracy would always emerge, and to deal with this he advocated that it should be planned for, and provided with a function that would render it socially beneficial.<sup>115</sup> Adams praised James Burgh's *Political Disquisitions* when it was published in 1774, though he was unimpressed by Tom Paine's *Common Sense*, which he saw as advocating democracy that 'must produce confusion and every evil work'.<sup>116</sup> Jebb and Adams were middle-class Commonwealthmen who were modifying their political philosophy in response to enlightened ideas and political experience. The contrast between the conservative Anglophile Adams and Jefferson the Francophile democrat presaged the serious interruption to their friendship in the 1790s. While Adams was repulsed by fashionable society in England, he still respected the ideals of the mother country's ancient constitution and past efforts to restrain royal absolutism.<sup>117</sup> Such sentiments were aired and refreshed in his discussions with the likes of Jebb and Price.

Like his British friends, Adams only reluctantly resigned himself to the necessity of independence, and after the war laboured hard to re-establish ties with Britain. Jebb told Adams that 'I regard the establishment of Liberty in America with a pleasure bordering on enthusiasm. I feel with Dr. Price the ardent wish that nothing may retard the extent and influence of freedom'. He trusted that under the guidance of Providence the 'bright example' set by the Americans would

influence the People from whence they sprang, and every other European state, to shake off the shackles of Civil and Religious despotism and enable their inhabitants more generally to become what Heaven intended men to be – virtuous, rational, wise and happy here – and consequently prepared for the enjoyment of still superior degrees of happiness in a more enduring state.<sup>118</sup>

In August 1785 Jebb expressed a desire to travel to America, but it was a dream that would remain unfulfilled. As Nabby Adams observed: 'Poor Man looks as if he was not long intended as an ornament to Learning and Science; his Health is very Poor.'<sup>119</sup> He died in March 1786.

<sup>114</sup> Massachusetts Historical Society, Adams Papers, John Adams to JJ, 26 Sept. 1785.

<sup>115</sup> Pocock, *Virtue*, p. 269.

<sup>116</sup> *The Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*. ed. L. H. Butterfield (4 vols., Cambridge, MA, 1961), ii. 330.

<sup>117</sup> Merrill D. Peterson, *Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue* (Athens, GA, 1976), pp. 28–61.

<sup>118</sup> Massachusetts Historical Society, Adams Papers, JJ to Adams, 13 Sept. 1785.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, Nabby Adams to John Quincy Adams, 26 Aug. 1785.

## VIII

Even without the American Revolution there were enough ideological, social and political causes to ensure that British radicalism evolved in the late eighteenth century. Yet it is clear that the American cry of 'no taxation without representation' and the resort to armed resistance exerted a powerful influence upon the ideology and confidence of British radicals. This was certainly the case with John Jebb. As a young man the resistance to perceived despotism by Wilkes and the American colonists inspired him. Against the background of growing imperial tensions, Jebb's own efforts to reform both the Church of England and Cambridge University failed in the face of powerfully entrenched interests. Increasingly alienated from Cambridge, opposed to the dominant theology and politics of the established Church, and despairing at the outbreak of conflict in the colonies in 1775, Jebb resigned his livings and moved to London. The imperial crisis led various British writers to argue for substantial parliamentary reform. Among other works, Cartwright's passionate tract in support of the Americans, *Take Your Choice!* (1776), led Jebb to believe that, in accordance with historical and natural rights, and as a practical remedy for crown manipulation, the House of Commons should be elected according to universal manhood suffrage. When growing dissatisfaction with the cost, defeats and widening international scale of the war prompted a surge in popular protest, Jebb worked hard to marshal support for radical reform. Finally, with the war concluded in 1783 and interest in reform fading, Jebb looked to America as providing a new nation in which 'Liberty has an asylum'.<sup>120</sup>

Jebb demonstrates how, for British radicals, notions of religious liberty, republican virtue and universal political rights coalesced around the American cause. During the years of the French Revolution, British radicals advertised the virtues of America in order to make a polemical connection between material prosperity and a representative system of government based upon popular sovereignty.<sup>121</sup> While Jebb did not live to witness the American Constitution or the French Revolution, his influence lived on. At the Revolution Society commemorative dinner in 1788 a toast to 'the immortal memory of Hampden, Pym, Russell, and Sydney' was followed with one to 'the memory of Andrew Marvell, Milton, Locke, the late Mr. Hollis, and the late Dr. John Jebb'.<sup>122</sup> Both friend and foe recognized the leading role Jebb had played in the reform movement in the early 1780s. If it can be said that Richard Price was the 'first and original Left-Wing Intellectual'<sup>123</sup> in British history, Jebb was one of the first 'left-wing' activists.

<sup>120</sup> *Life of John Jebb*, p. 92.

<sup>121</sup> Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals*, p. 165.

<sup>122</sup> *An Abstract of the History and Proceedings of the Revolution Society in London* (1789), p. 4.

<sup>123</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, 'Radical Criticisms of the Whig Order', in Jacob, *Origins of Radicalism*, p. 48.