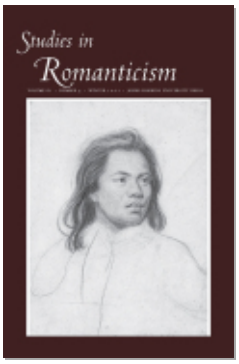
Radical Conduct: Politics, Sociability and Equality in London 1789–1815 by Mark Philp (review)



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context. Joep Leerssen draws from his *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe* to answer the question "what 'romanticism' can we sensibly and comparatively apply to both Ireland and continental Europe?" (342). Sonja Lawrenson contributes a fascinating exploration of the treatment of Ireland in post-Union popular fiction, including a number of Minerva Press items, in order to consider "the ways in which popular fiction helped to cultivate and contest the intertwined discourses of union and empire within the political hothouse of post-Union Ireland" (361). Joseph Rezek considers texts published in Ireland concerning the transatlantic slave trade written by pro-slavery adherents, white abolitionists and also by writers of African descent (382). His essay also compares and contrasts the little-known Sarah Isdell's *The Vale of Louisiana* with Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798). Finally, Fiona Stafford reflects on how Irish Literature of the Romantic era has been shaped as a field, offering her own rich "original map" (xiii) of this complex subject and tracing the contours of that map across time to the work of modern poets.

Irish Literature in Transition, 1780–1830 is an important contribution to Irish literary criticism as well as to Romantic-era studies in general. It rewrites the literary history of Ireland during this crucial era, taking into account not just the national dimension, but local and global considerations. The contributions included in the book are a collective testament to the vitality and suppleness of Irish Romanticism as well as to the creative and critical imaginations of those who work in the field.

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Mark Philp. *Radical Conduct: Politics, Sociability and Equality in London 1789–1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. 273. $99.99 (hardcover).

Few historians have taught us more about English political thought and culture in the age of the French Revolution than Mark Philp. His article on the "fragmented ideology of reform" is a classic, as is his nuanced treatment of loyalism. The first thing to be said about his new book, particularly since I raise some questions about the specifics of its argument, is that Philp has again produced a strikingly original work which should be read by historians and literary scholars of the period 1789–1815. He revisits themes, many of which he raised in his first book, *Godwin's Political Justice* (1986); he is primarily concerned with modes of conduct—sets of shared practices and expectations for conducting social and intellectual lives—that informed the interactions among William Godwin and his circle of

radical literary friends. The detailed appendices of his earlier book began the research project of mapping and interpreting these interactions. Such cultural mapping takes on particular importance given the codes of behavior dictated by these radical intellectuals' commitments to rational deliberation among equals, stark honesty in the pursuit of moral and political truth, the right to private judgment, and a disregard for social conventions and authority based on anything but the protocols of reason.

Relying on an exhaustive reading of primary sources—including diaries, correspondence, and literary works—Philp provides an insightful analysis of what these men and women were doing, what they thought they were doing, and the gap between their ambition and their ability to realize lofty goals. Godwin's own diary notebooks and correspondence constitute an invaluable archive that Philp fully mines. Indeed, we are already indebted to the author for heading the Godwin's Diary Project that makes available a digital and elaborately coded version of the thirty-six notebooks in which Godwin recorded his activities. Philp is well aware not only of the richness but also the limitations of the documentary record left by Godwin. The difficulty comes in extrapolating from a unique source produced by an extraordinary individual in order to draw conclusions about a relatively small group of friends and their networks of association, and then more problematically to relate their conduct to the norms of a broader community of Londoners from the middling orders.

Radical Conduct is structured in three main parts, dealing with understandings of "politics," questions of sociability and friendship, and a wide range of musical activities. In revisionist fashion, Philp questions the common view that the 1790s was a decade of intense political activity, asking us to consider how contemporaries themselves understood political language and interventions. In contrast to rational deliberation seeking moral truth, Godwin was wary of political associations as subject to conditions of partisanship, demagoguery, enforced programs, and potential disorder. In *Godwin's Political Justice*, however, Philp countered E. P. Thompson's dismissal of Godwin's abstract theorizing and absence from the political fray, by linking Godwin to a "broader radical community" that included the London Corresponding Society and the Society for Constitutional Information. Philp has clearly rethought that position. More generally, he explains that most people when they spoke of "politics" meant central government, parliamentary proceedings, and foreign policy. When discussing political subjects, people did not necessarily think they were acting politically; when petitioning for reform, folks might have thought in terms "more as a formal representation of views contributing to public interest than as an expressly political activity"(31). It remains unclear what tens of thousands of Londoners thought they were doing when they assembled at Copenhagen Fields in October and November 1795 to protest the government's introduction of the repressive Two Acts. We

might also ask what Pitt's government thought they were doing when they had Godwin's closest associate, the playwright Thomas Holcroft, arrested on charges of high treason for his part in the activities of the SCI. As Philp argues, the government forced the issue, increasing the costs of opposition and exerting corrosive effects on the sort of speculation and experimentation practiced by Godwin and his circle. Government repression and loyalist vigilance transformed "private" conversations, correspondence, and gatherings into sedition. Did the ministers simply scare themselves? Quite possibly.

In working through texts such as diaries and private correspondence, Philp offers carefully focused readings based on his deep knowledge of the writers under consideration. When he steps back to offer a wide-angled view, the results are understandably less nuanced. If the 1790s are best regarded as a period in which politics was a limited affair, Philp dates the full blooming of the political domain to the period 1820 to 1840. As a broad generalization, this seems right. He bases this judgment on a large-scale study of changes in the lexicon of politics; on the incidence of reform terminology ("agitation," "reform," "radical," "movement," etc.) and general political terminology ("despotic," "tyrannical," "political," "parliament," etc.) found in an expanding universe of newspapers from 1770 to 1870. We know that newspapers circulated widely, but when generalizing about what "most people" or "ordinary people" thought about politics, one wants to know something about the audience for daily newspapers. And then as Godwin feared, cheap print media circulating in streets and low taverns of the metropolis—song sheets, squibs, handbills, mock playbills, caricatures, addresses to the public—played an unfortunately prominent role in the political education of vulgar minds. This is not to deny the usefulness of Philp's big data but to suggest what might be missed.

The book's center of gravity is located in five superb chapters dealing with the social lives of a subset of metropolitan literary men and women associated with Godwin. Philp points out that London was not a unified urban environment, but fragmented and locally bound. In Burkean fashion, people sought out their "little platoon." The platoon in question was remarkable for its members' literary accomplishments, close ties, and dedication to distinctive modes of sociability. In evaluating Godwin's network of association, relationships ranging from weak to strong ties and varying in degrees of interdependence, Philp profits from the work of social-network theorists. Despite a striving for equality among its members, the fragility of the model of deliberative conversation and disinterested friendship, particularly with regard to gender relations, is evident. Male friends were less judgmental of each other's conduct and less exposed to danger to their reputations as they engaged in the pleasures of the city and associated with male friends and associates. The social lives of women were more often dedicated to familial

connections and the professional associations of their husbands. The women in Godwin's circle were by no means immune to the more general norms of social conduct governing the middling orders and were often subject to the social policing of female friends. As Philp observes, while the playwright and novelist Elizabeth Inchbald, a close friend of Godwin's, might have sympathized with the actress and writer Mary Robinson, notorious for her affairs with the Prince of Wales and others, she avoided meeting her; she cut Mary Wollstonecraft once her status as Mrs. Imlay was revealed to be false.

Chapter four, "Radical Literary Women," qualifies the picture of a group of serious literary women that emerged in the wake of the French Revolution, who looked for progressive social change and the improvement of the place of women in society, at least to the extent that they embraced a collective identity or formed a coherent group of deliberative friendships. Philp finds a more limited sub-group of London writers gathered around Robinson, Mary Hays, Wollstonecraft, and Eliza Fenwick, with some additional contact with Amelia Alderson, Charlotte Smith, and Anne and Belle Plumptre of Norwich. In keeping with the study's emphasis on the difficulties faced by those seeking to pursue unconventional social lives, Philp concludes that the attempt of these women "to establish a different kind of relationship based upon intellectual interests and affinities" (139) was undercut by gossiping tongues and the perils of social censure directed at them, including attacks from conservative propagandists. He concedes the case for seeing Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of the Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) "as especially ill-timed" (154), although he is cautious about regarding 1798 as a turning point in the fortunes of female radicals. The year coincides, however, with the point at which Godwin identified a reaction against reform among former friends, such as Samuel Parr with whom he fell out badly. The collapse in confidence also coincided with the prosecutions of Benjamin Flower, editor of the *Cambridge Intelligencer*, Joseph Johnson, radical publisher whose dinners were an important site of radical sociability, and Gilbert Wakefield, classical scholar and Unitarian reformer, whose fates are noted in passing.

Philp provides an intriguing analysis of Godwin's interactions with women to whom the philosopher offered didactic guidance rather than deliberative equality. The author charts with a fine mesh various types of contact, involving sites of encounter, who is visiting or calling on whom, whether they dine with others or alone. In the case of Alderson, Norwich's budding poet and novelist, adventurous conduct was balanced with care taken to stay on the safe side of scandal. Her flirtatious teasing unsettled Godwin. Interestingly, Philp suggests that Godwin's exchanges with female interlocutors opened the way to his relationship with Wollstonecraft. In turn, Philp revises his earlier estimate of Wollstonecraft's influence; he now credits her role in changing Godwin's view of the rational mind stripped

of emotion, allowing a role for private emotions of sympathy and affection. Philp explains that the central challenge Wollstonecraft posed for Godwin was for him to recognize her as an equal, in a society with little or no support for such a relationship, "in a literary culture that in parts tolerated that aspiration but found little success in achieving it" (176).

The book's final chapter explores the less rational universe of music and dance, addressing in splendid fashion a subject rarely given serious attention by historians of the period. As well as opposing repetition, Godwin was concerned about being emotionally overwhelmed by music. It is fair to say that Godwin and his friends were not the life of many dances or parties. Drawing on references from diaries, as well as noting how widely such activities feature in contemporary novels, Philp emphasizes the centrality of dancing to provincial culture. The disciplined repetitions and physicality of dance, the display of femininity and male gallantry, rendered the manners and courting rituals of balls suspicious to literary radicals keen to reject conventionality and critical of fashionable society. While bands might strike up the Marseilles and Ça Ira at radical dinners, loyalist songs drowned out revolutionary refrains; although historians might regard the culture of loyalist and volunteer associations as enforced compliance to established authority, readers are informed this "was not a perspective that the vast majority of contemporaries would have taken" (226). The repertoire of loyalist propaganda – publications, celebrations of military victories and royal occasions, demands for the lighting of windows, control of key venues including churches and theaters, as well as the licensing of taverns—easily prevailed over the efforts of reformers. Utopian desires fueled initially by the French Revolution and founded on Enlightenment principles ran headlong into opposing social, ideological, and political conditions determining what might be achieved. In her *Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796), the last book published before her death, Wollstonecraft rhapsodizes over the supposed independence and virtue found among farm communities in Norway and dreams of the possibilities for "cultivation of the mind, without depravity of heart," and then reflects, "but reason drags me back whispering that the world is still the world." Philp joins in returning those of us too much taken with the radical promise of the 1790s to historical reality.

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