Napoleon and British Song, 1797–1822

Oskar Cox Jensen

War, Culture and Society, 1750–1850

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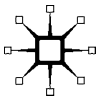

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Abbreviations and Conventions

BM	British Museum
Bod.	Bodleian Library Broadside Ballads <ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>
FARNE	Folk Archive Resource North East <www.folknortheast.com>
Madden	Madden Ballads, Cambridge University Library
Newcastle	Newcastle upon Tyne
ODNB	*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <www.oxforddnb.com>
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary* <www.oed.com>
POB	The Proceedings of the Old Bailey, 1674–1913 <www.oldbaileyonline.org>

All quotations retain their original spelling, grammar, and emphasis. [*sic*] is used only within quotations of otherwise standard, accurate English. Uncommon dialect lyrics are either glossed within square brackets on the same line or translated into standard English below the original.

Songs are named, and a writer given where known, in the text or endnote. Titles of Welsh-language songs are given in English translation. Further bibliographical information is truncated to an appendix number. Consultation of the Appendix will provide my preferred source for any given song, in addition to supplementary details where known: tune, date, form of contemporary publication, and Roud number.

Unless stated otherwise, place of publication is presumed to be London.

Note on the Songs

This is a book full of songs. In order that they be treated as such, I have recorded as many as possible, given that so few of their tunes are known. There are of course many more out there, either too famous or too obscure to set down. These songs, listed in the order in which they are first encountered in the text, are available to stream and download at <soundcloud .com/napoleonandbritishsong/tracks>. I have refrained from supplying a complete track list here, in the hope of uploading further songs upon the discovery of additional tunes. The interpretations are as simple as possible, to give a sense of tune and tempo only, rather than attempt to recreate any subjective sense of performance conditions or indeed any particular accent. Please bear in mind that both texts and tunes may have varied from one performance to another.

Introduction

It is no coincidence that they named the Wars after him. Few have ever loomed as large as Napoleon; in the imaginations of the inhabitants of the British Isles, only Hitler (perhaps) and that aggregated individual known as 'the Pope' have figured with comparable prominence. No historical figure has taken up so many pages of English-language publications – memoirs, monographs, novels, poems, songs. This introduction is itself written amidst the throes of anniversary, two hundred years on from the Hundred Days. Yet the eloquence of the caricatures once again hanging in the British Museum, in which the big-hatted, small-bodied creation of Gillray and the demonic imagery of Rowlandson figure so affectively, threatens to enshrine one collective memory of Napoleon whilst obliterating all others.[1] Indeed, the laudable historical turn to material and visual culture has in the case of Napoleon led to a general focus on officially endorsed propaganda, at the expense of less accessible subaltern memories often preserved, if at all, in a more orally located culture.[2] The historical reality is that across the British Isles, both during and especially after the Napoleonic Wars, the eponymous Bonaparte was better loved and respected by the general populace than Wellington, Pitt, or the Prince Regent. Nowhere was this sentiment more strongly expressed, nor more remorselessly challenged, than in the realm of popular song.

'Popular' song – a heterodox amalgam of Elizabethan balladry and the latest light-operatic hits, of elite patriotic effusions and obscene gutter cant, of provincial beggars' improvisations and Romantic poetry – was the most widespread and influential form of literary and musical expression of the day. At the turn of the century, this ubiquitous medium found a ubiquitous subject. Never were so many melodies, verses and choruses expended in praise, condemnation, pity, and ridicule as in the case of Napoleon: and never to so little scholarly attention, save from collectors of what is sometimes called 'folksong'. All too often, major authorities in this field persist in making brief asides to 'many less famous works', whilst privileging a narrow corpus of Romantic verse or journalism as representative of the British

experience, usually wildly underestimating the number of songs or the scope of their impact in the process.[3] Conversely, the sheer mass of material available has tended to diminish its interest as a set of discrete cultural objects. In a recent work, Kate Horgan notes of Michael Scrivener that he 'makes the valuable point that songs were so 'material' and 'commonplace' as to be excluded from the aesthetic domain', an exclusion perpetuated by too many modern academics.[4] Thus, in making proper and exhaustive enquiry into the representation of one man in song, my simplest aim is to bring to light a neglected corpus of historically important material, and to treat the songs within it with a just degree of aesthetically inflected consideration.

This 'bringing to light' of a host of songs, some four hundred of which are tabulated in this book's Appendix, should furnish historians, ballad and literary scholars alike with a fascinating and surprisingly eclectic body of texts. My principal methodological aim in this book is to pioneer a new model of reading them. I have sought to approach these culturally sensitive vernacular texts in a way that takes into account their musical nature, their performative affect and their generic characteristics. A key concept I have formulated here is 'fitness': a means of helping to reconstruct some sense of songs' reception by audiences by evaluating how well they functioned, without resorting to subjective value judgements or worrying about the red herring of 'authenticity'. This book, after all, differs from most studies of song (or indeed poetry), in that I have tried to consider *all* songs with relevant subject matter, rather than songs conceived of (either by the author or via some historical process of canonisation) as being 'good' or exemplary. Indeed, many subjective opinions, my own included, would deem the majority of songs in question to be not very good, and even downright bad. I cannot simply dismiss that consideration, on the grounds of scholarly detachment, or attribute it to the songs' 'low' status. That would be bad history. As Robert Walser has put it, the 'understanding of cultural pleasures is an unavoidable precondition to understanding social relations, identities, structures, and forces, so we might as well confront the issue head-on: we are, despite the proverb, in the business of accounting for taste'.[5] In this book, I have sought both to account for why many of these songs might have been heard by contemporaries as 'bad', and to theorise such judgements with more objective, technical evaluation, the better to address the all important matter of these songs' reception.

'All important', because I am interested here not in an abstracted literary record but in a historical process. My principal aim historically is to use these songs to understand popular mentalities during the Napoleonic Wars, and the relation of the mass of the people with both Napoleon and the British state. I do not mean by this that I expect song texts to illustrate popular mentalities. Rather, songs were employed actively to construct and contest identity and opinion, by writers, publishers, singers, and buyers, and it is that process – to which the song texts (written, printed, performed, and

heard) were central – that is of interest. Put another way, song afforded a cultural space in which politics all of kinds was done. My aim is to ascertain what was achieved when politicking was combined with musicking.[6]

My historical goal, then, is to make sense of a wealth of ephemeral material produced in Britain about Napoleon, so as to ascertain what the British people thought of him – and, as a necessary corollary, what they thought of the war effort conducted by the British state. (This precludes a wider engagement with Napoleonic song across the Atlantic or on the Continent: for the latter, I would recommend the ongoing work of, among others, Katherine Hambridge and Éva Guillorel.)[7] I seek thereby to contribute to major areas of specifically historical debate, addressed below; to determine how far popular culture was a means of self-expression and self-definition on the part of a nascent working class, and how far a means of exerting sociopolitical control on the part of a loyalist and moralising elite; to judge whether this period was really, as has been repeatedly and eloquently claimed, a cornerstone in the creation of a united British identity.[8] To do so productively, I must achieve a historiographical goal as well, by furthering our ability to engage with problematic media, such as songs, when asking political questions.

Irrespective of discipline, academics have come to appreciate the fundamental entanglement of politics with what was once thought of as 'mere' cultural history. In a major musicological survey, Jane Fulcher has recently written of the impact of first Foucault, and then Bourdieu, whose work 'allowed us to identify political power in systems of representation … We have hence grown increasingly aware that culture is neither extraneous to politics nor devoid of authentic political content but may rather be a fundamental symbolic expression or articulation of the political.'[9] Political historians have undergone the same journey in reverse, John Barrell writing that:

> Historians of this period … have characteristically tended to describe its political history without much reference to the ramifications of political conflict beyond the area that can be thought of as 'directly' political, in the wider culture or in daily life. Historians of literature and art, on the other hand, have increasingly focused their attention on the politics of culture in the period, but … have frequently been content to rely on each other's ready-made and very broad-brush accounts [of politics] … A multidisciplinary approach … is the only approach which can attempt to suggest the extent to which the whole life of a nation was believed to have been penetrated by political suspicions and restructured by political conflict.[10]

As Barrell indicates, the period of the French Revolution and its aftermath is especially resonant in this regard, as numerous forms of material, written, and visual culture were put to use in the service of what is now called

propaganda. In the past 30 years, a good deal of excellent scholarship has conducted just such multidisciplinary enquiries.[11] Historians have taken great strides in assimilating the particularities of painting, caricature, gesture, and festival into their thought. Yet the problems posed by song have not been overcome: we have not come to terms with the medium as a type of musicking – both as a strictly musical form and as sung, heard, and bought. Roy Porter's analogous 1986 dictum in the *London Review of Books*, that we must 'analyse . . . prints not just as "evidence" but as "art", with its own conventions', has not yet been satisfactorily applied to song.[12]

In fact, the most important work in this field has come, not from historical studies such as Roy Palmer's *The Sound of History*, but from specialised areas of musicology, psychology and folklore; at least one leading historian of the nineteenth century is openly 'proselytising for a folkloric turn'.[13] Robert Darnton's *Poetry and the Police* has also broken new methodological ground by including links to recordings of the songs discussed, an excellent innovation only hampered by anachronistic arrangement and production.[14] This focus on enacted song culture has produced several excellent social historical studies in areas as disparate as Renaissance Florence and, more pertinently, nineteenth-century Ireland, yet none has contributed significantly to dialogue between cultural and political history.[15] Numerous articles have restated the significance of performance to a song's meaning: of the need to unite music, social space, and politics. Worthy sentiments: yet they are rarely backed up by sustained research.[16] In fact, what is to my mind the most perceptive study of how the idiosyncrasies and conventions of performance can alter or subvert political meaning, written by Helen Burke, takes as its subject the stage, rather than song.[17] Michael Davis exhibits a similar sensitivity to the mediatory importance of performance, in a succinct verdict upon the compositions of Thomas Spence: 'Songs like this were deliberately didactic. Their lyrics intended to be politically instructive, but often they must have been virtually impossible to sing.'[18] This sort of appreciation is all too rare, however. The most significant historian's contribution by far is that of the early modernist Christopher Marsh, whose work I read (and listened to) only after the writing of this book – yet it is of real significance to scholars of any historical period interested in the social or political role of music.[19] My scope is more limited than Marsh's swathe of both history and musical practice, but I hope to effect a similar entente between historians and music making.

One barrier to that entente is of course that of musical language, so often alienating to those without specialist training. The technical vocabulary of music cannot in itself bridge the gap between the description of technique and the affective impact of a piece of music. Yet without it, discourse often descends into vague, subjective impressions (happy, sad, memorable, dull) that fail to advance beyond one's own experience. The very possibility of ascribing emotional meaning to music is suspect among current

musicologists. Nor should we regress to the close reading of scores in the expectation of learning something universally applicable about the 'work'. My solution is instead to focus on songs, not as musical works, but as works subject to musicking: to consider them as written, as sung in performance, as heard, and as sung in recreation (the ultimate aim of popular song before the era of recording). Mark Booth's little-known *The Experience of Songs* is a good example of what may be achieved when we consider song texts as things that are sung.[20] Booth conducts no musical analysis, concentrating on the 'song verse', yet demonstrates that 'even if we only postulate music with these words, we can hear them better': a hypothesis that is especially helpful when it comes to the songs in this book, many of which specify no particular tune.[21] Again, I came to Booth's work at the very end of this project, but it has helped crystallise much of my own thinking, in demonstrating how we may circumvent the linguistic challenges posed by music itself.

This should not be construed as an attempt to remove music from song. This book includes a large body of recordings of the songs discussed which, whilst not adhering to any strict doctrine of 'historical practice', nonetheless attempts to provide the reader (and listener) with a point of access to these songs as musical performances. At all costs, I wish to avoid treating songs as in any way 'illustrative', one flaw of a work that still looms large in this area of history, E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. In Thompson's great thesis, singers are alluded to variously (and inconsistently) as government mouthpieces; as one among many disreputable features of fairs; and as facilitators of Luddite, satirical, and radical discourse, bringing the printed word to the illiterate. In these instances, they are passive.[22] Songs are treated as indicative rather than active objects: for example, as celebrations of Trafalgar and the British tar.[23] Thompson's influence in my work has less to do with his use of songs, than with the discourse he has generated about the use of cultural forms by workers to resist authority: of culture as subaltern social signifier, and culture as subjected to authoritarian attempts at control and repression. As Thompson summarises: 'The process of social discipline was not uncontested.'[24]

I would demur, however, from applying too strict a class-based reading to popular song and the Napoleonic Wars. Attempts to subvert the song culture of the masses from above were largely failures, whilst that culture continued to revitalise itself from below. These processes might be read within a narrative of working-class self-creation and the rejection of values imposed from above. Yet other factors are also at play that nuance this reading: the fruitful creative dialogue between the composition of popular song and polite verse; the low social origins of some loyalist writers; the magpie tendencies of popular taste, as keen to assimilate the music of the middling stage as that of the street. Above all, I would eschew a partisan radical reading: the fierce autonomy of popular song culture was capable of resisting all political

discourse, not just the politics of authority, and we should not necessarily associate sympathy to Napoleon with a radicalised political programme.

One key divergence from Thompson's story here is that *The Making of the English Working Class* is necessarily a narrative of change, as are most historical analyses of the war years, whereas, following David Hopkin, I wish to emphasise the importance of historical continuity: as historians, we are too readily drawn to the gleam of development, at the expense of the dull stuff of stasis.[25] The Napoleonic Wars stimulated a tumult of developments in British society. But these developments did not obliterate existing modes of existence, which often proved surprisingly resilient. As this book sets out to demonstrate, popular song culture was an excellent example of this, as a living discourse inimical to wholesale reform. Songs and singers were not typically given to preaching, to radicalising, or to constructing the nation state. Rather, they told individual and affective narratives that, if they were to succeed, had to resonate with the existing conditions of daily life: a phenomenon that Alan Lomax called 'maximal accord'.[26] Thompson's often overlooked *Customs in Common* is more pertinent in this regard, in the attention it pays to the fractured and contradictory incoherence of popular culture as a whole, and the resistance of this heterogeneous culture to attempts at systematisation. Of supreme importance to the impact of the Napoleonic Wars on British society is his verdict on the preceding one hundred years: it is a 'characteristic paradox of the century [that] we have a *rebellious* traditional culture'.[27] We should not expect such a subaltern, intransigent society as the eighteenth century that Thompson depicts to be easily suborned by either post-revolutionary radicals, or the loyalist nation builders of Linda Colley's *Britons*.

Unlike Thompson, who made liberal use of ballad lyrics, Colley's only reference to Napoleonic-era song is a glance at 'The Pitman's Revenge Against Buonaparte', which she reduces to an expression of pleasure in violence.[28] She writes: 'The cult of heroic endeavour and aggressive maleness that was so pronounced in patrician art and literature at this time, was just as prominent in popular ballads and songs.'[29] There is an insightful and accurate implication here – that elite and popular culture were connected – that she fails to tease out. To do so would be to refute one aspect of Peter Burke's *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, by suggesting that cultural practice was not so rigidly separated along class lines by 1800 as he posits, a theme I develop in this book. Nor does Colley discuss song as a propagating medium of national unity, despite the centrality to her work of this unifying narrative. Revisionism of this argument has come so far that it is easy to forget that on first publication, she was attacked in *The Times* for her radical undermining of the immutable truth of Britishness in charting its artificial, historically contingent creation.[30] Colley dissects this process quite brilliantly. I simply wish to question her conclusion: that this process successfully inculcated a unified, loyal, British identity. I appreciate that, in revising an earlier

generation of largely socialist historiography, Colley, Gerald Newman et al. undertook essential, insightful work called for by Thompson himself.[31] Yet the pendulum has swung too far: rather than complicating a too radical discourse, Colley has superimposed another that is too loyalist.

I would rather not labour over an explicit critique of Colley. That work has largely been done, Catriona Kennedy offering a particularly thoughtful response within this series: challenging the idea that the Wars exacerbated Francophobia; stressing the importance of Ireland to the idea of Britain; questioning the impact of loyalist propaganda; and highlighting the experience of the individual rather than the construction of the collective.[32] Kennedy also makes the valuable point that, whilst the mediation of the conflict was strikingly 'modern', the essential narratives of the conflict were those of traditional dynastic warfare, between princes, not peoples.[33] I would go further still. It should be remembered that encounters between the militaristic state and its subjects were often not experienced as patriotic motivation, but as the violence of the press gang, enclosure, transportation, and Pitt's 'terror'. John Bull could be a Luddite or a smuggler. Considering the Wars with a working knowledge of the fighting itself further disrupts Colley's narrative. I hope that there is no longer a need to dismantle her formulation of the 'Other', but it may be worth reiterating that, contrary to her central claim, this was not a traditional struggle against the Catholic French.[34] The fact that loyalists often represented the Wars as acts of liberation belies that notion: the Allies were freeing the Catholic French from the, by turns, atheist and Muslim Corsican, Napoleon, in order to restore the Bourbon dynasty. As the Wars developed, so did the contradictions. As usual, the Protestant Dutch were key opponents. At sea, several small-scale defeats were inflicted by other Protestant powers, in the form of the United States' frigates and Danish privateers. The British burnt both those nations' capitals, causing moral unease to many patriots. Unprecedentedly, Britain became Spain's defender, seeking to reinstate His Most Catholic Majesty, as well as numerous Catholic rulers from the two Sicilies to the (ex-)Holy Roman Empire – not to mention the small matter of the Pope himself.[35] Britain's staunchest allies were Austria and Portugal, as Catholic as they came. As important as these intricacies themselves is that the mass of the people were increasingly aware of them, as I will repeatedly demonstrate, especially throughout Chapter 3.

There are many other respects in which the wartime Britain that emerges from this book differs from that of Colley's *Britons*, from increasing and often fraternal contact with foreigners, especially the French, to varied, idiosyncratic, and often sceptical responses to the threat of invasion. Not least among these differences is that of geography, from the local to the national, and the sense of belonging to communities more tangible than Britain, in which if there was a hated rival, it was the neighbouring village or town rather than Napoleon. As Katrina Navickas writes, Britishness 'was never a monolithic or homogeneous concept. Nor did it progress from

confusion and localism to embody clear, national principles shared by all. Geographical identities have always been multiple, changing, overlapping, and contested.'[36] Whilst I wish to stress the local, I would also draw attention to larger affiliations other than 'Britain' – the concept, for example, of 'north Britishness', as espoused by lowland Scots and Northumbrians in particular, which I have discussed elsewhere.[37] Most importantly, I am interested in the entirety of, to use J.G.A. Pocock's coinage, the Atlantic archipelago.[38] Matthew Johnson, who reminded us, above, of the initially hostile response to Colley's thesis, did so in a geographical revision that borrows Collini's useful term 'muffling inclusiveness'.[39] This is shorthand for the subsuming of alternative regional and national identities, across the archipelago, within a southeastern English identity. 'Muffling' has long been a failing of scholarship in this area. Thompson at least makes a clear and specific apology for the geographical limitations of his research and is conscientious in keeping England, not Britain, in mind.[40] Whether national borders were the correct place to draw his line is another matter. Colley seeks to exclude Ireland from her imagined community of 'Britain'.[41] Many others have failed to address the issue, writing 'Britain', 'Britons' and 'British', yet drawing almost exclusively on London sources. One writer especially guilty of this tendency is Stuart Semmel, whose *Napoleon and the British* might more accurately be called *Napoleon and London Society*. He explains that:

> Metropolitan London publications . . . overshadow provincial ones in these pages (as they did, of course, in the general printed corpus). Though one key theme of this book is national identity, I do not propose to tease out national or regional variations in conceptions of Napoleon. I am struck by the similarities and continuities, not the differences, between productions of different geographical origins . . . The separate question of Ireland lies beyond the boundaries of this study.[42]

This may or may not hold true for the primarily journalistic material Semmel discusses; it does not apply in any particular, however, to popular culture, especially song.

Semmel's only treatment of song is in relation to the metropolitan broadside campaign of 1803 to 1805.[43] A further three paragraphs discuss post-1815 songs, but merely conclude that they are 'surprisingly positive'.[44] He notes that 'One remarkable verse reiterated the array of heroic British names so often invoked in the broadsides of 1803 – but now added Napoleon to their ranks', without perceiving an essential relation between the songs of the two periods.[45] His claim that the thousands of earlier loyalist productions are 'evidence of what the British people were being told about Napoleon and France – and what loyalists feared the British people might be thinking' is by contrast a typically nuanced appreciation of the complexities of propaganda and mentality, which helps shape my investigation into both the

motives behind songs' production, and into ways of accessing how they were received.[46] His general observation that 'Napoleon served as a lens through which to scrutinize Britain's own identity, government, and history' is especially pertinent to this context.[47] But it is also symptomatic of his interest in an overtly partisan, politicised debate carried out in a bourgeois public sphere, rather than in the streets, fairs and public houses of this book.

The notion of the public sphere itself, first formulated by Jürgen Habermas, has of course been relentlessly interrogated by historians. In a recent study, Christina Parolin stresses the importance of English plebeian discourse – both rational and otherwise – but sensibly refrains from construing this as a separate space. Following Kevin Gilmartin, she eschews the idea of a plurality of discrete 'spheres', in acknowledgement of both the physical and abstract intersections of superficially distinct realms of discourse.[48] I would add that the implicit binary of public and private that any such 'sphere' sets up is as unwieldy as that of public and plebeian. I am, however, fascinated by the refraction of war into any number of spaces, discursive and otherwise – a lively field for the past two decades, thanks in large part to the scholarship of Mary Favret.[49] Particularly in Chapter 3, I seek to contribute to a debate on the 'paper shield' and the mediated domestic experience of war that has already been greatly enriched by the work of the editors of and contributors to this series.[50]

Most recently, Jenny Uglow's *In These Times* has sought to popularise perceptions of the everyday experience of the Wars, though this excellent work struggles at times to throw off the constraints of a traditional high narrative.[51] This may be due to the need to tell a clear story to the wider public. It may also stem from an essential difficulty in attempting to penetrate beneath the surface record. Mark Philp, whose expertise Uglow acknowledges in *In These Times*, puts it thus: 'While the loyalty of the common people has been studied by their participation in local riots, rites, rituals, monarchical pageants, and volunteer movements, … there is little work (probably because it is so difficult to do) on the private and sub-cultural worlds which lay behind loyalist performances.'[52] This is true for all forms of experience, overtly loyalist or otherwise, and a problem particularly prevalent when it comes to song. Generally, we are left with the song itself, and an impression of its possible performance, but almost nothing of how it was received and internalised. I suspect that this paucity of reception evidence is the main reason why so few historians have been able to follow the dictum of de Certeau, when he writes:

> The presence and circulation of a representation … tells us nothing about what it is for its users. We must first analyse its manipulation by users who are not its makers. Only then can we gauge the difference or similarity between the production of the image and the secondary production hidden in the process of its utilisation. [53]

It is certainly the reason why, though my greatest interest is in how ordinary people made use of 'representations' (in this instance, songs), I have made the songs, rather than the people, the central object of analysis: by and large, we have the evidence of the one but not the other. Given this disparity, it is essential that we look at songs in terms of their likely usage. I hope thereby to have undertaken work of the difficult kind called for by Philp. Yet even at the surface level of reading the songs, I am greatly indebted to Philp's sensitivity to the multiplicity of interpretations offered by a single text.

Whether one can ever simply 'read' a song is another issue. The primary goal of this book is to contribute to our understanding of the period of the Napoleonic Wars in Britain; it is, if you like, a history book. The nature of my source material naturally necessitates an interdisciplinary approach, however, and I engage (most obviously in Chapter 1) with major issues of ballad and folk scholarship and musicology. In light of this, it may be worth covering some essential terminology and technicalities. I have generally employed 'song', 'popular', and 'polite', rather than 'ballad', 'working class', or 'bourgeois'. 'Song' refers to any production primarily composed of a melody and a lyric. The majority of extant street songs from this period give no tune, often leaving it to be inferred that they should be sung at all. The presence of a chorus (or refrain, or 'burthen') is sometimes a useful clue, but many songs had no chorus. Nor is a lyric's material source necessarily an indicator: broadsides were only usually songs; newspapers and journals favoured poetry but included songs; most poets also wrote songs. Hence the line between song and poem is occasionally and indeed interestingly blurred.

'Ballad' is often considered synonymous with 'song'. The definition in Samuel Johnson's dictionary, 'Ballad (balade, Fr.), A song' has been cited as proof of this.[54] Yet a definition from 1806 was rather more specific: 'BALLAD generally means a kind of song, adapted to the capacity of the lower class of people . . . Some have supposed that the knowledge of the ballads in common use is necessary to a minister of state to learn the temper and disposition of the people.'[55] Most songs in this book are ballads by this definition, but by no means all. 'Ballad' is further complicated by its implication of narrative, an element missing from many songs; by the expectation of a slow tempo and a substantial number of verses; and by its more particular poetic connotations, whereby 'ballad' and 'ancient ballad' were often interchangeable, the stuff of Scott's *Border Minstrelsy* rather than the streets. Thus, like Horgan, I prefer to employ the 'broader' term of 'song' unless a specific variant is to be indicated.[56] However, I employ 'ballad singer' as synonymous with 'street singer', as this was the universal usage at the time. In this book, 'ballad singers' sing 'songs'. Horgan's category of song is designed to foreground 'the relationship between topical songs, classical songs, psalms, and hymns'.[57] I have found that when it comes to Napoleon, 'traditional' songs, topical broadsides, theatrical songs, and songs in periodicals are similarly entangled. Sacred song intrudes occasionally, though efforts were often

taken to police the boundary between the sacred and the political. Whilst devotional culture is clearly a part of my story, and we will encounter clergymen, thanksgivings, and Sunday school attendees, I have not been able to find room for a developed investigation of sacred song: for those interested in the topic, Horgan's second chapter may be of relevance.

A song's composite identity of melody and lyric distinguishes it from 'tune' or 'air', two words used to denote solely the melodic part. Even this is problematic. Many lyrics were penned to the same tune, a far more common occurrence than the setting of existing words to a new melody. When this happened, the lyric would often be prefaced with 'To the tune of *x*'. Well-known tunes thus required titles, and could not exist independently of words. In popular culture, tunes were known by the names of famous songs of which they had formed a part. This could change over time. The tune known as 'The Brags of Washington' in 1812 had become 'A-Hunting We Will Go' by 1840.[58] The United Irishman songbook *Paddy's Resource* provocatively insisted that 'Brethren Unite' was to be sung to 'Tune – "*God save the Rights of Man*" ' rather than 'God save the King'.[59] This tune held competing identities in this period, such as Joseph Mather's 'God Save Great Thomas Paine' and 'Bob Shave the King', wherein 'Bob' was Robespierre.[60] For these radical appropriations to work, the tune's existing loyalist association was essential to the irony. In these cases the tune was a loyal one, but the resulting song was not. Samuel Bamford's attorney seized on this distinction when defending the Peterloo marchers' conduct in their trial of 1819. Aware they would be accused of singing seditious songs, the lawyer sought 'to prove the object of the music, and the use made of it, in playing national and loyal airs'.[61] It is probable that the 'airs' were national and loyal. Yet the lyrics may have been subversive. A tune, in short, was never purely melodic.

Not uncontroversially, I sometimes evaluate the success of fitting a new lyric to the meter of the tune as a key determinant of a song's 'fitness', and thus its potential to be well received. Of course, performances were often *a cappella* and idiosyncratic, singers elongating or abbreviating phrases at will. This could be said to negate the impact of an ill-stressed lyric: the singer would simply adjust the tune to fit. Yet the clumsy settings I discuss go further than an occasional extra syllable. I will only base my argument on cases when a lyric goes beyond plausible salvation, or 'reinterpretation', by a singer: cases when repeatedly unrhythmic or crammed meter constitutes a real barrier to singing.

One of the greatest problems in tackling these songs remains that of dating. Very few broadsides bore a date, and oral testimony is equally obscure. It is difficult to determine even a printed song's first appearance. Where I have attempted any dating, however broad, I have combined internal lyrical evidence with all known external data – collectors' testimonies, writers' or singers' biographical details, printers' dates of residence at premises registered on broadsides – to provide a date range.

'Popular' and 'polite', meanwhile, are shorthand techniques to differentiate what contemporaries perceived as two broadly distinct social groups. 'Popular' maps onto both the anachronistic 'working class' and 'underclass'.[62] 'Polite' implies some share or interest in an educated, property-holding society, and thus largely subsumes both 'elite' and 'middling', when middling interests were aligned with those of their class superiors. Since 1995, when Tim Harris exposed the flaws of overly paradigmatic thinking in 'Problematising Popular Culture', no satisfactory alternative model has been widely adopted.[63] I would argue for the utility of retaining 'popular culture' in this particular context, as a strong sense of 'us and them' obtains in the discourse on the Wars, with many subaltern individuals bidding for inclusion in the 'polite' group.[64] Thus the crudity of these two terms is to some extent a throwing up of hands: an acknowledgement of the impossibility of any rigid division of the populace into two or more horizontal or vertical categories, leaving open the possibility for dialogue between the two; for a multiplicity of cultures within the same class; for cross-class agency; and for the movement of songs both up and down the social scale. I am following Harris in thus focusing on 'the interaction of elite and popular culture'.[65] Pierce Egan's *Life in London* serves to remind us of this: its characters flit between elegant art galleries and dens frequented by beggars, appearing comfortable in all settings, simultaneously rogues and gentlemen.[66] I prefer 'popular' to 'vernacular' as a prefix, as popular songs could have a high literary origin, or later enter polite culture. Such songs' literary idioms were not always 'low'. The term also wards off the associations of 'folk'. Terms such as 'folk' and 'oral tradition', as Dave Harker argues so convincingly, 'are conceptual lumber, and they have to go'.[67] They also carry unhelpful connotations of stasis. Returning to Harris, I find especially pertinent to song in this period his comment that: 'Rather than seeing culture as a thing or a structure, we should see it as a process, constantly adapting itself to new developments and new circumstances.'[68] In particular, it would be as naïve to insist upon a total distinction between print and oral song culture, as between urban and rural. Similarly, no work touching upon William Cobbett could insist upon a rigid binary of loyalist and radical: not only did these two terms embrace a multitude of shifting positions, between which even a single individual could move, but they imply a certain sense of programme or partisanship absent from the mentality of much of the populace. When I use these terms, I do so specifically and contingently. Which leaves only 'Wars' to be defined: a simple referent to Britain's conflict with France, twice interrupted, between 1793 and 1815.

Though the Wars began for Britain in 1793, my story does not. Chapter 1 starts instead with a thorough examination of popular song culture in Britain in this period, a wholly necessary contextualisation if we are to make anything of the songs that follow. We must appreciate 'song' as a form with its own values and conventions, central to which is the understanding that

songs are musical objects whose affective meanings are determined in their performance: that live in the mouth, eye, and ear, not simply on the page. Popular song in this period was a mix of oral and print-based traditions in ongoing dialogue, rejuvenated by new writing from within, and by more elite productions either introduced or appropriated from above: the theatre, the pleasure garden, the literary journal, and the pens of moral and political activists. Ephemeral printers produced large, cheap, single-sided 'broadsides', usually priced at a halfpenny for one or a penny for two songs, or garlands, chapbooks, and songsters of between three and twenty-odd songs, selling for anything up to sixpence but offering greater economy of scale. These printers operated from small towns as well as major cities, and indulged in a healthy degree of piracy. Songs were distributed, performed, and sold (or, if subsidised, given out *gratis*) primarily by disreputable ballad singers. Singers were largely peripatetic, either travelling the country or working a provincial circuit from an urban hub.[69] No ballad singer would sing only topical political songs: their repertoires were rich and varied, and popular audiences were as accustomed as polite audiences to performances that spanned a range of moods and genres.

Audience response is of course simultaneously the most important and least accessible dimension of this song culture, and the chapters that follow have at their heart this task: to assemble a sense of the relative impact of songs. Structured chronologically, chapters 2 to 4 construct an unbroken narrative of the Wars in popular culture. The themes present in the events and songs of each chronological division lend each chapter a distinctive focus. Chapter 2 addresses the geographic and political palimpsest of Britain, revealing both a bitterly contested political confrontation – primarily between loyalist-nationalists in the south and Wales, and English and Irish radical voices – and a set of perspectives that fit neither side of that binary. Loyalist songs predominated by dint of sheer volume, yet their impact was less than that of moderate, contingently patriotic songs, whilst satirical and subaltern compositions thrived in smaller numbers due to their better fitness to the conditions of popular culture. Songs, like Britons, were freer and more heterodox in the time of the invasion scares than has generally been imagined.

Chapter 3, covering a period when songs turned to wider continental matters, is more concerned with news than nation, and with the control, on the domestic front, of time and space in the consumption of this news. As the war dragged on with little hope of success, the deluge of loyalist propaganda receded, and disaffected, subaltern, regional voices came to the fore. In the heady and hectic years of 1814 and 1815, the subject of the first part of Chapter 4, the growing divisions between these two broad groups became most obviously manifest, as first the General Peace, and then the Waterloo campaign, were interpreted very differently in two sets of songs. By the post-war period, however, a sung consensus was established, and it

was not a loyalist one. It became clear that the Napoleonic Wars did not forge a homogenous, quiescent British identity, but left a divided and often disaffected populace, increasingly self-aware and susceptible to further dissent in the wake of post-war repression and economic depression. To this singing nation, Napoleon – victim of the war and the British state – was one of their own: a hero and an everyman. To sing his story was thus in some sense to identify with him.

Chapter 5 serves as a case-study synopsis of this narrative, providing a level of close detail not afforded by the grand sweep that precedes it. It reveals a song culture on Tyneside that was subversive, ironic, resistant to external influence, and preoccupied with local and regional registers of discourse. Rather than inculcating widespread loyalism and patriotism, the activities of volunteer forces and propagandists stimulated scepticism and dissent, articulated in song as the most receptive and natural form for popular and especially countercultural expression. Finally, I should draw attention to the Appendix: detailed information on all songs mentioned throughout the book may be found here, when such data is available. Many of these songs may be heard via the link that accompanies this book. These are necessarily interpretations, one set of performances among an infinity of possibilities, limited to a single voice and should be taken neither as historical reconstructions nor as authoritative 'works' for analysis, but rather as, to co-opt a phrase third hand via Marsh, 'a hearing aid for historians'.[70]

1
‘A Hacknied Tune’? Song Culture in Napoleonic Britain

Until his death in 1808, John Freeth owned a tavern in Birmingham.[1] As his obituary notes, Freeth – a celebrated radical and debater – did more than serve drinks. Here was a man:

> Who, when good news is brought to town,
> Immediately to work sits down,
> And business fairly to go through,
> Writes songs, finds tunes, and sings them too.[2]

His biographer informs us that Freeth rarely committed his most extemporary effusions to paper, yet he is known to have published numerous collections of his songs, two of which concern the Napoleonic Wars.[3] It would be folly to attempt to read one of Freeth’s songs without considering his agency – as consumer of news, as songwriter, as publisher, as singer – and without a thought to the contexts in which the song existed – the tavern, the songbook’s material page, the city of Birmingham at the turn of the nineteenth century. There is nothing ineffable or intangible about song thus conceived: it is a sort of musicking carried out by people in physical and temporal space. In this opening chapter, I wish to situate Napoleonic song culture in terms of those people, the better to understand the songs that follow as part of the practice of everyday life.[4]

As Freeth’s example demonstrates, a single individual could perform multiple roles in that practice. Yet in the context of any given song, even Freeth performed those roles consecutively rather than concurrently. Conceptually, those roles may be given as: writer; printer (almost all the songs in this book were printed at some stage in their history); singer; listener. These four roles suggest a journey from creation to consumption, though the reality was rather messier. If a listener liked a song, they would become singer in turn, and every act of singing is necessarily recreative: a song was always to some extent rewritten with each rendition, just as many were rewritten (accidentally or otherwise) with each printing. Even simply to listen

is to participate in the creation of meaning. There is, therefore, fluidity, even instability, inherent in these four categories. Yet they serve to order our thinking about the practical operation of song culture in British society, during the Napoleonic Wars.

Writers

At the risk of gross simplification, it could be said that writers of Napoleonic song fell into two categories. These were distinguished, not by their relationship to politics or to Napoleon, but by their relationship to songwriting as a medium. One set were single-issue writers: those interested in the subject, rather than the medium, for whom the goal was politically or morally to influence others and thus to participate to some degree in affairs of state. The other set could more truly be called songwriters: their compositions generally ranged across a broader range of subjects, the process being a more accustomed habit of mind, and thus when they turned to topical matters, their writing was informed by both a wider and a deeper appreciation of the medium. In thinking through this intentional and technical difference, it may be helpful to see it as a vernacular permutation of Clement Greenberg's proposition, perhaps too often bandied about: 'that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique in the nature of its medium'.[5] The former group, who in many cases lacked this competence, might be called amateurs in the modern sense, the latter amateurs in its original sense, save that some in both groups also wrote for profit. Indeed all songwriting constituted to some degree a bid for status within a community, however sincere the creative act. It is with regard to the first group (the single-issue 'amateurs') that these bids are of greatest interest, as this form of civic-minded songwriting was a phenomenon peculiar to the period of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.

Philp brings this to our attention in his discussion of the contributors to Reeves' Association in the early 1790s: a group of would-be activists seeking to condition the mentality of the masses. He argues convincingly that many of those who contributed songs and other material were seeking a degree of social respectability.[6] Though these writers might hail from lowly backgrounds, they were bidding for participative inclusion in a dutiful, loyalist public sphere, in its original sense of a privileged, restricted, literate community. Letters accompanying submissions to Reeves are full of self-justifying discourse in which the distinction between the 'vulgar' language necessary in addressing a plebeian audience, and that which the authors might ordinarily employ, is painstakingly made clear. By representing themselves as condescending patricians, low-status writers negotiated the careful social codes examined in Bourdieu's *Distinction*, with the ensuing irony that in penning songs designed to keep the poor in their place, they were themselves challenging the established social order.[7] John Morfitt of Birmingham

took up his pen in 1803 because he could 'no longer be silent' in the face of 'this tremendous crisis', his words acknowledging both the need to make apology for his productions, and the break with custom in someone like him voicing a political opinion in print.[8]

This display was in part necessitated by a general prejudice against the writers of popular songs, at least as manifested in the London press. The *European Magazine* declared that: 'There are few writers more frequent or more presumptuous in their intrusions on the public than, we know not what to call them, versifiers, rhymists, metre-ballad mongers, [anything] you will but poets.'[9] The *Scourge* went further. 'It scarcely need be mentioned, that these songs are generally composed by those who have been initiated in all the slang, filthiness, and corruption, which that seat of vice, St. Giles, can produce.'[10] One retired bookseller defined 'the composer of common ballads' as belonging to 'the lowest grade' of Grub Street writers.[11] Thus Reeves' contributing songwriters, in their exculpatory letters, were distinguishing themselves from both the masses and the stereotypical 'chaunter cull' (songwriter).[12] This attitude persisted throughout the Wars. By treating loyalist songwriting as a patriotic duty akin to parish charity, even the humblest could claim a share of Britannia's glory. John Tye, author of another Birmingham song collection, laboured the point in claiming that his *Loyal Songster, Dedicated to the Birmingham Loyal Associated Corps of Infantry* possessed 'no other *recommendation* than *novelty* and *loyalty*'.[13]

This phenomenon is of interest, not only in itself, but in its effect in producing a large proportion of topical song during the Wars: songs born, not from a popular cultural tradition of songwriting, but from an extrinsic political motivation. The most obvious consequence of this was the 'us and them' mentality manifest in the majority of avowedly loyalist songwriting, in which even the most vernacular lyricists could not help but pontificate, reflecting the attitude of Patty More, a bluestocking reformer and sister to the famous Hannah More: 'They [the poor] have so little common sense, and so little sensibility, that we are obliged to beat into their heads continually the good we are doing them; and endeavouring to press upon them, with all our might, the advantages they derive from us.'[14]

The more habitual sort of songwriter perceived less of a chasm between self and audience. Being accustomed to or involved in song more broadly, there was no need to maintain a barrier of distinction. Some were, of course, 'in the business', though fewer than one might think. The best examples of professional songwriters engaging with Napoleon and the Wars are the prolific Dibdin family: Charles the Elder and his two illegitimate sons, Charles and Thomas. Poets such as Thomas Moore, though writing in the first instance for a more elevated audience, or regional figures like Robert Anderson of Carlisle, fall into a similar bracket. Some, like the Scottish weaver and songwriter Walter Watson, were occasionally supported by local subscriptions in recognition of their works.[15] Most, however, derived little or no

income from songwriting, typically getting by as weavers, schoolmasters, clerks, soldiers, or shopkeepers (we must of course also allow for the likelihood of anonymous female songwriters in both groups). In delineating this broad category, I do not mean to suggest that these writers were disinterested when their songs did address topical affairs. The most obvious example is the 'weaver boy' and radical leader Samuel Bamford, who readily admits his motivation in composing his 'Lancashire Hymn'. 'I often said to my companions; "observe our neighbours, the Church-folks, – the Methodists, – and the Ranters, – what charms they add to their religious assemblages by the introduction of vocal music. Why has such an important lesson remained unobserved by us? Why should not we add music, and heart-inspiring song to our meetings?" '[16] In the introduction to his earliest set of songs, Bamford refers to himself as 'one of old Burke's pigs', and hopes of his 'little book' that 'the sentiments of Liberty which it contains may arouse a corresponding feeling in the bosoms of his Countrymen'.[17] He differed from the single-issue loyalists described above only in that his political output was informed and accompanied by an accomplished wider repertoire, symptomatic of his deeper engagement in song culture and, in consequence, his greater competence as a songwriter. William Thom, a weaver from Inverurie, Aberdeenshire, asserts the importance of this engagement to the act of composition: 'It was not enough that we merely chaunted, and listened; but some more ambitious, or idle if you will, they in time would try a self-conceived song.'[18] He lists his own influences – Byron, Moore, Hogg, Burns, and above all Tannahill – and locates the creative process of songwriting within an existing tradition: 'some waxed bold . . . groping amidst the material around and stringing it up, ventured on a home-made lilt.'[19] Songwriters of this stamp frequently left memoirs, in which they stress the importance of long practice, and represent themselves as part of an established tradition.[20]

However one attempts to impose conceptual order, songwriting in this period was above all else heterogeneous: relevant writers range across the social and cultural spectrum, and their motivations were frequently mixed. Semi-professional Welsh singer-songwriters, for instance, could simultaneously profess piety and the wish to be paid, in formulas ranging from this humble verse by George Stephens –

> Three small half-farthings is my tribute
> Before the whole world in public;
> If they are accepted (this is the truth)
> It will be more in my mind than a piece of land.[21]

– to Ioan Dafydd's more assertive stamp of intellectual copyright:

> I must now conclude,
> Lest I should tire anyone by singing,