

Editorial: Representing Reform in the Long-Nineteenth Century

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'Sir: I had a Reform Bill;—in fact, I've got a Reform Bill,—but unfortunately I've left it at home on my dressing-table. It's too far to send; but, I think, if you will allow me, I can explain the scheme of it.' John Hollingshead, 'The Humiliation of Fogmoor', *Household Words* (1858)

AS THIS SCENE in John Hollingshead's political satire for *Household Words* shows, reform can be an elusive concept. Nonetheless it remains one of the essential frameworks used by scholars to orientate and unsettle thinking about the long-nineteenth century. On the one hand, the persistent—although not unchallenged—classification of the nineteenth century as 'the Age of Reform', and the ways in which the term is persistently applied to narratives of increased political and cultural access, mean that reform seems to coalesce with the idea of neatly cumulative statistics and progress narratives. However, recent research has tended to subdivide the study of reform, finding an approach which focusses on single institutions, individuals or pieces of legislation more favourable to making sense of the heterogeneity and patchiness of nineteenth-century reform projects, than addressing the concept as a whole.

This edition of *Romance, Revolution & Reform* combines a granular analysis of the individual cultural moments that form our composite sense of nineteenth-century reform, with an evaluation of the rich and often surprising continuities between such moments: continuities which are often considered in separate studies, or even separate disciplines. In this respect, it follows work such as Joanna Innes and Arthur Burns' *Re-thinking The Age of Reform*, which unifies its chapters on separate reform projects by exploring their shared engagement with 'reform as aspiration'.¹

The idea that reform is primarily defined by the discourses that precede (or follow) a moment of change is a crucial one for many of the articles published here.

¹ Joanna Innes and Arthur Burns, 'Introduction', *Re-Thinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

However, this issue moves beyond the question of aspiration to consider that of mediation, by exploring the ways in which reform was represented and reimagined. From published statistics to unpublished plays, and from periodicals to popular fiction, these articles reveal ways in which textual discourses about reform facilitated—or attempted to facilitate—material impacts. At the same time, their shared focus on representation unites discussions about reform as aspiration, reform as retrospection and reform as lived experience, by considering the ways these approaches were all mediated via various texts and types of data.

Sometimes this data reveals reform to be the product of decades of small changes, as opposed to the achievement of a single watershed moment. As Paul Smith and Jeff Ralph explain in the first article in this collection, which analyses the development of price measurement: '[i]f the development of measures of retail prices was a revolution, it was a very slow and stealthy one, operating more or less throughout the long-nineteenth century'.² Nonetheless, as Smith and Ralph argue, this steady, long-term development, recorded in statistical studies across the century—from Thomas Tooke's calculations of historical price data, to Seebohm Booth and Joseph Rowntree's collection of household expenditure statistics—produced a no less radical change in society than epochal reform. Instead, their article shows that it was precisely the work of 'enterprising individuals' who built upon the statistical methods of their predecessors across decades, which ultimately led to a state maintained price index, culminating in the introduction of the Cost of Living Index by World War I. Such work, they argue, also prompted serious thought about the relationship between price levels, wage levels and the poverty line, which in turn acted as evidence of the need for nationwide social reform. In this way, Smith and Ralph's mapping of the development of general price measurement reveals statistical approaches, revised over decades, to be capable of executing the landmark changes with which we most closely associate reform in contemporary criticism. It also reveals a combination of reform aspiration and retrospection to be responsible for the progress of retail price measurement, as strategies moved from 'individual innovation to state production'.

Conversely, taking the periodical as his chosen medium, Jonathan Potter's article about the retrospective representation of the reformed post office and the hospital in

² Paul A. Smith and Jeff Ralph, 'Measuring the General Level of Prices in the UK in the Long-Nineteenth Century: from Individual Innovation to State Production', *RRR*, 3, pp.10-35, (p.33).

two *Household Words* articles—'Valentine's Day at the Post Office', by Charles Dickens and William Henry Wills, and Frederick Knight Hunt's 'Twenty-Four Hours in a London Hospital'—takes a less linear approach to the relationship between the individual and the system. Potter's work offers a timely analysis of these texts and their representation of institutional reform, contributing to a burgeoning body of work on urban improvements and mid-century infrastructural networks championed most notably by Karin Koehler, Joanna Hofer-Robinson, Eleanor Hopkins and others.³ Potter argues that, '[f]or those writing at the mid-nineteenth century, [...] similar shifts in scale and in what space and time meant to lived experience were not so much reformations of a previous system, but an entirely new way of being'.⁴ Rather than building upon the work of previous initiatives, Potter argues that the mid-century reform of the Post Office and hospital was understood as making a more radical break with the past. This meant that periodical authors such as Dickens and Knight Hunt needed a new way to make sense of these confusing and overabundant spaces. For Potter, this means that the role played by these articles, as they re-imagine the individual's relationship with reformed spaces, is somewhat sinister, as they 'seek to reform the role of the individual in relation to [...] systems, subjugating individual agency to the primacy of systemic control'.⁵ Using Marc Augé's discussion of non-places and supermodernity as a theoretical framework, and demonstrating how these articles teeter between a rational representation of confusing spaces and a darker attempt to subsume the individual within the system, Potter reads meaning into tangled networks. However, his work also tentatively raises questions about what happens, not when reform itself is disquieting, but when it can only be mobilised or represented if controversial topics are acknowledged. When the ability to represent the need for reform is significantly restricted, it takes additional detective work from the modern scholar to uncover hidden motivations and agendas.

In her article on Elizabeth Inchbald's 1792 play *The Massacre*, Eva Lippold addresses this problem by astutely interweaving discussions of censorship, the position of women in the late-eighteenth century and the concept of female morality to reveal

³ See for example, Karin Koehler, *Thomas Hardy and Victorian Communication: Letters, Telegrams and Postal Systems*, (London: Palgrave, 2016).

⁴ Jonathan Potter, 'Humanity Invested with a New Form: The Post Office and the Hospital in Household Words, c. 1850', *RRR*, 3, pp.36-56, (p.37).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.36.

intriguing resonances between the fictional world of the play, and its fraught post-revolutionary context. Lippold offers a re-appraisal of the possible reasons why the *Massacre*—the only known play written by a woman dedicated to a representation of the French Revolution at this time—was not staged during Inchbald's lifetime. By suggesting early in her article that the piece was an intentional closet drama, Lippold moves beyond previous work on this topic—which takes the Revolution itself and French culture as its centre of gravity—focusing instead on the intersection between Inchbald's fictional representation of female morality 'as a potential means for political change', and the representational limits placed upon women playwrights during this particular cultural moment.⁶ 'Despite the threatening atmosphere prevailing throughout Inchbald's play', Lippold argues, 'her work is not primarily about the physical dangers of revolution, but instead reflects on the concept of morality in challenging times'.⁷ For Inchbald, the moral standards enforced upon women can have violent and tragic consequences, and Lippold's discussion of these representations analyses Inchbald's advocacy for reforms that chime with several of her contemporaries, including Mary Wollstonecraft. In this article, we also return to the importance of individual enterprise in shaping patterns of reform, which Smith and Ralph explored in their more empirical approach. However, rather than using reform to consider the relationship between self and system, Lippold draws out the unique engagement with reform in one of Inchbald's plays and analyses its uniqueness in relation to the rest of her oeuvre.

Our penultimate article takes us from the work and approaches of individual feminists to the imagined communities that they formed. In her article about feminist campaign journalism during the crisis in France in the early 1870s, Sian Kitchen mines an immensely productive subject at the intersection of feminism, periodical history and military history. Her article illuminates the stakes of women's campaign journalism during the French crisis, suggesting that because feminist journalists contributing to these publications and 'expressed opinions on spheres outside those usually ascribed to women, including foreign events', they wrote against dominant patriarchal

⁶ Eva Lippold, 'Liberty joined with Peace and Charity': Elizabeth Inchbald and a Woman's Place in the Revolution', *RRR*, 3, pp.57-77, (p.58).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.66.

ideologies and created a very specific kind of imagined community.⁸ Rather than simply re-shaping Benedict Anderson's cornerstone theory, however, Kitchen posits that feminist campaign journalists created a complex counter-community, distinct from the male, nationalist vision of England 'that defined itself against a "foreign other"', during this time of crisis in France.⁹ However, Kitchen nuances the binary terms of this model by suggesting that this feminist imagined community 'may itself be challenged, as it emerged from English feminists' experiences which were themselves grounded in their own class privileges and political ideologies'.¹⁰ The article therefore suggests ways in which the representation of debates about political reform in France on the pages of English feminist periodicals created new discursive communities, while also remaining alert to their limitations. This revised framework allows Kitchen to approach the articles of such periodicals as the *Englishwoman's Review* and the *Women's Suffrage Journal* in a new light.

Kitchen's article reconstructs a narrative formed of female voices, in which revolutionary warfare in Europe is bound up with the fight for women's rights and suffrage, rather than a male assertion of nationalistic superiority. In our final article, Carol Bolton echoes the at times unexpected relationship between anti-establishment coups and fervent nationalism in her analysis of the under-studied African Journal of Captain Philip Beaver. Bolton's article includes a careful survey of the journal's account of Beaver's venture to Bolama, where he and others attempted to establish a colonial project in 1791. A supporter of abolition and with high-minded plans for reforming relations between white British colonists and indigenous African communities, the planned Bolama colony about which Beaver wrote, was a 'civilising' mission, predicated on the employment of 'free' Africans. In narrating the history of the venture and the published journal to which it gave rise, Bolton uncovers a fascinating trajectory: while the Bolama colonists' constitution was disapproved of by the British government as echoing Revolutionary instability, Beaver's published journal led to his being revered with the same kind of national pride as such figures as Horatio Nelson. The article also offers a timely addition to other methodologically conscious writing about colonists,

⁸ Sian Kitchen, "'Let the feminine plebiscite be consulted": English feminists' campaign journalism, foreign policy and the crisis in France of 1870-71', *RRR*, 3, pp.78-104, (p.78).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

slave owners and abolitionary reform, such as Christer Petley's recent book *White Fury* (2019).¹¹ Ultimately, Bolton argues, '[e]xamining the context from which Beaver's text emerged enables understanding of the nexus between individual ambitions to explore and settle foreign lands, the imaginative engagement of readers with such accounts, their influence on secondary works, and the implications for British foreign policy in expanding knowledge of, and intercourse with, the Atlantic world'.¹²

Unlike the luckless politician in Hollingshead's sketch—who ultimately accepted that Reform is not easily described, particularly if one leaves the paperwork at home—this edition of *RRR* uses the idea of 'reform as representation' to unify broad conceptual thinking about the topic, with an original analysis of specific texts, individuals and projects. By placing subjects that would not normally be analysed together in adjacent positions, this issue aims to reveal unexpected methodological cross-currents, as well as revisiting some well-trodden paths to offer new perspectives.

¹¹ Christer Petley, *White Fury: A Jamaican Slaveholder and the Age of Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹² Carol Bolton, 'The Bolama Colony and Abolitionary Reform in Captain Beaver's African Memoranda (1805)', *RRR*, 3, pp.105-127, (p.112).