

Chapter 12

‘THINKING MINDS OF BOTH SEXES’:

Patriotism, British Bluestockings and the Wars against Revolutionary America and France, 1775-1802

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‘Without intending it, I have slid into politics’, wrote the poet Anna Seward at the end of a long letter to a regular correspondent, Colonel Dowdeswell of Shrewsbury, in November 1797. ‘In a period so momentous,’ she explained, ‘their attraction, to thinking minds of both sexes, is resistless.’¹ This quotation might suggest that Seward had forgotten herself temporarily to make a brief aside which touched on some political question. In fact, her whole letter had been devoted to discussing the war against revolutionary France—her enjoyment of a concert in Birmingham given to celebrate Admiral Duncan’s victory at Camperdown the previous month; the civility of the eighty French prisoners of war exiled in her home town of Lichfield in Staffordshire for the past ten months; the prisoners’ inhospitable reception by most of the other residents of Lichfield and their recent removal to Liverpool jail; her musing on the sufferings of British prisoners of war in France; the miseries and evils of war in general; and the prejudice and corruption of the Pitt administration in its refusal to seek peace with France sooner. The ‘slide’ into

politics that she mentions therefore represents no momentary lapse, but rather a natural shift from describing her experience, as a genteel woman, of the British homefront during the war against revolutionary France—through appropriately feminine expressions of anxiety about British prisoners and the horrors of war—to clearly political judgement regarding the errors of government policy. The statement that she had found herself writing about politics ‘without intending it’, however, may imply that such political comment was not necessarily regarded as appropriate from women.

Historian Harriet Guest, among others, has pointed out the difficulty of defining ‘the nature of patriotism, and the form in which it might be appropriate to women’ in Britain in this period, in which national politics were increasingly factionalized, and in which an increasing emphasis was placed on the domestic roles of middle-class women.² This paper considers some of the forms of patriotism which have previously been identified as open to British women during the wars of the late eighteenth century and suggests another, which may be described as ‘independent patriotism’: a non-gendered, non-partisan engagement with the political affairs of one’s country. It does so by focusing mainly on the correspondence of two English bluestockings (members of a network of literary salons and correspondence),³ Anna Seward and Elizabeth Carter, each with clearly different political proclivities, and examining the ways in which they discussed these conflicts.

The Revolutionary Wars took place during a period of crystallizing political connections in Britain. The war against revolutionary America was fought by the administration of Lord North, and opposed in Parliament by groups of Whigs following the leadership of the Marquis of Rockingham and the Earl of Chatham (the elder Pitt) respectively. Both groups believed initially that the British government

ought to conciliate rather than coerce the American colonists and, later (in the Chathamites' case, after the death of their leader), that independence was inevitable and that amicable relations should be restored as soon as possible. By the time the Revolution in France broke out, William Pitt the younger, son of the Earl of Chatham, was Prime Minister. The Foxite Whigs, successors to the Rockinghamites, split into those who crossed the floor of both Houses of Parliament to support the government on the issue of the war, and those who, under Charles James Fox, opposed the military struggle fought by Pitt's administration and its successors against France for almost all of its 22 years. Anna Seward (1747-1809) held opinions which generally aligned her with the Foxite Whigs in opposition to the Pitt administration. Her published correspondence begins after the end of the American war, so this paper only refers to her views on the French war. Elizabeth Carter (1717-1806), the renowned Greek scholar, tended towards similar opinions to those of Edmund Burke on both conflicts. Burke, the chief spokesman for the Rockingham Whigs, opposed the government's policy on America. Famously, however, he was the first to break with the Foxite Whigs and support the war against the French Revolution.

Female Patriotism

Louise Carter has recently discussed many of the ways in which British women were not merely permitted, but positively encouraged, to engage actively in support of the war against revolutionary France, describing them collectively as 'female patriotism'. These were patriotic activities which were deemed appropriate

for women to carry out but which were not superfluous, merely decorative, additions to the national war effort, suggested simply to allow women to feel involved and keep them out of the way of more important work. Rather, they emerged from the needs and challenges created by the scale of this conflict, and a range of discourses characterizing women as patriots as well as moral and religious exemplars justified their participation in these ways. They included sacrificing the presence and support of male relatives to active armed service away from home, contributing financially to the cost of the wars, writing loyalist publications, dispensing military patronage, offering charity and travelling on campaign with the British armed forces.⁴ Just as the British authorities were forced to accept the politicization of many non-elite men by their need to mobilize public support of different kinds during this war, and, as Karen Hagemann has shown, just as the Prusso-German elite had to encourage patriotic activity by women in their struggle against Napoleonic France, so too the British governing classes needed not only to countenance but even to solicit the active loyal support of women.⁵ In the Voluntary Contribution of 1798 towards the prosecution of the war, for instance, donations from women accounted for 20 per cent of the total funds collected.⁶

Harriet Guest suggests that this kind of ‘female patriotism’ may be seen as a form of eighteenth-century sensibility, an emotionally driven response to national need, in which both men and women extended physical affection for their own families ‘to embrace the public good’.⁷ Anna Seward’s nationally acclaimed poetry discussed war, for instance, through the lens of her distress over the death of her friend, Major John André.⁸ Elizabeth Carter’s entry into political engagement in her letters in the 1770s can be explained by her use of the common characterization of the American war as a conflict between parent and child. Carter’s view, widespread

among those who opposed the war, was that the normal trajectory of colonies was to mature over time and, eventually, become independent. It was painful for parents to let go, but wrong for them to continue to demand submission. This domestic vocabulary, Guest proposes, allowed women such as Carter admission into the discussion by forming a bridge from the private into the public.⁹ The languages of morality, compassion and religion, and an attention to the details of daily life, offered acceptable and often distinctively feminine ways of writing about war, whether from a loyalist or an anti-war standpoint; not only did they draw on traditionally feminine concerns and domains, but they also offered to women a legitimate sense of obligation to act.¹⁰ Patriotism construed as a local and domestic matter was suited and open to women. Historian Emma Major has argued that public events took on private importance in this period, notably in the bluestocking correspondence.¹¹ Contemporary writers would have agreed. Charlotte Smith, for example, wrote in her 1792 novel, *Desmond*: ‘Women it is said have no business with politics . . . Why not?—Have they no interest in the scenes that are acting around them in which they have fathers, brothers, husbands, sons or friends engaged?’¹²

In many ways, the correspondence of the bluestockings conformed to this understanding of ‘female patriotism’. They frequently expressed pain on behalf of the families of soldiers and sailors, concern for the poor, fear of invasion, and desire for peace, however worthwhile the objects of the war. ‘It made me melancholy to reflect how many would probably never return to their families, and their country’, Elizabeth Carter wrote after watching troops embark for Holland from her home town of Deal in September 1799. She discussed the anxiety of local fishermen not to be pressed into naval service in 1776; she was pleased that her friend was due to take a journey north in 1778, further from any likely French landing point than was her

home in London; and she rested her hopes in the good Providence of a powerful God.¹³ In a similar way, Anna Seward could not see that the balance of power in Europe should be a priority for Britain in 1791, when war with Russia threatened: ‘Why should we augment the ruinous weight of our immense national debt, and grind the faces of the poor with taxes in endless accumulation, beneath a visionary dread lest the balance of power should be lost in Europe?’¹⁴ Peace, she reflected in 1797, ‘is worth any price to England, short of the reduction of her navy’. The value of Britain’s foreign conquests, which might be conceded to secure peace, ‘is as dust in the balance against the miseries of protracted war’.¹⁵

But how far did these women also engage with the political and ideological aspects of the Revolutionary Wars, or were they restricted only to commenting on the more practical issues? Contemporary discussion of women and war did not suggest that women might take an intelligent interest in armed conflict. The assumption was often that women were weak, passive objects of defence. The conservative writer Laetitia Matilda Hawkins claimed in her *Letters on the Female Mind* (1793) that most British women knew very little about the French Revolution or the war.¹⁶ At best, they might be moral supporters of the wars and guardians of the homefront; at worst, they were potential sexual traitors, waiting eagerly for invading French troops.¹⁷ Even those writers who encouraged a positive, active patriotic role for women during the wars encompassing charity, propaganda and other forms of moral support, distinguished this type of effort from politics. ‘In directing the attention of our female readers to these transactions,’ warned J. A. Stewart, the author of *The Young Woman’s Companion or Female Instructor*, ‘our object is not to make them *politicians* but *patriots*.’—that is, moral supporters of the war, not analysts of its causes or conduct.¹⁸ Anna Seward’s *Monody on Major André* (1781)

was praised for its poetry by the anonymous author of the *Dialogues Concerning the Ladies* (1785), but criticized for its attack on George Washington for the manner of André's death. The author of the *Dialogues* chose to excuse this, however, because 'the laws of war are not a very natural or ordinary subject of female inquiry'.¹⁹

Louise Carter argues that the majority of women's published views on the war against revolutionary France were therefore 'framed in terms of the human consequences of the conflict rather than the loss or advantage to the state or military and were cloaked in the language of morality rather than political analysis'. While the personal papers of many women show that they did take an interest in high politics and military strategy privately, they did not usually express this interest publicly.²⁰ Anne K. Mellor has shown that women skilfully used different genres of literature to take part in public debate about war and other political subjects, but this was necessarily a subtle form of political discussion.²¹ However, the bluestocking letters engage directly with some of the political issues raised by the wars, while inhabiting a space between the public and the strictly personal, being passed around a number of friends and acquaintances and, in Seward's case, being deliberately prepared by her for posthumous publication.²² Kathleen Wilson has recently suggested that they 'mimicked and supplemented' public reportage, circulating news and intelligence and exchanging opinions on political affairs discussed in newspapers and pamphlets.²³ Since drawing-room salons were the other major element of bluestocking sociability, it is not surprising that the bluestocking correspondence often has the air of salon contributions.²⁴ While Carter articulated her reluctance for her letters to be read by anybody other than the named recipient, it is clear that her letters were regularly shared with others in the bluestocking circle, and it is possible that she also contemplated posthumous publication.²⁵ Lord Bath, returning one of her

letters in 1761 to her chief correspondent, Elizabeth Montagu, expressed pleasure for Carter and Montagu themselves that they were to spend much of the coming winter together, but admitted that ‘I wish you very often separated, & apart from each other, that mankind hereafter may be benefited by such a Correspondence’.²⁶

These writers were, then, self-consciously observers of (rather than participants in) political action, but this should not be seen as necessarily a female role. English women were obvious bystanders during wars, with the exceptions of camp followers, nurses and navy wives, but it does not necessarily follow that intelligent and highly literate women were any less engaged in the political events of their era than the average educated, male, civilian observer of the times. Jonathan Clark has recently argued, for instance, that relatively few people in Britain, presumably of either sex, Edmund Burke included, really grasped the significance of American revolutionary events at the time.²⁷

It is true that both Carter and Seward made occasional remarks to the effect that politics were not an appropriate subject for women. Yet, rather than reinforcing the view that war consolidated gender difference, their letters tend to demonstrate, if anything, a narrowing of the gap between men and women. War was a subject which, as the opening quotation from Seward suggests, attracted the notice of women as much as men; and the bluestocking letters showed that they paid close attention to the political and military situation, and assumed the same interest in their readers.

Eighteenth-Century Patriotism and the Independent Country Gentlemen

A broader form of patriotism open to women may be suggested, therefore: the ‘independent patriotism’ proposed above. As Anna Clark has noted, before the conservative patriotic resistance to the revolutionary French appeared in the 1790s, for most of the eighteenth century the primary British understanding of patriotism was of opposition to the government—defending one’s country by holding its administration to account. From the 1770s, however, a further, cosmopolitan, patriotism promoted the rights of humanity and not just those of the freeborn Englishman.²⁸ While the loyalist patriotism of the 1790s made room for women in the various forms of female patriotic activity described above, Clark has suggested that the oppositional patriotic model, centred on Parliament, was ‘highly masculine and xenophobic’; and only relatively few women, such as the historian and political writer, Catharine Macaulay, aligned themselves with the radicalism of the cosmopolitan patriots.²⁹ A fifth, less vociferous genre of eighteenth-century patriotism may also be considered, however. It is possible to draw a parallel between the kind of patriotism displayed by some of the bluestockings and that adopted by independent country gentlemen sitting in the House of Commons in the eighteenth century, and so to suggest a further form of patriotism open to women in the later eighteenth century. For this it is necessary to consider briefly these men and their notion of patriotism.

The independent country gentlemen constituted a non-partisan sector of MPs first formally identified and analysed by Lewis Namier in *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (1928). He divided those he described as ‘the inevitable parliament men’—those who were more or less predestined for parliamentary service

from birth—into two groups. These were the ‘politicians’ and the ‘country gentlemen’. The ‘politicians’, or those who sought careers in politics, were active within either the ‘Court’ or the ‘Country’ connections, and generally saw patriotism as a matter of supporting government or opposing government respectively. The independent country gentlemen, however, stood in Parliament because this proved their standing and influence in their own counties, and in order to defend their local and class interests. Their distinguishing political characteristics, Namier argued, were ‘as a rule neither political acumen and experience nor Parliamentary eloquence, but an independent character and station in life, and indifference to office’.³⁰

There were only around 60 to 80 of these MPs in the mid-eighteenth century, out of a total House of Commons membership of 558; but they were enough to allow the loose Parliamentary opposition usually termed ‘Country’ to defeat the Court if they threw their collective weight against the government on any particular issue.³¹ They rarely troubled to do this. They believed that government was the responsibility of the Crown and its ministers, and that Parliament was there only to hold the administration to public accountability, not to hinder or prescribe government policy. Therefore, while they enjoyed visiting London and Westminster during ‘the Season’, and they did attend the House periodically, they did not feel obliged to attend every session nor to inspect and dissect every government action. They did not accept the ‘Country’ argument that it was a patriot’s duty to oppose the Court party on most matters because the Court was attempting to subvert the constitution in favour of the Crown; rather, their default position was one of support for the Court, but with the freedom to oppose and defeat it when they were convinced that the policies and tactics of the government were corrupt or catastrophically incompetent. Regular, formed opposition was certainly factious and possibly treasonable. In their eyes,

‘patriotism’ meant defence of the national interest, which was unlikely to mean permanent opposition to the government of the Crown. Permanent opposition, they believed, was more likely to be motivated by personal ambition than by pursuit of national welfare. Specific measures might be resisted with discrimination, but not the government as such.³²

The Bluestockings as Independent Patriots

Matthew McCormack is, of course, right to emphasize the masculinity inherent in the concept of independence in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries England, from the emergence of a neo-classical political creed based on the independent citizen during the English Civil War, to the definition of ‘the independent man’ by 1832 which allowed the electorate to be substantially widened.³³ His discussion, however, is largely concerned with the campaign for the acquisition of active political rights, which Elizabeth Carter and Anna Seward did not consider, so far as is known. And it is arguable that the patriotism observed by the independent country gentlemen was, in some telling respects, analogous to that practised by Carter, Seward, and other bluestockings quite as much as it was open to male observers of British politics outwith the Houses of Parliament. The independent country gentlemen, while distinguished from such observers primarily by their membership of the House of Commons and their potential to effect change when they chose, were most frequently characterized by an attitude of detached observation rather than any desire for active interference. They had the right to express their own opinions on political matters, because they were dependent on no-

one, whether patrons or political parties, for their seats in Parliament, and those opinions could swing between political connections depending on the issues at hand. On the other hand, they had no independent power to change government policy.

Similarly, the bluestocking letters, ‘mimic[king] and supplement[ing]’ public reportage, were written by women free from partisan obligations. Both Carter and Seward emphasized the detachment which characterized their individual states of life. Carter retired from publishing in the mid-1770s, and Seward frequently drew attention to her provincial life and distance from the metropolis. They also underlined their independence from political groups and stances. After the outbreak of the war against America, Carter berated both sides in Parliament:

What wretched accounts of the state of things in America, and what folly in the measures on all sides, which have involved the nation in such a difficulty! The government by urging an unprofitable right, if a right it be, and the opposition by heightening the refractory spirits of the colonists!³⁴

Reginald Blunt, the editor of a selection of Elizabeth Montagu’s correspondence in 1923, dismissed such a political attitude. Mrs Montagu, he wrote, was ‘very little of a politician. Her interests were largely personal, and she numbered among her friends prominent people on both sides in Parliament.’³⁵ However, such an independent patriotism—a non-partisan, intelligent engagement with political events, unrestricted by the approved forms of ‘female patriotism’—was open to women of independent means and intellectual ability, such as the bluestockings. In their discussions of the wars in correspondence, they showed a general informedness about the course of events and an interest in intelligent analysis; their observations

were frequently acute and expressive; most interestingly, perhaps, they demonstrated a willingness to think independently, and to change their minds, unshackled as they were by party ties.

Carter was always hungry for political and military information, and she frequently expressed scepticism regarding the quality of public information and complained about its paucity. ‘We have here the same strange want of intelligence as ever,’ she grumbled in April 1780, ‘and nobody can tell if the French fleet has, or has not, been in the Channel.’³⁶ However, because she lived in Deal, just north of Dover, a safe place to anchor at the mouth of the River Thames, down river from London, in fact she often obtained news carried by ships from America very quickly, though she treated it with caution. In December 1776, impatient for news, she seized on a story ‘received from the masters of several transports just arrived in the Downs’, all agreeing on the same events; yet, she commented, ‘Common ship-news is so very suspicious, that I know not how far this intelligence may be credited’.³⁷ ‘What strange contradictory accounts of American transactions!’ she exclaimed in 1777. ‘I have long since forborn [*sic*] giving credit to any but such as are transmitted by the Generals themselves. Most of the private accounts, I suppose are forgeries for stock-jobbers, who win or lose a battle just as it suits their own particular interests.’³⁸ Such trust reposed in ‘the Generals’ was not so indirect as it may appear: in 1778, she told Mrs Montagu, ‘I just saw a gentleman who is secretary to our Admiral, and I find by him that there is not likely to be any formal declaration of war [against France], till it is known what is the success of our commissioners in America’.³⁹ Living in Deal also allowed her to verify stories for herself: ‘I am never much dejected by patriotic wailings’, she wrote later in 1778, using the word ‘patriotic’ in its older, oppositional sense:

Some time ago I had a letter, in which my correspondent told me, she had met a patriot in her visits, who just before he left the room let off, by way of news, that the French had taken the [British] Jamaica fleet. On the very day I received this letter, the said Jamaica fleet, in great safety and quietness, sailed through the Downs.⁴⁰

In Bath in December 1781, she had much less opportunity to secure news: 'I suppose the present important crisis of public affairs engages the mind of all who think, and the conversation of all who talk, in London. At Bath nobody thinks or talks of any such matter.'⁴¹

Both Carter and Seward read and discussed such essential publications as Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791-92). Although Carter had not seen Fanny Burney's new novel, *Cecilia*, (published on 12 June 1782) by September, because it had not yet reached her local circulating library, she managed to read Burke's *Reflections* within six weeks of its publication on 1 November 1790, and thought it 'a very noble performance', though she expressed misgivings about the notorious passages on Marie-Antoinette.⁴² On the other hand, she found Paine's *Rights of Man* an 'execrable performance'.⁴³ Seward made do with extracts from Burke's pamphlet in the newspapers for several weeks, and preferred the radical *Letters from France* by her friend Helen Maria Williams (published in the same month as Burke's *Reflections*), for showing her 'the sunny-side of the French Revolution', as opposed to the 'darkness, clouds, and shadows' thrust upon it by Burke.⁴⁴ By 19 December

1790, however, she had felt obliged to read his *Reflections* properly for herself: ‘You will wonder’, she wrote to a friend,

when I tell you that as yet I have read only in extracts, that publication upon which the eye of all Europe is bent. Accident, and not want of inclination, has occasioned this abstinence. I shall have it next week, and I mean to read and consider it with the most impartial eye.⁴⁵

By the time she finished the letter, she had read the book, and was, she confessed, ‘reluctantly convinced that the boasted liberty of France is degenerating into coercive anarchy, not likely to end well’, though she did not like Burke’s ‘Quixotism about the Queen of France’ nor his vindication of hereditary honours.⁴⁶ Seward also read various replies to Burke, such as those by Sir Brooke Boothby, Tom Paine and David Williams. She admired all these works for their criticisms of the *Reflections*, but none of them convinced her that Burke was wrong about the disastrous nature of the Revolution in France.⁴⁷

Although Seward was the more liberal politically of the two, neither sympathised with radicals, nor with the republican model. Historian Gary Kelly is correct to point out that the bluestockings were so rooted in the established order that they had an interest in upholding it and that most of them resisted radical change to it.⁴⁸ ‘I have ever loved and venerated the cause of liberty’, Seward claimed in August 1792,

. . . but I every day grow more and more sick of that mischievous oratory which ferments and diffuses the spirit of sedition . . . Paine’s pernicious and

impossible system of equal rights, is calculated to captivate and dazzle the vulgar; to make them spurn the restraints of legislation, and to spread anarchy, murder, and ruin over the earth.⁴⁹

She praised the government's success, by January 1793, in deflating the radical movement and stirring up national loyalty; and, in April 1793, her message to those who were still dissatisfied with the British constitution even in the light of the vortex of violence in France, was blunt: 'America is accessible'. She had little sympathy for the campaign of the Dissenters for equal political rights with Anglicans, conflating this with the republicanism of 'their leader, [Joseph] Priestley'.⁵⁰ Seward's opinions often naturally aligned her with the Foxite Whigs in opposition to the government, but her views on their attitude towards the radicals clearly demonstrate her independent patriotism, and, indeed, she used the word 'patriotism' in this sense. After the failure of the government's treason trials in 1794, she criticized the leading opposition MPs, Charles James Fox, Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Thomas Erskine, for supporting the radicals during the trials, and for their demands for the repeal of the government's legislation repressing radical activities. 'Serjeant Adair and Mr Wilberforce are the only men, one on the H[abeas] Corpus Act, the other on the war, who appear to have spoken, independent of selfish short-sighted ambition and party connections, the dictates of true patriotism, suited to the ominous complexion of the times.'⁵¹

As early as 1782, after hearing about Richard Price's *Letter to the Volunteers* on the subject of parliamentary reform, Elizabeth Carter had made the suggestion that radicals should consider emigrating to America.⁵² The French Revolution only increased her revulsion. Denying that she had felt any anxiety about public disorder

on the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1791, because she had believed government measures to have been adequate to deal with any such attempts, she none the less admitted that, 'I felt a very great horror of the general spirit that gave rise to that absurd celebration. . . . It is astonishing that some people, even of sense and virtue, should give an encouragement to the wretches who would contrive our ruin'.⁵³

Carter, whose views tended to chime with those of Edmund Burke, was uneasy about the war against America, thinking it an impossible task for Britain: 'all but peace is ruin'. 'I am no American', she protested in 1777, but, where colonies demand independence, 'the truest policy is at once to give up the point'.⁵⁴ She also criticized the management of the war by the North administration. She hoped, for instance, that the Irish Parliament might succeed in being granted the trade concessions they sought in 1779, which might have been granted to them with better grace the previous year. 'But this is a procrastinating age. Our armies march too late, our fleets sail too late, and our concessions are made so late that some will not receive, and others not thank us for them.'⁵⁵ Like Burke, however, she had fewer qualms about the conflict against France, though she continued to regret warfare in itself and to wish it over as soon as possible.

Anna Seward, on the other hand, was highly critical of the Pitt administration during the French wars, at least from mid-1794 onwards. She offers a fascinating study of independence of mind, which might uncharitably be dismissed as a 'feminine' inability to make up her mind, but which is more accurately described as the ability to follow events and to admit with great candour when she changed her mind as the issues changed. Like an independent country gentleman in the House of

Commons, she was under no obligation to adhere to her party leadership through thick and thin, but could follow events and change her opinions as she saw fit.

Seward began the French Revolutionary era, as we have seen, by admiring Helen Maria Williams's perspective on the Revolution.⁵⁶ But she realized that these letters 'do not attempt to reason, they only paint, and shew the illumined side of the prospect', and when, reluctantly, she finally read Burke's *Reflections*, she was persuaded by his pessimism regarding France and his fear of the consequences for Britain (if not by his view of the Glorious Revolution in Britain). While the early radical replies to Burke pleased her in terms of their general political philosophies, none of them convinced her of a more optimistic view of the French Revolution. Even while, as a liberal Whig, she hoped that, eventually, 'the French may prove a pattern . . . of public virtue and public happiness, to the whole world', she agreed with Burke that, currently, the revolutionaries were engaged in a 'hazardous experiment; in which all the links were broken in that great chain of subordination which binds to each other the various orders of existence'.⁵⁷ This did not mean that she adopted all of Burke's political principles, however, since she continued to wish for a more liberal constitution in Britain; but she recognized, with Burke, that 'The frailty of human nature considered, we have no more right to expect perfection in governments than from individuals'.⁵⁸

Further criticisms of Burke's stance, however, published later in 1791, caused her to wobble in her assessment of his accuracy:

Mr Burke's book has greatly fallen in my estimation, since the replies have proved upon it much misrepresentation and suppressed evidence—have hunted its arguments into all their artful recesses and demonstrated their

sophistry. . . . I looked through the darkened telescope of Burke, and believed [the ruin of France] inevitable; but, at present, the prophecy wears no likelihood of completion.⁵⁹

She began to doubt her own judgement: ‘As to politics, I do not think myself at all qualified to talk about them; to speak with any degree of certainty upon the event of that great, but hazardous experiment, which France is making . . .’⁶⁰

A year later, in autumn 1792, as the Revolution became more sweeping and more violent, and as radical societies flourished in Britain, she had regained certainty of her opposition to the Revolution. This did not mean, however, that she was glad to see the German invasion of France: they merely added to the ‘rivers of blood’ already running high in France, and she could not see that they would be either victorious or successful in restoring the monarchy.⁶¹ She hoped that the Pitt administration would ‘keep us out of the bloody Quixotism, in which so considerable a part of Europe has engaged’, and she did not consider the defence of Britain’s ally, the Dutch Republic, to be a sufficient cause of Britain declaring war on France—the Dutch, after all, had proved themselves to be a faithless ally by joining America’s war against Britain in 1780.⁶²

Yet by January 1793, Seward found herself applauding those opposition Whigs who were forming the so-called ‘Third Party’ to support the Pitt administration in its move towards war with revolutionary France and repression of radicalism at home, while still opposing it on most other grounds. This, she said, was ‘to see true patriotism breaking out, like the sun, from beneath the clouds of party and prejudice’.⁶³ In April, 1793, she defended the war against France. After the public threats made in the French National Convention ‘to assassinate our ministers,

bring our monarch to the block', and after French revolutionary ideas were promulgated all over Britain, abetted by 'those unhappy distempered people, who were endeavouring to communicate their plague-spots to our yet healthy region', it was surely time to repel the French by force. 'If ever it was right to petition Heaven for a blessing on the unsheathed sword, it is now that it has been drawn against the lawless, the murderous, the impious, seeking to infect and to subjugate every happier country.'⁶⁴ Moreover, where once she had hoped for parliamentary reform in Britain, now, she admitted, this had been a 'romantic folly', since

the mischiefs of individual representation are fully demonstrated by the guilty, the ruinous anarchy into which it has plunged our unfortunate neighbours. We are now, however unwillingly, taught by experience, that, through the natural depravity of human nature, people of property, who have a considerable stake in their country, are, in general, the only real patriots—that they alone can be safely entrusted with the management of its interests.⁶⁵

By mid-1794, however, Anna Seward had returned to her usual stance of opposing Pitt, the war having proved both unsuccessful and enormously expensive. 'From the moment Mr Pitt declared in the senate, that the war must be pursued at every hazard, even of national ruin here, he fell in my confidence, from the highest elevation of wisdom and virtue that ever minister attained.' Moreover, she wondered, what sense did it make to squander British resources of armed forces and money abroad which could be used to defeat radicalism at home more effectively?⁶⁶ Having earlier attacked Fox for his opposition to the war and his support of the radicals in 1794, by 1797 she admitted that 'his struggles against the commencement and

continuance of this disastrous war, . . . clearly prove his right to be entitled the People's Friend'.⁶⁷ She was highly critical of Burke's four *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1796), which argued vehemently against attempting to negotiate peace with the French republic; and she remained opposed to the Pitt administration, the war, and the government's 'despotic' policies at home for the rest of the conflict, remarking of Pitt after his passing in 1806, 'He has died too late'.⁶⁸ In the same letter, she argued that Bonaparte was no worse than any other European monarch, and certainly not a reason for Britain to remain at war with France.⁶⁹ Discussing her change of mind over the war, Seward had told a correspondent in November 1796, 'You will perhaps think I am wading beyond my depth, when I thus write to you of politics . . . but I am not too proud to confess myself mistaken, beneath the force of such disastrous proofs of it exhibited by this ruinous war. Time is a broad mirror, which often shows us the fallacy of our own judgment.'⁷⁰

While Elizabeth Carter and Anna Seward made frequent references to individual military and naval events in their correspondence, they tended not to discuss them in any detail, concentrating on the human losses which resulted from them, on the political significance of such actions, or on the broader politics of war and peace. Their interest generally was political rather than strictly military, but their correspondence certainly shows their awareness of military and naval events as they unfolded. 'I had an account from London which calls the late skirmish between the two fleets, on our side, a victory', wrote Carter on 7 August 1778 of Admiral Keppel's engagement with the French off Ushant. 'But the express sent to our Admiral, is not very encouraging', she accurately continued. 'We have three or four hundred men killed and wounded, and we have taken nothing from the enemy.'⁷¹

Conclusion

The bluestockings discussed the wars of the late eighteenth century vigorously. It is true that they often cherished their exclusion from the problems and trials of involvement in public political life, and it may be, as Harriet Guest has suggested, that this was a factor in their freedom from partisan ties.⁷² It did not, however, prevent them from engaging passionately with the political issues at stake as independent patriots, at least by the period of the Revolutionary Wars. This was not the patriotism of militant conservatism, nor that of opposition for opposition's sake, nor that of cosmopolitan radicals, but rather a 'love of country' which demanded a citizen's attention to political events and an intelligent, independent judgement of the issues as they arose. Nor was this the publicly correct female patriotism of charitable donations and moral support—it was political engagement despite the restrictions on women's politicking in the late eighteenth century. These were not typical women—neither did all men observe politics so acutely, so far as can be known—but this was another form of patriotism open to them. They operated within their context: in some ways, their responses to the conflicts were typically gendered, distinctively preoccupied with the human consequences of war, and reinforcing the developing notions of the domestic ideology.⁷³ Yet the bluestocking letters also provide evidence of women breaking this domesticated mould in a quiet, semi-public, way, and choosing to follow a path of independent patriotism alongside the female patriotism that they were encouraged to display.

The independent country gentlemen declined in numbers steadily during the Napoleonic Wars as the Pittite and Foxite groups of MPs developed into the Tory

and Whig parties and the British Parliament moved towards a bilateral party system; and there are many instances of nineteenth-century women's political writing which took clear party political stances, including the war poetry discussed by Jane Rendall in this book. However, it would be surprising, given their lack of political rights and their frequent freedom from party ties, and yet their access to increasing volumes of political information, if both women and men of independent means did not often continue to opt for the route of independent patriotism during the nineteenth century; and, indeed, independent patriotism retained a place in nineteenth-century political discourse as part of the self-definition of the parliamentary Liberal party.⁷⁴

¹ Anna Seward to Colonel Dowdeswell, 30 November 1797, in *Letters of Anna Seward written between the Years 1784 and 1807*, 6 vols, ed. A. Constable (Edinburgh, 1811), vol. 5, 20.

² Harriet Guest, *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism, 1750–1810* (Chicago, 2000), 175.

³ The 'bluestocking circle' originated in the 1750s in the form of intellectual tea-parties, hosted by society women in London, especially Elizabeth Montagu, Frances Boscawen and Elizabeth Vesey. They were attended by both men and women of the upper and professional classes, and maintained by a network of correspondence, visiting and philanthropic projects, both in London and in the country. The term 'bluestocking' probably came from the blue worsted stockings worn as a sign of serious intellectual priorities by a leading member of the group, the scientist Bishop Benjamin Stillingfleet, and perhaps other male members, in opposition to the white or black silk stockings worn by upper-class men and courtiers; but it came to be used

satirically of the female members. See Gary Kelly, 'General Introduction', in *Bluestocking Feminism: Writings of the Bluestocking Circle, 1738–1785*, gen. ed. Gary Kelly, 6 vols (London, 1999), vol. 1, *Elizabeth Montagu*, ed. Elizabeth Eger, ix–xi.

⁴ Louise P. Carter, 'British Women during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1793–1815: Responses, Roles and Representations', Ph.D. thesis (University of Cambridge, 2005), 208–209.

⁵ Robert R. Dozier, *For King, Constitution and Country: the English Loyalists and the French Revolution* (Lexington, KY, 1983), 54–55; David Eastwood, 'Patriotism and the English State in the 1790s', in *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics*, ed. Mark Philp (Cambridge, UK, 1992), 146–168, 150; Karen Hagemann, 'Female Patriots: Women, War and the Nation in the Period of the Prussian-German Anti-Napoleonic Wars', *Gender and History* 16/3 (2004): 397–424, 402–405.

⁶ Carter, 'British Women', 105–106.

⁷ Guest, *Small Change*, 203.

⁸ Anna Seward, *Monody on Major André* (Lichfield, 1781); see Guest, *Small Change*, 178, 254.

⁹ Elizabeth Carter to Elizabeth Montagu, 20 July 1777, in *Letters from Mrs Elizabeth Carter to Mrs Montagu, between the Years 1755 and 1800: Chiefly upon Literary and Moral Subjects*, ed. Montagu Pennington, 3 vols (London, 1817), vol. 3, 30–31; Guest, *Small Change*, 178.

¹⁰ Emma Vincent Macleod, *A War of Ideas: British Attitudes to the Wars against Revolutionary France, 1792–1802* (Aldershot, 1998), 165–169; Carter, 'British Women', 69–78, 86; Guest, *Small Change*, 146; Claire Brant, 'Varieties of Women's

Writing', in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1700–1800*, ed. Vivien Jones (Cambridge, UK, 2000), 285–305, 288.

¹¹ Emma Major, 'The Politics of Sociability', in *Reconsidering the Bluestockings*, ed. Nicole Pohl and Betty A. Schellenberg (San Marino, CA, 2003), 175–192, 182–185.

¹² Charlotte Smith, *Desmond*, ed. Janet Todd and Antje Blank (London, 1997), 6, cited in Carter, 'British Women', 64.

¹³ Carter to Montagu, 2 September 1799, in Pennington, *Letter*, vol. 3, 355; idem, 23 November 1776, in ibid. vol. 3, 18–19; idem, 21 June 1778, in ibid. vol. 3, 75; idem, 3 September 1799, in ibid. vol. 3, 353–354.

¹⁴ Seward to David Samwell, 15 May 1791, in Constable, *Letters*, vol. 3, 61.

¹⁵ Seward to Colonel Dowdeswell, 30 November 1797, in ibid. vol. 5, 19.

¹⁶ Laetitia Matilda Hawkins, *Letters on the Female Mind*, 2 vols (London, 1793), vol. 2, 194.

¹⁷ John Bowles, *Remarks on Modern Female Manners, as Distinguished by Indifference to Character, and Indecency of Dress; extracted from 'Reflections Political and Moral at the Conclusion of the War'* (London, 1802), 12; Macleod, *War of Ideas*, 173–177.

¹⁸ J. A. Stewart, *The Young Woman's Companion or Female Instructor* (3rd edn, Oxford, 1815), 435, cited in Carter, 'British Women', 16. See also *Lady's Magazine* 30 (1799): 450–451.

¹⁹ *Dialogues Concerning the Ladies* (London, 1785), quoted in Guest, *Small Change*, 170.

²⁰ Carter, 'British Women', 68.

²¹ Anne K. Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England, 1780–1830* (Bloomington, IN, 2000).

²² Guest, *Small Change*, 13–14. For similar comments on the correspondence between Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren, see Kate Davies, *Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren: The Revolutionary Atlantic and the Politics of Gender* (Oxford, 2005), 7–9.

²³ Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 2003), 110.

²⁴ *Bluestocking Feminism*, vol. 2, Elizabeth Carter, ed. Judith Hawley, 376; Susan Staves, ‘Church of England Clergy and Women Writers’, in Pohl and Schellenberg, *Reconsidering*, 81–104, 82.

²⁵ Judith Hawley, ‘Selected Letters: Introductory Note’, in *Bluestocking Feminism*, vol. 2, 375–376.

²⁶ Huntington Library, San Marino, CA, Montagu Correspondence 4238, William Pulteney, Earl of Bath, to Elizabeth Montagu, 21 September 1761, quoted in Elizabeth Eger, ‘Selected Letters: Introductory Note’, *Bluestocking Feminism*, vol. 1, 142.

²⁷ Jonathan C. D. Clark, ‘Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in America* (1777), or, how did the American Revolution relate to the French?’, in *An Imaginative Whig: Reassessing the Life and Thought of Edmund Burke*, ed. Ian Crowe (Columbia, SC, 2005), 71–92, 76.

²⁸ Anna Clark, ‘1798 as the Defeat of Feminism: Women, Patriotism and Politics’, in *These Fissured Isles: Ireland, Scotland and British History, 1798–1848*, ed. Terry Brotherstone et al. (Edinburgh, 2005), 85–104, 85–86.

²⁹ Ibid. 86. Macaulay, as Kate Davies has suggested, was identified with the bluestocking network, but went beyond the more feminine bluestocking style, with her vocal and republican politics. Davies has further argued that the patriotism

embodied by Macaulay gained its ‘masculine’ self-determination paradoxically in part because of her status as a learned woman, which earned her respect and a certain license to comment politically. This license was widely withdrawn during the American War of Independence as loyalist anxieties overtook national pride in her intellectual achievements, and as her private life caused public scandal, so that her femininity became associated with political betrayal. See Davies, *Catharine Macaulay*, esp. chs 1–3.

³⁰ Sir Lewis Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (2nd edn, London, 1957), 6.

³¹ Ibid.

³² H.T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-century Britain*, reprinted (London, 1979), 176 and 178–179.

³³ Matthew McCormack, *The Independent Man: Citizenship and Gender Politics in Georgian England* (Manchester, 2005).

³⁴ Carter to Montagu, 3 June 1775, in Pennington, *Letters*, vol. 2, 310.

³⁵ Reginald Blunt (ed.), *Mrs Montagu. ‘Queen of the Blues’: Her Letters and Friendships from 1762 to 1800*, 2 vols (London, 1923), vol. 2, 116–117.

³⁶ Carter to Montagu, 18 April 1780, in Pennington, *Letters*, vol. 3, 125.

³⁷ Idem, 21 December 1776, in *ibid.* 21, 23.

³⁸ Idem, 23 November 1777, in *ibid.* 49.

³⁹ Idem, 27 July 1778, in *ibid.* 82.

⁴⁰ Idem, 7 August, 1778, in *ibid.* 85.

⁴¹ Idem, 17 December 1781, in *ibid.* 162.

⁴² Idem, 21 September 1782, in *ibid.* 176; Carter to Montagu, 15 December 1790, in *ibid.* 322.

⁴³ Idem, 18 July 1791, in *ibid.* 328.

⁴⁴ Seward to Helen Maria Williams, 12 December 1790, in Constable, *Letters*, vol. 3, 44.

⁴⁵ Seward to the Rev T. S. Whalley, 19 December 1790, in *ibid.* 46, 48;

⁴⁶ Seward to Mrs Taylor, 10 January 1791, in *ibid.* 52.

⁴⁷ Seward to Mrs Knowles, 19 May 1791, in *ibid.* 75–78.

⁴⁸ Gary Kelly, ‘General Introduction’, in *Bluestocking Feminism*, vol. 1, xiii.

⁴⁹ Seward to Lady Gresley, 29 August 1792, in Constable, *Letters*, vol. 3, 159–160.

⁵⁰ Seward to Helen Maria Williams, 17 January 1793, in *ibid.* 208–209; Seward to Mrs Stokes, 25 April 1793, in *ibid.* 218.

⁵¹ Seward to Mrs Jackson, 21 January 1794 [1795], in *ibid.* vol. 4, 34. William Wilberforce, the slave trade abolitionist, was a close friend of Pitt and generally supported his government in the House of Commons. Between December 1794 and December 1795, however, he opposed the war, on the grounds that Britain had achieved what it had originally set out to do in 1793 and no longer required to maintain the waste of men and money involved in conflict. He returned to support the war at the close of 1795 after the government’s efforts to negotiate peace were rejected by France. Similarly, Serjeant James Adair might have been expected, from his previous Foxite convictions, to have opposed the suspension of habeas corpus (the right not to be held indefinitely without trial), but, as a Portland Whig, preferred to support the government on this issue, though he was inconsistent in his stance on reform throughout the 1790s.

⁵² Carter to Montagu, 26 November 1782, in Pennington, *Letters*, vol. 3, 187–188.

⁵³ Idem, 18 July 1791, in *ibid.* 327.

⁵⁴ Idem, 6 October 1776, in *ibid.* 10; idem, 20 July 1777, in *ibid.* 30–31.

⁵⁵ Idem, 16 November 1779, in *ibid.* 117.

⁵⁶ See also Seward's sonnet in the *Gentleman's Magazine* 59 (August 1789), 743, making her approval of the early events of the French Revolution public.

⁵⁷ Seward to Mrs Knowles, 19 May 1791, in Constable, *Letters*, vol. 3, 75–76, 78;

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 76; Seward to Helen Williams, 17 January 1793, in *ibid.* 209. See also Seward to Edward Jerningham, 5 March 1796, in *ibid.* vol. 4, 182–183.

⁵⁹ Seward to Miss Weston, 7 July 1791, in *ibid.* vol. 3, 87–88.

⁶⁰ Seward to Rev. William Fitzthomas, 5 June 1791, in *ibid.* 80.

⁶¹ Seward to Lady Gresley, 29 August 1792, in *ibid.* 160; Seward to the Rev. T. S. Whalley, 4 September 1792, in *ibid.* 163–164.

⁶² Seward to the Rev. T. S. Whalley, 4 September 1792, in *ibid.* 164.

⁶³ Seward to Colonel Dowdeswell, 3 January 1793, in *ibid.* 200. See also Seward to Mrs Adey, 14 June 1793, in *ibid.* 259.

⁶⁴ Seward to Mrs Stokes, 25 April 1793, in *ibid.* 218–220.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 216.

⁶⁶ Seward to the Rev. T. S. Whalley, 25 July 1794, in *ibid.* 377–378. See also Seward to Sir Brooke Boothby, 7 May 1797, in *ibid.* vol. 4, 339.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 340.

⁶⁸ Seward to Mrs H. Thornton, 11 December 1796, in *ibid.* 281–283; Seward to the Rev. R. Fellowes, 10 March 1800, in *ibid.* vol. 5, 281; Seward to Miss Catherine Mallet, 14 April 1806, in *ibid.* vol. 6, 255.

⁶⁹ Seward to Miss Catherine Mallet, 14 April 1806, in *ibid.* 251–253.

⁷⁰ Seward to Edmund Wigley, 19 November 1796, in *ibid.* vol. 4, 279–280.

⁷¹ Carter to Montagu, 7 August 1781, in Pennington, *Letters*, vol. 3, 85–86. See also her account of Admiral Cornwallis's skilful manoeuvre against the French to save

the *Mars*, also off Ushant, in June 1795: Carter to Montagu, 7 July 1795, in *ibid.* 344–345.

⁷² Guest, ‘Bluestocking Feminism’, in Pohl and Schellenberg, *Reconsidering*, 67.

⁷³ Kelly, ‘General Introduction’, *Bluestocking Feminism*, vol. 1, ix–li.

⁷⁴ See Jonathan Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, 1993); *idem*, *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity and Europe, 1830–1886* (Cambridge, UK, 2006), esp. chs 1 and 2.