**Richard Whatmore, *Terrorists, Anarchists, and Republicans: The Genevans and the Irish in Time of Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019, 512** **pp., $39.95 / £34.00 (Hardback) ISBN 9780691168777.**

Richard Whatmore’s new book tells a remarkable and largely unknown story about New Geneva, a refuge for exiled Genevan republicans and self-styled democrats – condemned as terrorists and anarchists – near Waterford in Ireland in the late eighteenth century. The idea of New Geneva presented itself after the failure of the 1782 Revolution in Geneva, in which the *Représantants* had sought to transform the city state’s oligarchic politics and move it in a democratic direction. This attempt was quelled by the French monarchy and its minister Charles Gravier, comte de Vergennes – notorious for his involvement in the royal coup in Sweden in 1772 which terminated the ‘Age of Liberty’ – in alliance with Savoy and Bern. Highlighting the importance of power politics at the time, Whatmore stresses that the same French troops that had aided the Americans in their war of independence helped to put down a democratically elected government at Geneva in 1782 (p. 30). The republican leaders fled the city in the hope of finding liberty in a new country. France’s arch-rival Britain welcomed them, and identified Ireland as the favoured destination, as it was hoped that the Genevan watchmakers would bring industry to a poor part of the British Empire, long suffering under penal laws directed against the Catholic majority and commercial legislation restricting its ability to trade. New Geneva was shortly abandoned because of the instability of British politics, and more precisely the failure of Britain to provide the funds the Genevan exiles demanded. The utopian experiment was converted into barracks, and in 1798 the half-built town became a prison and torture-site for Irish republicans. As Whatmore writes: ‘Planned as an asylum for republicans, it ended up a republican graveyard.’ (p. 11).

The Genevans of 1782 have been presumed by historians, and were reputed at the time, to be followers of the iconoclastic Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the most famous son of Geneva. Whatmore shows, however, that Rousseau was a moderate in Genevan politics. Even though many republican reformers viewed Rousseau as a latter-day Calvin, Rousseau himself correctly predicted that France, with strong ties to the city states, would never put up with democratic reform in Geneva (p. 33). Moreover, as Whatmore writes: ‘When François-Henri d’Ivernois, in a letter of 1767, referred to Rosseau’s project ‘to reverse the constitution [of Geneva] and establish a pure democracy’, Rousseau asked whether d’Ivernois was aware of his assault on democratic government in the *Contrat social.*’ (p. 85). Unsurprisingly, the next generation of Genevan reformers had less time for Rousseau. François d’Ivernois, François-Henri’s son, believed that Rousseau foolishly loved peace more than liberty (p. 33). The intellectual hero of Étienne Clavière, one of the principal Genevan democratic leaders in 1782, was not Rousseau, but Adam Smith, in spite of the Scottish philosopher’s own lack of sympathy for the Genevan reformers (p. 106). Clavière believed that Smith provided the tools to understand a world that had been transformed by the growth of commerce.

Smith identified the root of the problems of eighteenth-century Britain when he attacked the excessive wealth and political influence of merchants and special interest groups in British politics under the heading of the ‘mercantile system’ (p. 26). This analysis was of fundamental importance to William Petty, 2nd Earl of Shelburne (1737-1805), the central political figure of the book on the British side of the story (p. 227). After Shelburne’s failure to patronise Smith, he was attracted to the dissenting minister Richard Price, who was not only interested in reforming Britain’s commercial system, but also its ‘corrupt’ politics. With Price and John Horne Tooke, Shelburne collaborated in the writing of *Facts Addressed to the Landholders, Stockholders, Merchants, Farmers, Manufacturers, Tradesmen, Proprietors of Every Description, and Generally to All the Subjects of Great Britain and Ireland* (1780), which went through seven editions in the year of its publication, and attacked parliamentary corruption along with Britain’s growing national debt.

As Whatmore’s book shows, Ireland had suffered particularly badly from the mercantile system (p. 254). Shelburne was born in Ireland and remained a major absentee landowner. The rise and fall of the short but eventful Shelburne ministry, which made peace with America, is key to the book. Taking office on the death of the Marquess of Rockingham in the summer of 1782, Shelburne was ousted the following spring by a coalition between the old Rockingham party, led by Charles James Fox in the Commons and the Duke of Portland in the Lords, and its erstwhile antagonist, Lord North. Shelburne had been interested in New Geneva since he thought that it could ‘contribute to the realisation of the grand goal of moving to a world beyond corruption.’ (p. 227). The change of ministry sounded the death knell for the project. But the problems were more deep-seated. The establishment of New Geneva was delegated to the worst creatures of the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland who appear to have viewed the experiment as a means of self-advancement and enrichment.

This is an unusual book in the genre of intellectual history since it uses ideas to explain political events, rather than the other way around. Indeed, the skeleton of the book is a political history, mined from archival material at the Bibliothèque de Genève, the National Library of Ireland, and elsewhere in the British Isles and on the continent. The story has everything most readers desire: drama, tragedy, and irony. The book certainly corroborates David Hume’s contention that history at its best is as entertaining as fiction.[[1]](#footnote-1) More importantly for the academic audience, the book presents several arguments, crucially that we should not think of the period of the French Revolution and ‘the Enlightenment’ as a time when modern ideas of democracy and social improvement were put into practice. Instead, this was a time when social experiments such as New Geneva failed. What about the French Revolution? Whatmore writes that ‘nineteenth-century intellectual life began with an acceptance of the failure of the French Revolution.’ (p. 350). The solution for Ireland was not revolution on the French model but incorporation into the British state, which had been created after the union between England and Scotland in 1707. The flourishing of Scotland in union with a richer country showed that England, rather than France, was increasingly viewed as the future, as the British Empire was redefined.

The book thus contributes to a number of historiographical debates, perhaps most crucially the relationship between small and large states in the eighteenth century, which was an era of expanding commercial empires, and the transition between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries more broadly. More specifically, it raises important questions and provides interesting answers about how the British state was perceived in the eighteenth century, and how this changed in the nineteenth century. In short, the British constitution may have been admired in theory, but the mercantile system was regarded as Britain’s Achilles’ heel. In the early nineteenth century, however, François d’Ivernois, one of the participants in the Genevan Revolution who was knighted by George III in 1796, argued that Britain was able to fight France because of its mercantile system (p. 251). The turn to Britain in continental thought happened in the era of Germaine de Staël and Benjamin Constant, and not in that of Voltaire and Montesquieu, Whatmore argues. Even those readers who are not swayed by this larger argument – and prefer to continue to view the French Revolution as the birth of the modern world – are still in for an astounding story, masterfully told by a historian at the top of his craft.

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1. Hume, ‘Of the Study of History’ (1741), in *Essays: Moral Political and Literary* (Indianapolis, IN, 1987), pp. 563-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)