

**“Fraternising with the Enemy:” Problems of Identity during the  
French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars**

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Problems of identity across the watershed of the ancien régime and the Revolution have been an ongoing theme of my research. However, the paper I would like to present today takes a rather different tack from the one I usually adopt. It barely touches upon the apprehensions of ordinary people and is not at all concerned with those of country dwellers. Instead, it explores the attitudes and reactions of elites—highly educated and highly mobile elites—in an international rather than a purely national context.

The origins of my paper lie in a train of thought set in motion at the start of the year when I was invited to give a lecture on Dr Joseph Priestley, the radical theologian and natural philosopher, the bicentenary of whose death in America occurred in February 2004. A triangle of reference points frame Priestley’s life. At the apex is Birmingham where he resided for ten years before being expelled in 1791. Considered a dangerous religious and political fanatic, his house was burned to the ground in a “King and Country” riot. At the corners can be found revolutionary France, the country which offered him refuge and citizenship in 1792, and Pennsylvania, America, where he eventually found asylum in 1794, albeit asylum of a somewhat grudging character.

In addition to the Priestley undertaking, two other considerations have influenced this paper. It is inspired in part by a reflection or meditation on my own curious relationship to the Commonwealth of Australia, a country whose citizenship I hold despite not having been born here and not having even set foot on its shores until I was in my thirties. This, in turn, prompted the further reflection that the patron of our colloquium, George Rudé, might also have had much to say about the problems of identity since his life, too, was lived within a triangle of reference points: Norwegian parentage, English upbringing and French intellectual preoccupations. Cicero once

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declared that “no man can be the citizen of more than one country,” but I am afraid that Priestley, Rudé and even yours truly all testify against the truth of this assertion.

Let us proceed, however. What I intend to do is to tell a story—not the story of Priestley, interesting though it is, but the story of the intellectual and political “voyage” of William Russell, his companion and collaborator. Russell’s story—one might almost call it an odyssey—is even more dramatic and pregnant with implications than that of his mentor. Hopefully it will enable me to contribute some observations on the fluid and problematic issues of identity, belonging and citizenship during the period bounded by the High Enlightenment and the rise of the European nation states. I will begin with the minimum of necessary background information. Then I will sketch in the story of William Russell as briefly and factually as possible. Finally, I will turn to the nub of the matter: the issues that it seems to me to raise.

The period that we are concerned with can be roughly encompassed by the dates 1760 to 1820. Russell, incidentally, was born in 1740 and would expire in 1818. This period of European history witnessed almost incessant international conflict. Yet, paradoxically, it was also the setting for a remarkable growth in international trade and social intercourse between Europe’s elites. As is well known, Britain and France waged war against each other between 1778 and 1783; between 1793 and 1802; and between 1803 and 1814. Less well known is the fact that France and the infant republic of America were also at loggerheads between 1797 and 1800; and that Britain was engaged in hostilities with the American republic as well as with France between 1812 and 1814.

Yet despite nearly endemic warfare (and perhaps because of it), the second half of the eighteenth century produced an intensification of European sociability. Levels of geographical mobility without precedent marked out these decades as grand tourists, merchants and businessmen, skilled craft workers, settlers and of course refugees and prisoners of war moved with increasing rapidity and frequency from country to country. Peter Sahlins’s recent work on aliens provides some quantitative underpinning for this migratory ebb and flow, and it pretty much confirms what we know from piecemeal literary sources.<sup>2</sup> In the 1770s the Paris chief of police kept tabs on around 3,800 foreign travelers visiting the French capital each year, he informs us.<sup>3</sup> We know, too, that between eight and ten thousand Americans came to France between 1784 and 1814,<sup>4</sup> and that France exported nearly 80,000 refugees to Britain alone between 1789 and 1814.<sup>5</sup> These figures do not include the involuntary movements of prisoners of war. During the peace negotiations in October 1801, the British government disclosed that it was holding 14,000 French prisoners of war.<sup>6</sup> They were released without waiting for formal ratification of the treaty. France, for its part, was detaining 500 British hostages and around 12,000 English and Irish prisoners according to the Minister of War in 1810.<sup>7</sup>

My point is that elite mobility—whether voluntary or involuntary—was throwing what it meant to be English or French or American into sharp relief during

<sup>2</sup> J.-F. Dubost and P. Sahlins, “*Et si on faisait payer les étrangers?*” *Louis XIV, les immigrés et quelques autres* (Paris, 1999); and P. Sahlins, *Unnaturally French: Foreign Citizens in the Old Regime and After* (Ithaca, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Sahlins, *Unnaturally French*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> W. L. Chew III, “Life before Fodor and Frommer: Americans in Paris from Thomas Jefferson to John Quincy Adams,” *French History* 18 (2004), 28.

<sup>5</sup> Colin Nicholson, *Strangers to England: Immigration to England, 1100-1952* (London, 1974), 80.

<sup>6</sup> J. G. Alger, *Napoleon’s British Visitors and Captives, 1801-1815* (Westminster, 1904), 12.

<sup>7</sup> H. A. S. Smith, “English Queensware and its Impact on the French Pottery Industry, 1774-1814,” 2 vols. (PhD diss., Keele University, 2002), 2: 316 note 5.

these years, especially when we bear in mind that such mobility was also being catalyzed by the pressures of international conflict and a pandemic of political revolution. Sahlins who approaches this subject from a rather different angle does not hesitate to dub what was taking place a “citizenship revolution”—a transition from the cosmopolitan citizenship admired by the *philosophes* to a form of citizenship aligned with the relatively new concept of nationality.

I do not think that I would choose to use this phrase because it seems to me to simplify a complex cultural shift and also to render it rigorously uni-directional. However, I do take his point that something momentous was taking shape in these decades. When the frequency of use of the term “citoyen” shoots up in the ARTFL database from 3.8 per one hundred thousand words to 14.8 per one hundred thousand words in the course of the second half of the eighteenth century, something is definitely going on.<sup>8</sup> I agree, too, with those authors of the “surveillance and punishment” school<sup>9</sup> that governments—from the mid-1790s—were making a determined effort to render their peoples “legible.” I borrow the term from Jim Scott.<sup>10</sup> If citizenship and nationality (a still fuzzy concept) were coming into alignment towards the end of the period in question, it surely had much to do with mobility, travel and the surveillance of travel, not to mention the making of issues such as property transmission and the sources of political authority within states more transparent.

What light does William Russell’s extraordinary career shed on these matters? Born into a family of wealthy Birmingham merchants in 1740, Russell’s ancestral Presbyterianism seems to have matured into full-strength Unitarianism around the time when Dr Joseph Priestley took up residence in Birmingham as minister to the New Meeting chapel. That is to say in 1781. Even among English Dissenters as the non-conformists were called, Unitarianism passed for an extreme creed, though. It presupposed a denial of both the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. To orthodox churchmen and the Hanoverian Establishment, of course, it was anathema.

Russell was Priestley’s right-hand man in the New Meeting, and he bankrolled the numerous petitions that Birmingham Dissenters submitted to Parliament in the late 1780s for the removal of the political disabilities imposed upon them by the Test and Corporations Acts. When the French Revolution broke in 1789 virtually the whole of the Dissenter community of the town hailed this happy development as the dawn of a new age. Priestley and Russell were in the forefront of the agitation and lent their support to the local enthusiasts for French-style *liberté* when they decided to mark the second anniversary of the fall of the Bastille with a celebratory dinner. That night, 14 July 1791, and for several days following, the town descended into uncontrolled rioting. The New Meeting chapel was ransacked and burnt, as were most of the other Dissenting places of worship. Priestley’s house, library and laboratory were razed to the ground, also Russell’s house and about a dozen others belonging to prominent Dissenters.

Joseph Priestley fled Birmingham as is well known. The fulsome tributes and commiserations he received from revolutionary France, including the offer of citizenship both for himself and his son William, actually made matters worse. In

<sup>8</sup> Sahlins, *Unnaturally French*, 12 note 35.

<sup>9</sup> See J. Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge, 2000); and J. Caplan and J. Torpey, eds., *Documenting Individual Identity: the Development of State Practices in the Modern World* (Princeton, 2001)

<sup>10</sup> J. C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven and London, 1998).

April 1794 he set sail for America and a life of political exile. William Russell, too, decided to slough off his allegiance to Britain and to quit his native country. He identified strongly with revolutionary France—more strongly even than Priestley. But unlike Priestley, Paine, Bentham and many other European sympathizers, he had not been considered prominent enough in the cause of freedom to warrant the gesture of citizenship. In the summer of 1794 he, too, quit the shores of Albion with the intention of heading for America. Family considerations, reports of the Terror and no doubt religious scruples appear to have decided him to avoid France.

Six days out from Falmouth their vessel—an American merchantman—was overhauled by a frigate of the Brest squadron, and William, his son Thomas and his two daughters Martha and Mary were taken prisoner by those whom Martha, in her diary, described as the “good republicans.”<sup>11</sup> They spent much of the next four months in a prison hulk moored in Brest harbor within sight and sound of the town’s guillotine. But then the penny dropped in Paris, and an order to release them was dispatched by the Thermidorian Comité de salut public. William and his family traveled to the capital; they made contact with the much depleted English community; visited the sights; and the girls even attended sessions of the trial of Fouquier-Tinville. Their father, meanwhile, made use of his stay in the capital to purchase a considerable monastic property near Caen that had originally been offered for sale as a *bien national*. Finally, in the early summer of 1795, the interrupted voyage to America was resumed on board a vessel plying out of Le Havre.

On arriving in America the Russells made haste to visit Priestley in his log cabin in the backwoods of Pennsylvania (150 miles west of Philadelphia). The scheme that had been mooted earlier to found a free Unitarian community on the banks of the Susquehanna River swiftly proved to be quite impracticable, and the Russells settled instead in Middletown, Connecticut. There both William and his son Thomas applied for American citizenship—even though the Promised Land was scarcely living up to expectations. Unitarianism was no more acceptable in Connecticut than it was in England; in fact denial of the Trinity was forbidden by law. Moreover, the family soon became embroiled in the escalating tensions between Federalists and Jeffersonian democrats because of their unconcealed pro-French leanings.

Once the state of quasi-war between Directorial France and the American republic had eased in 1800, William Russell resolved to return to Europe and more precisely to France. He urged the elderly Priestley to accompany him. Unitarianism as a creed had a strongly millenarian thread to it, and Russell was not alone in interpreting Bonaparte’s coup d’état as the coming of the new Messiah. They would, he suggested to Priestley, form a Unitarian congregation in Paris and spread the gospel of Rational Christianity. Priestley wisely decided not to risk the sea-lanes, but the Russells abandoned America and the family dispersed in different directions.

William arrived in France in June 1801 alone, although he was eventually joined by his son. His daughters were back in England by this time; in fact one of them was married. However, he was now entering his sixties and hampered by increasing deafness. This hardness of hearing and the absence of family rendered him a solitary figure and accentuated the meditative and prophetic turn of his mind. He went to live on his new property—a former convent of the *Prémontré* Order with a large agricultural estate attached to it. There he passed himself off as an American citizen from Philadelphia which was more or less true. But he was also, whether he liked it or not, a British subject from Birmingham, England.

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<sup>11</sup> S. H. Jeyes, *The Russells of Birmingham in the French Revolution and in America, 1791-1814* (London, 1911), 61.

If he had not planned all along to reside permanently in France, two discoveries on his arrival from America would certainly have given him pause for thought. First, the discovery that he owned a valuable property worth around 30,000 francs in rental payments per annum, and second that it was actually a violation of English statute law for a British subject to own real estate in France. This made a putative return to England when the peace window of Amiens opened up in 1802 a problematic matter to say the least. A further complication was the fact that the Montagnard Convention had also ordered the confiscation of British-owned property, a decree not rescinded until the very end of 1794. All in all, then, a retreat into the ambiguities of American citizenship seemed the safest option. Whenever anyone enquired, both William and his son Thomas insisted that they were American citizens. They lived quietly and unobtrusively on their property, receiving quarterly rentals from tenant farmers and feeding the neighborhood poor. The only incongruous public action indulged in by the Russells at this time (1801-2) was to open up the Premonstratensian abbey for local Protestant worship!

Of course, it is possible, even likely, that in returning to France father and son had determined upon another transfer of allegiance. The evidence that points most powerfully in this direction is the fact that William applied for French citizenship by naturalization in 1807. His son did the same two years later. William's application file contains a letter of support written by Jules Sabonadier, pastor and president of the Consistory of Caen, which describes him as a passionate supporter of the Empire. In the light of his biblical meditations relates Sabonadier, "il voit dans notre auguste monarque [~~"Sa Majesté"~~] un envoyé de la Providence."<sup>12</sup> But maybe the pair was just suing for French citizenship in order to safeguard the transmission of the property in anticipation of the father's death. However, in view of the third-party evidence and what is known of William Russell's spiritual and political trajectory I am inclined to take the protestations contained in his letter of acknowledgement of the grant of citizenship rather seriously. In that letter he eulogized this "Grand Homme que la Providence a choisi dans sa munificence pour être le glorieux instrument de ses sages et bienfaisantes dispensations."<sup>13</sup>

By 1809 (the year of Thomas's naturalization), therefore, the Russells had superimposed one atop another three different identities. Whether they liked it or not they were by fact of birth British subjects since English law made it impossible to relinquish "subject" status. However, they had turned their backs on Britain and embraced the young American republic instead. Then, having abandoned life in America, they had proceeded to petition for French citizenship. While there may have been some doubt about the validity of their claim to American citizenship (the new Citizenship Act of 1795 required a prior declaration of intent and five years' residence),<sup>14</sup> there could be none about the letters of French naturalization issued on behalf of the Emperor.

Let us leave the case of William Russell and his son at this point. The end of their story can safely be held over to the conclusion. What issues does it raise in the mind of the cultural historian? For a start it demonstrates the plasticity of identity in an age still largely innocent of the modern concept of nationality. In these years the

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<sup>12</sup> Calvados, Archives départementales, M 3039, *Police: étrangers*.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> F. G. Franklin, *The Legislative History of Naturalization in the United States from the Revolutionary War to 1861* (New York, 1971 [1906]), 69.

boundaries of “identity” as far as Europe’s elites were concerned were still poorly marked out. Identity remained fluid, contingent, functional, even plural, therefore.

The custom and practice of citizenship, meanwhile, was slipping from the grasp of the jurists and becoming contractual and volitional. Individuals were learning how to vindicate the right to choose their loyalties or allegiances and, to judge from the case of the Russells, with a degree of success. This may prove to be a gross generalization, of course, but I doubt whether the Russells were alone in their consecutive enthusiasms and skilful maneuverings. In 1814 Bourbon France agreed in the Treaty of Paris to pay reparation for the property losses sustained by foreigners as a consequence of the Revolution and Bonaparte’s hostage law of 1803. The British Commissioners for Claims found themselves dealing with numerous petitions emanating from individuals with multiple loyalties; indeed with multiple citizenships.<sup>15</sup>

Yet at the same time the idea of the “foreigner” or—in this context—the alien, was being re-conceived. Prior to 1789 the distinction between natural-born subject and alien was being dismantled as Peter Sahlins and others have argued. Nevertheless, from the mid-1790s, all three of the governments mentioned in this paper began to worry intensely about “foreign-ness.” But they appear to have worried about it in a kind of semantic void, since the overarching concept of nationality had not yet been formulated. The nearest the British Commissioners for Claims could get to the concept when assessing the merits of petitions for compensation was to invoke something they described as “national character.”<sup>16</sup>

What then of cosmopolitanism? Did it survive the Revolution, or rather the Enlightenment, as some investigators have ventured to suggest?<sup>17</sup> Not according to Sahlins, if I have understood his recent book correctly. Yet I am not so sure that all the evidence points neatly in one direction. When Jeremy Bentham was offered French citizenship in October 1792 as one among a decidedly mixed bag of foreign sympathizers with the Revolution, he hesitated. Apparently he was concerned lest the offer should conflict with his British “subject” status, and he pondered whether it would be possible to be a royalist in London and at the same time a republican in Paris. Nevertheless, Bentham wrote back to J.-M. Roland, the Minister of the Interior, insisting that he regarded all Frenchmen as brethren.<sup>18</sup> Ten years later these misgivings would not deter him from voting in the Life Consulship plebiscite when visiting Paris during the peace interlude. François Chabot, the rabble-rousing deputy in the Legislative Assembly, would further fudge the issue when referring to foreign patriots—in this instance Joseph Priestley—as “cosmopolitan and therefore French.”<sup>19</sup>

My feeling is that the Revolution, or to be more precise the traumatic episode presided over by the Montagnard Convention, bequeathed a strain of visceral nationalism, but that cosmopolitanism made a partial comeback during the period of the Consulate and the Empire. However, Napoleonic cosmopolitanism was a kind of technocratic cosmopolitanism. After 1803 British hostages and prisoners of war learned swiftly that the best escape routes from detention were either to seek letters of naturalization from the hand of the Emperor or to seek release or exchange in the

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Public Record Office [now renamed National Archives], FO 27/190.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, *Statement for the Consideration of His Majesty’s Government* [c. 1818].

<sup>17</sup> See M. Rapport, *Nationality and Citizenship in Revolutionary France: the Treatment of Foreigners, 1789-1799* (Oxford, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> A. T. Milne, ed., *The Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, vol. 4, *October 1788 to December 1793* (London, 1981), 401.

<sup>19</sup> Rapport, *Nationality and Citizenship*, 137.

name of a common scientific culture. In effect, therefore, to pander to the scientific pretensions of the regime. The link-man in this endeavor was of course Sir Joseph Banks, president of the Royal Society—a figure well known in Australia as a result of his participation in Captain Cook's first voyage of discovery to the South Pacific.

For want of time these rather speculative comments on the lessons to be learned from the extraordinary life of William Russell will have to serve as a conclusion. Russell, incidentally, managed to satisfy the French courts as to his status and sell his property in Normandy. He and his son retired to England in 1814 on the cessation of hostilities. He died in 1818 at Upton upon Severn in Worcestershire. How he satisfied the legal authorities of his native land I do not know—probably by means of a technical admission of guilt. What can be said of the so-called “citizenship revolution”? When did it finally come to pass? I think that we can say that it was certainly consummated by 1831, for on 29 December of that year an Englishman disembarked from the Channel packet at Boulogne and proudly identified himself to the customs officer as Francis Horatio Nelson Drake.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> B. V. J. Meringo, “Travellers through France: Records of Cross-Channel Passengers at Boulogne, 1822-58 and Related Records Elsewhere,” *Genealogists' Magazine* 22 (1987), 178.