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*Unusual Suspects: Pitt's Reign of Alarm
and the Lost Generation of the 1790s*
(Oxford University Press, 2013)
by Kenneth R. Johnston

KENNETH JOHNSTON'S *Unusual Suspects: Pitt's Reign of Alarm and the Lost Generation of the 1790s* is the latest in a succession of scholarly works since 2000 that explore the interplay of Romanticism, radical reform and conservative loyalism during one of the most remarkable decades in British history.¹ Johnston spent nearly ten years researching more than seventy men and women – professional writers and laypersons, Anglicans and Dissenters – who, because of their involvement in the movement for parliamentary reform that emerged in the aftermath of the French Revolution, were regarded as ‘suspects’ by the Pitt administration, either through their published writings or private associations. Some of these individuals Johnston describes as the ‘usual’ suspects, the objects of formal accusations of sedition or treason (resulting in imprisonment and sometimes banishment); others became ‘unusual’ suspects, subjected to various forms of intimidation by the authorities (both national and provincial) for the purpose of silencing their opinions (more literally their ‘pens’) and damaging their careers.

Johnston's study focuses on the period of Pitt's ‘Reign of Alarm’, as he terms it, the seeds of which were sown in May 1792 with the passage of the King's proclamation against seditious writings. Thereafter the ‘Alarm’ fell into three stages: (1) December 1792–December 1794 – from Paine's trial *in absentia* through the Edinburgh Convention in 1793 to the Treason Trials in London, the latter resulting in the acquittals of John Thelwall, Thomas Holcroft, Thomas Hardy, and other reformers; (2) 1795 – when the government regrouped and doubled-down on reformist activities and associations, resulting that November in the Two Bills (the ‘Gagging Acts’), parliament's response to an attempt on the life of the King on 29 October; and (3) 1796–1800 – what Johnston calls the ‘mopping-up’ stage, in which several of his ‘suspects’ were tried for sedition, treason, and libel (with convictions), and many more were harassed by government informers, all of whom suffered ‘collateral’ damage due to Pitt's policies. Rejecting Clive Emsley's claim that there was no Pittite ‘Reign of Terror’, Johnston proposes that his book will ‘record and honor its cost in ruined lives’ (330), presenting a litany of the ‘walking wounded’ of

¹ See Jenny Graham, *The Nation, the Law and the King: Reform Politics in England, 1789–1799* (2 vols, Lanham, MD: UP of America, 2000); Jon Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (Oxford: OUP, 2003); Stuart Semmel, *Napoleon and the British* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004); John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide 1793–1796* (Oxford: OUP, 2000) and *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford: OUP, 2006); and Mark Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution, 1789–1805* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014).

British literary history (xviii), 'Britain's first 'lost generation' (12).²

From his lengthy list of 'suspects', Johnston has picked seventeen for inclusion in this volume (Amelia Alderson is an eighteenth, appearing at the end of the first chapter). Johnston employs an authoritative, engaging, and, at times, colloquial style ('Americanisms', he calls it) aimed at both a popular and academic audience, though the sparse footnoting may disappoint some scholars, despite the immense research that went into the making of this book. Each chapter contains a concise biographical summary of the writer under discussion and a detailed analysis of the political controversies surrounding that writer, all of which will prove an invaluable resource to students of Romanticism. John Thelwall is the primary example of the 'usual suspect', the outspoken reformer at odds publicly with the government. The rest are 'unusual suspects' – the political philosopher and sceptic William Godwin; the philosopher-theologian-scientist Joseph Priestley and two fellow Unitarians, William Frend and Gilbert Wakefield; the pietist James Montgomery; the scientist Thomas Beddoes; the poet and historian of the French Revolution, Helen Maria Williams; the Irish poet, lawyer, and co-founder of the United Irishmen, William Drennan; the novelist Robert Bage; and the Whig politician James Mackintosh – some better known today than others, but nevertheless a remarkable group of writers covering a wide range of genres and professions. Other women writers of the 'lost generation', besides Alderson, who receive a brief analysis by Johnston are Anna Letitia Barbauld, Mary Robinson, Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams, Ann Yearsley, and Mary Hays, all victims of unflattering portraits in Richard Polwhele's *The Unsex'd Females* (1798).

Against this large assortment of 'unusual suspects' Johnston situates what he calls his 'control' group, the leading voices of Romanticism that emerged in the 1790s against which the losses of the previous writers are weighed and compared: Coleridge, Wordsworth, Southey, Lamb, Burns, and Blake, several of whom were immortalized as 'radicals' in James Gillray's cartoon of George Canning's poem, "The New Morality," which appeared in *The Anti-Jacobin* in July 1798. To Johnston, this drawing reveals 'the last line-up of suspects from the lost generation of the 1790s' (225) and forever links these Romantics to Pitt's 'Alarm' and the repressive atmosphere his policies generated for creative imaginations. In regard to these well known Romantics, Johnston's aim is straightforward: demonstrate how they were affected by Pitt's machinery of repression and the subsequent consequences for their 'bifurcated' careers (before and after the 'Alarm') (16). Johnston argues that his 'unusual suspects' 'were at least as numerous as those tried and convicted for treason or sedition', though 'the stories of their ruination ... are much harder to find out than the victims of the various treason trials which dominated domestic politics in the British 1790s' (xv).

From beginning to end, Johnston never wavers from his thesis – 'that our

² See Clive Emsley, 'An Aspect of Pitt's "terror": Prosecutions for Sedition during the 1790s', *Social History* 6 (1981), 155–84.

perspective on the literature of the Romantic era is skewed by what we have not seen clearly until recently: that the lives, careers, and works of these artists were inflected (to put it mildly), or badly distorted, by their varying reactions to whichever of the random side-effects of William Pitt's regime of Alarm brushed up against them' (287). Pitt's repressive policies were aimed at those whose initial support for the French Revolution (and in some respects, America and its new constitution) became linked to parliamentary reform in England and opposition to the war with France, at least in the early phase of that war between 1793 and 1800. Concerning those who suffered negative consequences for their decision at one time or another to identify with these liberal causes, Johnston provides (with names) a sobering catalogue of how some were imprisoned and even died from their treatment in prison, some emigrated, some were arrested and detained but not imprisoned, some faced financial penalty, some were harassed, some suffered psychological and physical harm, some endured extended periods of orchestrated public criticism, some were forced into the use of *noms de plume* or complete anonymity as writers, some disappeared for extended periods of time, some changed their literary subjects and modes of expression, some later erased or significantly reinterpreted their earlier involvement in reform, some showed little signs of change before or after, some demonstrated voluntary change of political ideology, some dramatically adopted conservative positions, some publicly recanted their reformist opinions (even informing on others), some received monetary benefits for reneging on their earlier radicalism, and some merely chose to remain silent thereafter.

Johnston links all his literary reformers of the mid-1790s with an attraction to 'republicanism', a typical example being a youthful Wordsworth who signed himself 'a Republican' in his (then unpublished) 1793 letter to the Bishop of Llandaff, which, Johnston argues, 'had he published it, would certainly have landed him among the usual suspects on trial for treason and sedition' (xvii) (as it did Gilbert Wakefield in 1798). Years later, of course, Wordsworth and many other Romantics did their best to hide or even deny their earlier sympathies with France and republicanism, even though in the 1790s they all shared a common ideological idiom, the loss of which Johnston considers a serious consequence of the 1790s 'Alarm' and an incalculable loss to British culture. Another loss was the 'true' history of these 'unusual suspects', whose 'youthful enthusiasms' were all-too-often described by their nineteenth century biographers as signs of 'mental instability, temporary insanity, sinfulness, or personal immorality, sometimes by these persons themselves...' (16), personal histories Johnston successfully corrects.

Johnston poses many questions about the effect of the political turmoil of the 1790s upon the lives and careers of this 'lost generation' of Romantic writers: 'How would these genres [poetry, drama, and fiction] have been different in the absence of alarmist fears and pressures? Were there some works that might have been written, but weren't? And can their non-existence, or at least non-appearance, be attributed plausibly to alarmist conditions?'

(161). He ponders, for instance, what might have been the outcome for science if Thomas Beddoes had remained at Oxford as a Regius Professor instead of going to Bristol. Comparing the novelists Robert Bage and Jane Austen, he argues that, '[s]et together, their oeuvres make up a complementary pairing of novels-that-might-have-been' (181) (supposing that Bage would have continued writing novels attacking class barriers and that Austen would have written novels less aimed at upholding the status quo). Johnston believes Pitt's Reign of Alarm also affected the publication history of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, 'at least circumstantially' (251), resulting in its postponement for nearly fifty years, 'a significant loss indeed, making a significant difference in the development of English literary history' (253), possibly the most poignant 'loss' discussed in Johnston's book. He goes even further, proposing that had Thelwall settled near Alfoxden in 1797, the three poets – Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Thelwall – would have had a 'positive cross-fertilization ... to the immense good of English literature ... and not been driven apart by collateral damage from the reign of Alarm', an 'inestimable and incalculable' loss (240, 245), though clearly less than the *Prelude's* delayed publication. Though Johnston correctly notes that these 'what ifs' cannot be fully estimated, he nevertheless believes there is much circumstantial evidence to support his claims.

If the French Revolution and its aftermath in England led to Pitt's 'Alarm', as Johnston argues so effectively, it also generated an incredibly vibrant clash of political opinions and ideologies, with many individuals moving in and out of radicalism at various times for a variety of reasons, not always the result of Pitt's policies. The decade further witnessed the creation of new and often unorthodox organizing strategies, both rhetorical and practical (especially in relation to the propagation of printed materials) by reformers and loyalists alike, all designed to reach the lower and middling orders with their respective political messages, strategies that left an indelible mark on literature, printing, and the future of political discourse in England. These strategies first emerged in the late 1780s, prior to the French Revolution, with the creation and proliferation of the Sunday School Society, as well as the initial efforts to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts and abolish the slave trade, all involving representatives (and beneficiaries) of the upper, middle, and lower orders from the ranks of both Anglicans and Dissenters, orthodox and heterodox.

By the mid-1790s, these movements had been suspended except for the Sunday School Society, and that too came under scrutiny by the end of the decade, not for its doctrine but rather its connection with 'village preaching', which many Churchmen considered subversive, at least in the hands of Dissenters, or so Bishop Horsley thought in 1801 and Lord Sidmouth in 1811. The growing threat of 'French principles' in British politics as delineated in the meetings and pamphlets of John Reeves's Association for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers and championed by Pitt and his associates between 1793 and 1795 was used as a hammer against anyone associated with various aspects of the incredibly diverse ideology of British

'republicanism'. Besides those reformers discussed by Johnston, this threat was also associated with such outspoken abolitionists as William Fox, a non-descript Dissenting bookseller in London who became the movement's premier pamphleteer in 1791 before disappearing from the scene in 1795, as well as numerous other Dissenters whose support for repealing the Test Acts was viewed as a 'French' dislike of Church and King and whose acceptance of Unitarianism seemed closer to 'French infidelity' than traditional British Protestantism. For most orthodox Dissenters, support for Pitt's war against France after 1798 became more a matter of religious prudence and national allegiance than political agreement.

For others, separating themselves from 'reform' was ultimately a matter of maturity, though a certain level of fear engendered by Pitt's 'Alarm' cannot be discounted, as Johnston makes clear. Many of the figures discussed in his book were only in their early twenties when they espoused their most radical opinions, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and a figure outside Johnston's purview of 'unusual suspects', Henry Crabb Robinson. In 1799 Robinson, then twenty-four, paid visits to three significant Unitarian figures of the reform movement serving prison sentences – Gilbert Wakefield, one of Johnston's 'suspects'; Joseph Johnson, bookseller/printer; and Benjamin Flower, radical editor of the *Cambridge Intelligencer*. Flower published some of Coleridge's earliest poems in his paper as well as two articles on Godwin by Robinson. Writing many years later (1846) in his *Reminiscences* concerning his visit to Newgate to see Flower, Robinson notes that

he [Flower] was committed there by the Ho: of Lords for a breach of privilege – He was considered as a Martyr And in spite of the infirmity of deafness was a good companion Besides I was a thorough going Jacobin And rejoiced in the society of all reformers or revolutionists in church & state.³

A bold position for 1799, to say the least, but by 1809 Robinson, after the benefit of five years study and travel in Germany and extended stays in Altona and Corunna as foreign correspondent for the *London Times*, had undergone considerable changes in his philosophical, religious, and political opinions. Upon his return to London that year from Spain, he attended a public dinner on 1 May at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in London in support of parliamentary reform, led by Sir Francis Burdett, Capel Lofft, Major John Cartwright, and the Unitarian MP from Norwich, William Smith, who was 'all but hissed because he spoke with discrimination', the only speech Robinson liked that evening. He described the dinner as 'a precious Scene':

it was neither prudence nor Sense in what was done or said rank

³ Henry Crabb Robinson, *MS Reminiscences*, vol. 1, fols. 117-18. Quoted by permission of the Director and Trustees, Dr Williams's Library, London.

fanaticism Unthinking democracy fit for the mob – disgusted with the serious part. The After-piece (the farce) was rich enough – After the heroes were gone I boxed my way up – to the Chair & whom should I find on his legs but Capel Lofft vainly trying to force the ‘Memory of M^r Fox’ as a toast upon people who were equally without wine to drink & sobriety to appreciate Fox’s worth ... he was interrupted by a black-guard ex-Jacobin afterwards Anti-Jacobin now the right hand of Cobbett who roared out *Income tax – Hanover – Answer me Sir And do not interrupt me squeaked little Capel almost inaudible from rage All in vain – Give us a song – A Song – roared others –*

‘I have reported this’, he adds in his 1809 *Reminiscences*, ‘because this was my first public dinner in London – No wonder that it was my last public & political dinner’.⁴

Public political dinners, maybe – but this was by no means Robinson’s last private conversation about politics with reformers from the 1790s, many of whom had been previously championed by Robinson himself. After Anna Letitia Barbauld received ‘great reproach’ for her poem *1811*, a poem ‘written more in sorrow than in anger’, Robinson writes, he added his own opprobrium to what would prove to be Barbauld’s last significant creative effort:

There was a disheartening & even dastardly tone in it which even I, with all my love for her, could not excuse – It provoked a very coarse & even blackguard Rev: in the Quarterly R: which many years afterwards Murray told me he was more ashamed of than of any other article in the Rev: – I find in my journal occasional expressions of displeasure at the unqualified Jacobinism of her politics And lately on looking over her otherwise admirable *Sins of the Governm^t, Sins of the Nation* [1793] I was surprised that I had not before noticed what was then become offensive, the unqualified assertion that the numerical majority of every country ought to be the legislators!⁵

Even ‘Godwin was very severe on 1811’, Robinson adds to this *Reminiscence* of 1812. Clearly Robinson had experienced a remarkable transformation between 1799 and 1812, even more so by 1849, when he composed the section quoted above, a full fifty years after his prison visits and identification as a ‘thorough going Jacobin’. By 1812 Robinson was no longer unapologetically rejoicing ‘in the society of all reformers or revolutionists in church & state’ like that of his old friend Mrs. Barbauld, nor in 1849 did he view his own alteration as a ‘loss’ but rather a maturation of his earlier political opinions.

Coleridge changed more than just political opinions between 1793 and 1803. He began the decade of the 1790s as a student at Cambridge and ended as a student at Göttingen, and in between was a radical reformer, Unitarian,

⁴ Henry Crabb Robinson, MS *Reminiscences*, vol. 1, fols. 417-18.

⁵ Henry Crabb Robinson, MS *Reminiscences*, vol. 2, fols. 56-57.

necessitarian, soldier, abolitionist, lecturer, journalist, preacher, and poet. It may well be that the seeds of his movement away from reform politics were sown at his most radical moment, September 1794, when he returned to Cambridge flushed with Robert Southey's Pantisocracy, William Frend's Republicanism, and Joseph Priestley's Unitarianism. When he breakfasted with the noted Baptist minister and political reformer Robert Hall that September, the impression he left was not a positive one. After his interview with Coleridge, Hall wrote to his brother-in-law, Isaac James, a writer and bookseller in Bristol and Cottle's friend, that he thought the young scholar 'a very ingenious young man, but intoxicated with a political and philosophical enthusiasm, a sophic, a republican, and leveller. Much as I admire his abilities, I cannot say I feel disposed to cultivate his intimacy; it is difficult or rather perhaps impossible to come into contact with such licentious opinions without contracting a taint'.⁶ Hall's reaction to Coleridge was not uncommon at that time, for as Coleridge confessed to Southey on 18 September, many people 'have fled from me' because of 'sitting so near a madman of Genius!'⁷ (the focus appearing to be more on 'madman' than 'Genius'). Most likely Coleridge's religious heterodoxy influenced Hall's reaction, yet his use of 'enthusiasm' and 'republican' is fascinating, especially for someone who a year previous to his meeting with Coleridge, in his brilliant pamphlet *Apology for the Freedom of the Press, And General Liberty* (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1793), had accused Bishop Horsley of reviving the despised (by reformers) doctrines of passive obedience and non-resistance. In one of the most stinging rebukes of any high level operative of Church and State by a Dissenter and reformer during Pitt's reign of 'Alarm', Hall writes:

When we reflect on the qualities which distinguish this prelate, that venom that hisses, and that meanness that creeps, the malice that attends him to the sanctuary and pollutes the altar, we feel a similar perplexity with that which springs from the origin of evil. But if we recollect on the other hand, that instruction may be conveyed by negatives, and that the union in one character of nearly all the dispositions human nature *ought not to possess*, may be a useful warning, at least, we shall cease to wonder at the existence and elevation of Dr. Horsley. Characters of his stamp, like a plague or a tempest, may have their uses in the general system, if they recur not too often. (xvi)

Neither did Hall spare Pitt (certainly no friend of Coleridge's at that time either), describing him in his Advertisement to the 3rd edition of *Freedom of the Press* (1794) as the chief villain in England's unconstitutional war with France, the 'shameless apostate' who is upending 'all the barriers which the wisdom of our ancestors have opposed to the incroachments of arbitrary power'. 'The character of Pitt', Hall opines,

⁶ [R.H.W.], *The Hall Family* (London: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1910), 60-61.

⁷ E. L. Griggs, ed., *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-71), 1.103.

is written in sunbeams. A veteran in frauds while in the bloom of youth, betraying first, and then persecuting, his earliest friends and connexions, falsifying every promise, and violating every political engagement, ever making the fairest professions a prelude to the darkest actions . . . [T]he contempt we feel for his meanness and duplicity, is lost in the dread of his machinations, and the abhorrence of his crimes. (iv, v)

Hall's *Modern Infidelity* (1799) would turn his early political writings on end, exchanging the threats created by Horsley and Pitt for that of French infidelity and scepticism, the latter best exemplified in the writings of William Godwin. Hall's change of mind cost him his friendship with Benjamin Flower (who called Hall an 'apostate' that year), but in the autumn of 1794 Coleridge clearly admired Hall's sentiments and rhetoric (note the striking similarities between Coleridge's 1795 pamphlet, *The Plot Discovered*, and Hall's *Apology*). Nevertheless, as his letter to Isaac James makes clear, Hall was able somehow even in 1794 to distinguish *his* republicanism and dissent from that of the youthful Coleridge, possibly leaving impressions in Coleridge's mind that would find fertile ground in 1797 or 1804 or possibly 1817 (the same year Hall surprisingly identified himself in a letter to William Wilberforce as having always been a 'Foxite Whig').⁸

If we wonder what might have happened if Thelwall had joined Coleridge and Wordsworth in 1797, we might also wonder what the consequences would have been if Coleridge had acted upon his Pantisocratic ideals and emigrated to America with Southey in 1796, or stubbornly pursued a career as a Unitarian minister at Shrewsbury. Neither action seems likely to have produced the Coleridge we now read and study and who has been a source of admiration for two centuries. Cottle's reminiscence in 1837 of Coleridge's radical activities in 1795-96 suggests that maturity was a likely cure for Pantisocracy:

It is difficult to assign any other reason for the wild scheme of Pantisocracy, than the inexperience of youth, acting on sanguine imaginations. At its first announcement, every reflecting mind saw that the plan, in its nature, and in the agents who were to carry it into effect, was obnoxious to insurmountable objections; but the individuals with whom the design originated, were young, ardent, and enthusiastic, and at that time entertained views of society, erroneous in themselves, and which experience only could correct. The fullest conviction was entertained by their friends, that, as reason established itself in their minds, the delusion would vanish; and that they themselves would soon smile at extravagances which none but their own ingenious order of minds could have devised.⁹

⁸ Hall to Wilberforce, 27 February 1817, MSS Wilberforce, d.17, Bodleian Library, fols. 269-70.

⁹ *Early Recollections; Chiefly relating to the late Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 2 vols (London: Longman, Rees and Co., 1837), 1.193-94.

We do not have to agree with everything Cottle asserts but his main points are salient, and his use of 'ingenious' repeats Hall's assessment of Coleridge in 1794, just as his plea for maturity would be echoed in the 1840s in Robinson's *Reminiscences*. Without question, at some point a certain 'reason' did establish itself in Coleridge's mind about Pantisocracy, much like another 'reason' prompted him to forego becoming a Unitarian minister, neither decision regretted later by Coleridge or any Coleridgean since. Coleridge's changeability in the 1790s cannot be denied, nor his desire later in life to be known by a different set of political opinions than those he held, as Cottle gently reminds us, at the tender age of twenty-three.

But this brings us back to what Johnston proposes in his coda about these suspects and what was lost in their subsequent careers by Pitt's 'Alarm': 'What does it signify?' (323). Johnston ponders the overall effect of Pitt's repressive policies on the development of Romantic literature, arriving at the conclusion that it was 'not good', but 'just how bad was it' may be a question difficult to answer, since it is largely circumstantial. Johnston suggests that 'there is (or was) a good deal of writing that we do not have, or can recover only with considerable research outside the usually established bounds of canonical legitimacy', including giving more attention to the lesser known writings of many of the individuals of 'the lost generation' he has discussed in his book. He confesses that 'what was lost was more the promise of their achievement than, in most cases, an extant, recoverable body of fully realized work', but nevertheless believes that 'It is recoverable to a degree, but what is recovered is discouraging, because we can see how it failed – was not allowed – to develop' (326). Johnston has done an immense amount of 'recovering' himself, and in so doing has created a panorama of intellects converging in a critical period in British history, from which lives were unquestionably altered. Johnston's volume demonstrates most effectively the value of uncovering and recovering published and unpublished writings from the 1790s, both from formal and informal sources, and their power to reshape our perspective of the interplay of reform politics and Romantic ideology during that critical decade. What we might hope from Kenneth Johnston would be a second volume on the 1790s to serve as a bookend to this exceptional study, only this time recreating the lives of those who, like the journalists Benjamin Flower, John Foster, William Hazlitt and other 'unusual suspects', did not alter their opinions and who not only survived the 'Alarm' but, in some cases, lived to see a remarkable decade of reform, 1823-33, which included the formation of the Abolition Society (1823), repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts (1828), and passage of the Catholic Relief Bill (1829), the Reform Bill (1832), and the Slavery Abolition Bill (1833), the seeds of which, no matter how imperfectly, were sewn in the 1790s, a legacy we now see more clearly as a result of Kenneth Johnston's *Unusual Suspects*.