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**THOMAS McGRUGAR'S "LETTERS OF ZENO":
PATRIOTIC PRINT & CONSTITUTIONAL IMPROVEMENT
IN THE CALEDONIAN MERCURY, 1782-1783**

Alex Benchimol

In the winter of 1782-3 the *Caledonian Mercury* published a series of open letters addressed to the citizens of Edinburgh, using the classical pseudonym of Zeno, and laying out a scheme for Scotland's constitutional improvement.¹ The twenty-two-year-old author, Thomas McGrugar (1751-1810), then secretary of a society for reform of the Scottish Burghs, and soon to be admitted as an advocate, was son of a wealthy Edinburgh merchant of the same name, and his primary audience was the capital's prosperous commercial and professional classes.² McGrugar's stated aim was the constitutional empowerment of the burghesses from Scotland's

¹ "Zeno" [Thomas McGrugar], "Letter I [-V]. To The Citizens of Edinburgh," *Caledonian Mercury*, 23 December, 1782 [-5 February, 1783]; this article deals with the impact of McGrugar's letters in the *Caledonian Mercury*, not with the additional letters collected in *Letters of Zeno, Addressed to the Citizens of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: the Committee of Citizens, 1783).

² For McGrugar's authorship, see *Scots Magazine and Edinburgh Literary Miscellany*, 72 (April 1810): 317-318, and O.W., "Biographical Notice, Respecting the late Thomas M'Grugar, Esq.," *Scots Magazine*, 72 (October 1810): 723-724; Samuel Halkett, et al., *Catalogue of the printed books in the library of the Faculty of Advocates*, 7 vols (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1867-1879), V [L-M]: 698; see also current NLS catalogue, which uses the spelling MacGrugar, and cf. John Cannon, *Parliamentary Reform 1640-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 111. McGrugar was admitted to the Faculty of Advocates in 1786; his other published work included *A Letter from a Member of the General Convention of Delegates of the Royal Boroughs; to the Citizens of the Royal Boroughs which have not yet acceded to the plan of reform* (Edinburgh: n.p., 1784); *Disputatio juridica ad. Tit. VII. Lib. XLVI* (Edinburgh: Balfour and Smellie, 1786); and *Supplement to The Decisions of the Court of Session* (Edinburgh: Bell and Bradfute, 1804). There is a single memorial stone in Greyfriars Kirkyard to both McGrugar and his father, using the spelling M'Grugar, which from its layout leaves it ambiguous at first glance whether its tribute to work for the Royal Burghs of Scotland refers to the father or (correctly) to the son.

sixty-six Royal Burghs—civic units whose autonomy was ostensibly protected under article 21 of the 1707 Scottish Act of Union. To build support for that, McGrugar drew on a rhetoric of accountability, public responsibility and individual liberty that was an ideological complement to the economic modernization championed by bodies like the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce, founded contemporaneously in 1783, the same year that Scotland's three largest cities of Aberdeen, Glasgow and Edinburgh convened their own burgh reform committees.

The present essay examines this important, if unsuccessful, initiative in Scottish constitutional improvement, first by framing its relationship to the national public sphere of the time, particularly institutions like the Convention of Royal Burghs and Scotland's periodical press—those essential print mediators of Scottish civil society that frequently acted as explicit vehicles for national improvement. The essay then assesses the rhetorical strategy employed by McGrugar for the five letters published in the *Caledonian Mercury*, which highlights the complex ideological legacy of Scotland's Union with England from seventy-five years earlier, as it was manifested in arguments that deployed a North British rationale for constitutional reform in language that also sought to update Scotland's pre-Union patriot identity with a new emphasis on civil liberty and civic improvement.³ This complex projection of an improving national identity in late eighteenth-century Scotland illustrates how, in Colin Kidd's important ideological excavation of North Britishness, the "predominance of assimilationist opinion in North British political culture did not preclude...the persistence of traditional forms of Scottish patriotism," and indeed how "North Britishness was ... capable of reviving older forms of Scottish national consciousness."⁴ The "Letters of Zeno" show this in pleas for the equalization of civil rights within the Union that also sought to restore the pre-Union right of burgesses to participate in the governance of

³ "North Britishness" in this sense is understood primarily as both "a set of parameters comprehending the standard responses of mid- and late eighteenth-century Scots to Union," as well as "a manifestation of the concentric loyalties which allowed Scots to capitalize on their self-interested attachment to the expanding core of English commercial opportunity, without compromising their emotional identification with Scotland." See Colin Kidd, "North Britishness and the Nature of Eighteenth-Century British Patriotisms," *Historical Journal*, 39 (1996): 361-82 (361, 363). Bob Harris provides a more pragmatic sense of the North British ideology which underpinned the Scottish burgh reform movement: "proponents of burgh reform represented their cause as one of completing the Union, of fuller assimilation with British liberties": Harris, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution* (London: Pickering, 2008), 43.

⁴ Kidd, "North Britishness," 366-367.

Scots burghs, and to reclaim Edinburgh as a Scottish political capital for this patriotic project of civic-based constitutional improvement.⁵

What the “Letters of Zeno” published in the *Caledonian Mercury* showcase is the creation of a parallel periodical forum to the official deliberations of the Convention of Royal Burghs, one which fed into a short-lived, alternative Edinburgh assembly for the propagation and dissemination of the author’s project for constitutional improvement—discussed in the essay’s conclusion—briefly reconfiguring the parameters of the national public sphere in Scotland. In this sense the newspaper series provides a compelling case study for Bob Harris’s claim that “Scottish newspapers assumed, against the background of very rapid urbanization from the final third of the century, a growing importance as vehicles of publicity to an expanding range of activities and bodies.”⁶ The crucial organizational function of the *Caledonian Mercury* letter series in cohering the agitations for burgh reform into the key national Scottish political movement of the 1780s, this essay will argue, amplifies Harris’s contention that the newspaper form was “instrumental” to “a developing public sphere in later eighteenth century Scotland” (*ibid.*, 45).

If the early years of the *Caledonian Mercury* were noted for giving patriotic voice to the nation’s wounded political honour after the Union settlement of 1707, the last decades of the eighteenth century demonstrated how a concern for material improvement—including trade, manufacturing and infrastructure development in Scotland’s expanding principal cities—recalibrated the meaning and purpose of what constituted a patriotic press into print expressions of what John Robertson has called the Scottish “civic tradition.”⁷ Robertson identifies this tradition as going back to “the years

⁵ Amy Watson has argued that in the 1720s and 1730s, “a partisan movement known as Patriotism offered Scots a viable means of advocating for their nation’s political and economic interest within the British parliamentary system,” foreshadowing demands in the 1780s for equalization of rights within the Union, better support for Scottish industry, and respect for Scotland’s pre-Union constitutional identity. See Amy Watson, “Patriotism and Partisanship in Post-Union Scotland, 1724-37,” *Scottish Historical Review*, 97 (2018): 57-84 (58).

⁶ Bob Harris, “Scotland’s Newspapers, the French Revolution, and domestic radicalism (c1789-1794),” *Scottish Historical Review*, 84 (2005): 38-62 (43).

⁷ John Robertson, “The Scottish Enlightenment and the Limits of the Civic Tradition,” in Istvan Host and Michael Ignatieff, eds, *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 137-78. The newspaper was founded as a Jacobite periodical in 1720 and for the first forty-five numbers proudly displayed its support of the nation’s pre-Union patriot identity through the Scottish coat of arms on its masthead: see W. J. Couper, *The Edinburgh Periodical Press: Being a Bibliographical Account of the Newspapers, Journals, and Magazines Issued in*

preceding the Union, when Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun led a remarkably sophisticated debate on the national predicament,” and continuing “in the Enlightenment, at the instigation of David Hume,” when “the Scots had explored the demands which economic improvement makes of government institutions, and had sought to identify which form of government would be best adapted to the needs of a progressive, commercial society.”⁸ These demands for local and parliamentary government to respond to economic expansion initiatives in Scottish cities like Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen in the early 1780s found expression in a new kind of improving civic-patriot constitutional discourse in the Scottish national press.

I

Before examining the “Letters of Zeno” that catalyzed the burgh reform movement in Scotland, it might be helpful to review the significance of the constitutional body it sought to challenge with its call for an electoral realignment in Scottish local government. The Convention of the Royal Burghs of Scotland was a key stakeholder in the first Scottish Parliament until its dissolution in 1707, with its sixty-six constituent burghs represented by commissioners in that pre-Union parliament. The Convention was the most important civic body in the nation outside of the Kirk, led by Scotland’s landed and merchant elite and meeting alongside the parliament as a complementary corporate body to protect the trading and economic privileges of the Scottish burghs, which included Scotland’s primary urban centres. Not surprisingly, like the Kirk, it was also a principal vehicle for protest against the original terms of the incorporating Union, which would see its formal constitutional voice reduced to only 15 of Scotland’s 45 MPs. Karin Bowie notes the central role of the Convention in arguing to “maintain Scotland’s sovereign parliament, Presbyterian Church and Protestant succession.”⁹ Christopher Whatley has commented in his study *The Scots and the Union* that the loss of a major proportion of Scotland’s parliamentary representatives “was a grievous blow to an ancient incorporation, unique in Europe, which had comprised

Edinburgh from the Earliest Times to 1800, 2 vols (Stirling: Eneas Mckay, 1908), II: 40-62 (41).

⁸ John Robertson, “Scottish Political Economy Beyond the Civic Tradition: Government and Economic Development in the *Wealth of Nations*,” *History of Political Thought*, 4 (1983): 451-82 (452).

⁹ Karin Bowie, *Scottish Public Opinion and the Anglo-Scottish Union, 1699-1707* (London: Royal Historical Society, 2007), 120

one of the country’s three parliamentary estates.”¹⁰ In a 1706 address on the draft Treaty of Union, the Convention communicated how it could not “expect to have the condition of the people of Scotland made better and improv’d” without a Scottish parliament.¹¹

One continuity between the pre- and post-1707 Convention, however, was its persistent highlighting of the condition of the nation’s physical infrastructure, and the allocation of central mechanisms of taxation to improve the state of urban harbour walls and roads.¹² As well as acting as a principal lobbying body for the infrastructural needs and taxation concerns of Scotland’s main cities after the Union settlement, the Convention of Royal Burghs also, according to Bob Harris and Charles McKean in *The Scottish Town in the Age of the Enlightenment*, protected the status of the Scots burghs as “a moral community, of which the Kirk and council were conjoint guardians.” Harris and McKean observe:

By the later eighteenth century, the right of the magistracy to represent the sense of burgh community was under concerted challenge, as signalled very clearly by the upsurge in support for burgh reform in the early 1780s.¹³

The vision for constitutional improvement projected in McGrugar’s Zeno series is informed by underlying moral and civic concerns for a fair and transparent electoral system that adequately reflected the new concentrations of wealth and networks of economic activity amongst Scotland’s urban bourgeoisie. Gordon Pentland notes the Scottish burgh reform movement that emerged partly as a consequence of McGrugar’s letter series “was moderate, advocating the political participation in municipal affairs by propertied and intelligent citizens,” and “aimed at reforming abuses in the internal government of the burghs” which “was seen as the cause of much of the financial mismanagement and speculation that was carried on at the expense of the burgh communities.”¹⁴ This

¹⁰ Christopher A. Whatley, *The Scots and the Union: Then and Now* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 308.

¹¹ Anthony Aufere, ed., *The Lockhart Papers: Containing memoirs and commentaries upon the affairs of Scotland from 1702 to 1715, his secret correspondence with the son of King James the Second from 1718 to 1728, and his other political writings*, 2 vols (London: W. Anderson, 1817) I: 172, qtd in P. H. Scott, *The Union of 1707: Why and How?* (Edinburgh: Saltire Society, 2006), 61.

¹² Whatley, *The Scots and the Union*, 353.

¹³ Bob Harris and Charles McKean, *The Scottish Town in the Age of the Enlightenment, 1740-1820* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 433.

¹⁴ Gordon Pentland, “The French Revolution, Scottish Radicalism and the “People Who Were Called Jacobins””, in *Reactions to Revolutions: The 1790s and Their Aftermath*, ed. Ulrich Broich, H. T. Dickinson, Eckhart Hellmuth and Martin Schmidt (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007), 85-108 (p. 90).

concern with local government efficiency and middle-class participation was complemented by a desire to expand the parliamentary franchise beyond the control of self-elected town councils dominated by the political will of magistrates and their (often) landed patrons (*ibid.*). This reform movement overlapped with key contemporary Scottish civic and trade reform initiatives like the founding of the Glasgow and Edinburgh Chambers of Commerce in 1783 and 1785, part of a formation of new civic bodies which, as Harris observes, “exploited newspapers and other forms of print for parliamentary lobbying purposes.”¹⁵

The burgh reform movement also elevated the civic role of the burghs, whose identity was intertwined with a formal membership of the burgh and included exclusive economic rights as members of merchant guilds and trades incorporations that encouraged, to their frustration, an unrealized constitutional status for economic associations that, from their perspective, were the fundamental social units facilitating Scotland’s rapid material modernization. Their distinctive commercial interests, tax grievances, and plans for civic reform and infrastructure investment were still subject to the often recalcitrant instincts and opaque patronage mechanisms of Scotland’s town councils and magistrates. These councils and magistrates controlled the proceedings of the annual Convention of Royal Burghs and the election of the fifteen Westminster MPs allocated to the burghs. That this constitutional conflict in Scotland immediately followed the conclusion of a war in Britain’s North American colonies which had foregrounded the essential relationship of economic activity and taxation with formal political rights should not be overlooked, and was a point not lost on those in the burgh reform movement arguing for more electoral competence to be allocated to the burghesses.

The Scottish burgh reformers were partly attempting to assimilate, in a British constitutional framework, democratic ideas of transparency, governance and representation that formed the primary ideological basis for the rebellion in Britain’s North American colonies. As Dalphy Fagerstrom argued in an influential 1954 essay on “Scottish Opinion and the American Revolution,” “in Scotland as in England, the issues of the American war became involved with issues of domestic reform,” with burgh reform as a chief component in the former.¹⁶ Under the proprietorship of John Robertson in the 1770s the *Caledonian Mercury* gave voice to Scottish criticism of the British Government’s conduct of the American crisis, in some cases suggesting that Scotland could also

¹⁵ Harris, “Scotland’s Newspapers,” 44.

¹⁶ Dalphy L. Fagerstrom, “Scottish Opinion and the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 11 (1954): 252-75 (p. 272).

challenge unfair taxation in imitation of the rebellious American colonists.¹⁷

II

The first letter of Zeno, published on December 23, 1782, is framed as a formal address “To the CITIZENS of EDINBURGH,” as if McGrugar is attempting to use the pages of the leading newspaper of the Scottish national press to convene a parallel print assembly alongside the annual gathering of the Convention of Royal Burghs held in Scotland’s administrative capital. He opens with a prominent reference to Scotland’s martial past, linking this patriotic heritage with a new project for constitutional improvement, now based on a North British imperative to highlight the significance of civil rights and liberties:

Our ancestors were always distinguished for valour and intrepidity in the field: But I cannot, with equal truth, aver, that they have been often remarked for a love of *civil* liberty, or for that firm and determined opposition to arbitrary establishments, which truly characterise the patriot.¹⁸

This call to remake the nation’s constitutional future is notable for its repeated appeals to the historic struggles for a distinctive Scottish political identity. “Historic instances might be mentioned,” McGrugar reminds his readers in the *Caledonian Mercury*, a long-time periodical platform for the nation’s distinctive political and cultural identity, “but instances need not be produced to Scotsmen.” McGrugar attempts to raise the consciousness of his patriotic Scottish audience with a carefully calibrated rhetorical voice that both recounts “the transactions of your own countrymen” in patriotic service to the nation, while reminding them of the limits of that martial tradition for the future development of Scotland. The project of constitutional reform is thus presented as a way of redeeming Scotland’s past struggles for sovereignty by re-configuring patriotic identity around more modern concerns for civil liberties:

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 254. See “To the Printer of the Caledonian Mercury,” *Caledonian Mercury*, 2 October, 1775, where the writer asks “How a distant government’s *unlimited power* of taking a people’s money is consistent with national freedom?,” in a pointed critique of Scottish support for the British campaign. For other examples of critical discussions in the *Caledonian Mercury* of the British military campaign and ideological case for war with the American Colonies, see “To the Printer of the Caledonian Mercury,” *Caledonian Mercury*, 16 March, 1778; and “To the Printer of the Caledonian Mercury,” *Caledonian Mercury*, 6 February, 1775.

¹⁸ “Zeno,” “Letter I. To The CITIZENS OF EDINBURGH,” *Caledonian Mercury*, 23 December, 1782, 4. After the first citation from each letter, subsequent quotations are not separately footnoted.

If our ancestors, then, have incurred the imputation of *indifference* for *civil* liberty, let us evidence, by our conduct, that such an imputation is not applicable to their posterity.

This opening is followed by an explicit appeal for patriotic constitutional activism, using the ancient Scottish civic site of the burgh as a springboard to fulfil the equalization of Scots' political rights within the now seventy-five-year-old Union. The lack of equal political rights within this Union animates the new claim for a modern patriotic citizenship rooted in constitutional liberty: "The time is now arrived, when you may have an opportunity to assert your claim to freedom, and shake off those restraints to which our fathers have long been subjected."

Crucially, this patriotic appeal to Edinburgh's citizen-burgesses links the enhancement of their constitutional rights to a new, improved sense of the Scots burgh within the wider civic community; this at a time when Scotland's principal cities were driving the material modernization of the country, partly through the efforts of an industrious middle-class formally excluded from parliamentary elections. This reform effort, McGrugar writes, "if successful, must raise us to importance in the burgh, and the burgh to respectability in the community."

The chief obstacle to this vision of constitutional improvement is the "election of Representatives in Parliament for the burghs," which, McGrugar argues, "has, for a lapse of time, been conducted in a manner arbitrary and iniquitous." Echoing Glasgow chief magistrate Patrick Colquhoun's complaint to the Yorkshire Association a month earlier about the lack of parliamentary representation for the city's expanding population,¹⁹ the author lays out the fundamental source of this constitutional iniquity:

A small number of men, in each burgh, assume to themselves a prerogative which ought to be exercised only by the citizens at large. The representatives are not the delegates of the burgesses, but of the Magistrates; for the burgesses cannot consider those as *their* representatives, in whose nomination they have no voice. Whoever, then, interests the Magistrates, secures the election; and men are sent to Parliament, not the choice of citizens, but of the Council.

¹⁹ See "Paper V. Letter from the Lord Provost of Glasgow to the Chairman of the Committee of the Association of the County of York, 28 Nov. 1782," in Rev. Christopher Wyvill, ed., *Political Papers, chiefly respecting the attempt of the County of York... to effect a reformation of the Parliament of Great Britain*, 6 vols (York: W. Blanchard, 1794-1802), II, 84-5.

This constitutional anomaly renders the council the “supreme authority of election” while the wider community of citizens of the Scottish burghs in expanding cities like Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen

are not entitled even to remonstrate, how much soever the election should be contrary to their wishes, how much soever the person elected should be deficient in probity and ability, or how much soever, in other respects he should be inadequate to discharge the important trust reposed in him.

This opening letter advocates a rebalancing of the burghal constitution in Scotland through a new distribution of electoral responsibility based on values of accountability and competence; values that were embodied in the success of independent civic initiatives like Glasgow’s Chamber of Commerce, founded a month later in January of 1783 with Colquhoun as its president.²⁰

As well as calling for this rebalancing within Scotland, this first letter also argues for the electoral rights of burgesses to be equalized across the Union. Using “the constitution of this city of Edinburgh” as an example to his readers, McGrugar writes:

I really blush to recount the mode of election established in this metropolis..... Instead of allowing the citizens to vote with that freedom and extention practised in most of the burghs in England, the whole affair of the election is managed by the Town Council alone.

He then recounts how Edinburgh’s Town Council elects its lone Parliamentary representative where “the leading party, in this junto, has determined on.” “Such is the election sanctioned by usage in our metropolis” he notes to his readers in Scotland’s leading national newspaper, “and judge ye, whether or not it is comfortable to the rights of a free people.” This rhetoric of rights is significant in communicating the wider message of constitutional modernization behind the burgh reform project, and, as we shall see in subsequent letters, anticipates core arguments that would be deployed a decade later in the British radical parliamentary reform movement.

McGrugar’s highlighting of this corrupt electoral process as “sanctioned by usage” in the Scottish capital is amplified in an important footnote to this first letter. In it he makes clear that the current system

²⁰ For a discussion of the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce in relation to the *Glasgow Advertiser* newspaper, see Alex Benchimol, ““Let Scotland Flourish By the Printing of the Word”: Commerce, Civic Enlightenment and National Improvement in the *Glasgow Advertiser*, 1783-1800,” in *Cultures of Improvement in Scottish Romanticism, 1707-1840*, ed. Alex Benchimol and Gerard Lee McKeever (London: Routledge, 2018), 51-73.

“which confers on the Council the *exclusive* prerogative of electing a representative in Parliament” is not sanctioned in the Sett—or pre-Union charter of the Burgh—according to the 1583 Decreet Arbitral giving burgesses a role in choosing “said commissioners (in Parliament &c) for the burgh of Edinburgh.” “This confers no *new* right” of election, he notes, “it respects only a right formerly possessed,” making his call for constitutional improvement in this first letter also a plea for the restoration of pre-Union Scottish Burghal rights for election.²¹ What is also notable in this opening letter is his equating of this defect in representation for the Edinburgh burgesses with the rights of “citizens at large,” who “have not the smallest concern” in parliamentary elections. This, in turn, for McGrugar, shines a light on the lack of accountability and transparency of the Town Council in Edinburgh, and by deliberate extension, Scotland’s other leading cities, where “the members of this Council are subject to no controul, in matters of election”. “We have no check, no restraint on them: They cannot even be called to an after-account for their conduct,” he remonstrates to his readers.

The series of rhetorical questions in the concluding section of this first letter amplifies the language of democratic rights and links them to a wider democratic deficit at the core of contemporary Scottish civic identity invoked at the letter’s opening. “What right, then, have we to boast of a Parliament! to boast of freedom! to boast of our own legislators!”, McGrugar recounts to his audience with patriotic indignation. “Can that legislature be called *ours*, in the election of which we have no voice?,” he

²¹ This argument became a central plank of the burgh reform movement in later years seeking reform of the internal government of the burghs, cited in the following 1789 parliamentary motion by Richard Brinsley Sheridan on behalf of the reformers, as reported in the *Glasgow Advertiser*:

On an examination of most of the charters of the royal boroughs, it appeared that forty of them contained clauses in favor of that plan which was the object of the bill, and only five favored the present form of government. Hence it was evident, that the bill aimed at no annihilation of the charters, but only sought to restore the original chartered government of the boroughs, and prevent those abuses which were the consequence of a deviation from the spirit of the charters.

See “SCOTS BOROUGHS REFORM”, *Glasgow Advertiser*, 6 July, 1789. Alexander Murdoch has noted that the 1583 Arbitral was a contested legal provision in eighteenth-century Edinburgh politics, with “wealthy merchants,” “prosperous tradesmen”, “the larger group of burgesses”, and “the other inhabitants of the city”, who all “expressed themselves through the sixteenth-century constitution of 1583”: Alexander Murdoch, “The Importance of Being Edinburgh: Management and Opposition in Edinburgh Politics, 1746-1784,” *Scottish Historical Review*, 62 (1983): 1-16 (p. 2).

asks, reminding his readers—“The CITIZENS OF EDINBURGH”—of their relationship to that chief institution at the heart of British political identity, as well as Scots’ main basis for equalizing their rights of representation within the Union. In the same issue of the *Caledonian Mercury* another plan for electoral reform was mooted, this one addressed to the “LANDHOLDERS OF SCOTLAND,” and proposing a lower property threshold for electoral qualification. Although addressing a different social constituency, the article is notable for its similar emphasis on expanding “civil and political liberty” as the primary means for national prosperity. It also echoes the patriotic rhetorical appeals of the first Zeno letter to Edinburgh’s burghesses, with its call for “temper, wisdom, firmness, and dispatch” in the “restoration of the constitution of Scotland.”²²

The second letter of Zeno, published on the front page of the *Caledonian Mercury*, on December 28, further grounds McGrugar’s project in a North British constitutional context, demonstrating how, in Bob Harris’s words, “proponents of burgh reform represented their cause as one of completing the Union, of a fuller assimilation with British liberties.”²³ After summarizing the argument from letter one about the lack of representational rights for the “citizens of Edinburgh,” the second letter opens by asking its audience

how far it is consonant to the nature of civil liberty, and the principles of the British constitution, to extrude them from the exercise of such rights? ... This enquiry would lead us into an investigation of the nature of liberty, and of the British constitution.²⁴

This second letter breaks down the key aspects of “civil or political liberty” through the mechanisms of representation in a modern state, arguing that “it is evident” that “a free state must be governed by *itself*, or, what is equivalent, by a convention of delegates *deputed by itself*.” “Upon these principles the British constitution has been superstructured,” McGrugar observes. He then emphasizes the wider British constitutional rationale for respecting the individual rights of the Edinburgh burgh community to elect their parliamentary representatives, by arguing that “men in the middle ranks of life, who generally constitute the majority of every free

²² “Albanicus,” “To The LANDHOLDERS OF SCOTLAND,” *Caledonian Mercury*, 23 December, 1782. The pseudonym “Albanicus” was used in these years for other writings known to be written by David Steuart Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan (1742-1829); see Emma Vincent Macleod, in *ODNB* (2004; revd. 2010).

²³ Harris, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution*, 43.

²⁴ “Zeno,” “Letter II To The CITIZENS OF EDINBURGH,” *Caledonian Mercury*, 28 December, 1782, 1.

community, cannot be excluded from a voice in the appointment of their representatives, because this would be to deny them the right of self-government.” He also characterizes the burgesses as the backbone of the Scottish civic nation at large, uniquely qualified for an expanded constitutional responsibility in local and national affairs “by their knowledge and extent of property, which must give them a weight in every free state, and a title to a share in the legislation.” “To withhold from these,” McGrugar asserts, “the exercise of this right, must be a deviation from the principles of the British constitution.” This argument presented to the burgesses of Edinburgh, and by extension, via the circulation of the *Caledonian Mercury*, to those of similar prosperity in Scottish cities like Glasgow and Aberdeen, seeks to impart a distinctive constitutional agency to those traders, manufacturers, and professionals (key cultural constituents of the Scottish national press, it must be noted) supporting the material modernization of Scotland, by its yoking together of economic and political rights. Notably, this constitutional agency is denied to what the letter calls “the dregs of the populace,” who, McGrugar asserts, “are disqualified by a natural ignorance and hebetude, which render them unfit to be their *own* directors, and therefore, they must be directed by *others*.”

McGrugar concludes this second letter by asking the readers of the *Caledonian Mercury*, once an influential periodical voice against the Union, why “one part of a nation possess this discriminating mark [of self government], and the other be extruded from the same privilege?” “Why should the Burghs of Scotland be denied a right which is exercised by the Burghs of England?” “The people are the same; their advantages ought to be equal.” In the absence of constitutional reform that empowers the Scottish burgesses to a say in the election of their parliamentary representatives, McGrugar surmises, “we are Britons, without possessing the rights of Britons.”

The third letter, published in the *Mercury* on January 6th, 1783, touches on a constitutional principle that would become a cornerstone for the radical parliamentary reform movement in Britain during the next decade. Citing Montesquieu’s theory of representative freedom, the letter argues for a natural-rights-based justification for “our claims to vote in the appointment of a delegate.”²⁵ “These claims arise from natural right,”

²⁵ “Zeno,” “Letter III. To The CITIZENS OF EDINBURGH,” *Caledonian Mercury*, 6 January, 1783, 4. For some influential treatments of natural rights theory in the context of the radical British reform movement of the late eighteenth century, see H.T. Dickinson, “The Rise and Fall of the Theory of Natural Rights in Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century Britain,” in *Naturrecht, Spaetaufkldrung, Revolution*, ed. Otto Danna and Diethelm Klippel (Hamburg: Meiner, 1995), 23-47; H. T. Dickinson, “The Debate on British Liberties and

asserts McGrugar, "and this natural right has been possessed by every free and independent people." Deploying a patriotic rhetoric of "freedom" and "independence" made familiar from Scotland's tumultuous debates around the Union from seventy-five years earlier, McGrugar pointedly asks if "the representation for the city of Edinburgh be termed comfortable to the rights of a free and independent people?"²⁶ McGrugar uses this patriot discourse to amplify the natural rights-based rationale for electoral reform to his audience in the pages of the *Caledonian Mercury*. Nearly a decade later, the Glasgow Burgh Reform Society, a burgh reform society with key ideological links to the Friends of the People through its president James Richardson, would convene a meeting reported in the pro-reform *Glasgow Advertiser* to present "an elegant silver medal" inscribed on one side with a key natural rights based principle resonating in the political agenda of those also involved in the radical parliamentary reform movement: "All men are by nature free and equal in respect of their Rights; hence, all civil or political distinctions and authority are derived from the people, and can be founded only in public utility."²⁷

Anticipating his call for a new general convention of burgesses in the final letter, McGrugar in this third letter lays the philosophical basis for an independent assembly of Scottish burgesses to challenge the authority of the gatherings convened by the Convention of Royal Burghs. "The right of being self-directed, or of chusing a delegate in the national convention, is a *right of nature*," he argues, and goes on to question the power held by Town Councils to act as responsible electors in place of the "people." "Magistrates are the trustees of the people, vested with powers for the advantage of the communities over which they preside," he writes, with a warning that "if they should be found to have usurped any such power, the people, as the original *trusters*, have a title to revoke." This was a principle that would animate national reform gatherings of "citizens" in the 1790s, like the first Scottish convention of radical parliamentary reform societies held in Edinburgh in 1792, modelled on the Edinburgh convention of independent burgh reform societies some eight years earlier.²⁸

Natural Rights," in *The Politics of the People in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Palgrave: Macmillan, 1995), 161-89; Mark Philp, "English Republicanism in the 1790s," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 6 (1998): 235-62.

²⁶ On Scottish patriot responses to the proposed incorporating model of Union, see Bowie, *Scottish Public Opinion and the Anglo-Scottish Union*, 97-98.

²⁷ *Glasgow Advertiser*, 23 March, 1792. Richardson was a signatory to the London Friends of the People's declaration of principles, published in Scottish newspapers: see *Glasgow Advertiser*, 14 May, 1792.

²⁸ Thomas Muir was reported in the Scottish press as having proposed a motion "That this Convention do agree to a General Convention by Delegates from all Associations in Scotland, and write circular letters of the opinion of all

The fourth letter continues with this line of argument, questioning the integrity and efficacy of the parliamentary members representing the Scots burghs with such a constitutionally defective system of election. Structural corruption in the electoral process leads to not only ineffective advocacy for the needs of Scottish local government, but also to endemic mismanagement of burgh assets used by Town Councils for the “Common Good” of urban communities, a medieval Scottish legal principle describing a pool of assets, including property, land and revenues used by Scots burghs for the benefit of their inhabitants.²⁹ McGrugar warns that

if candidates are allowed to purchase their elections with money, or by other unjustifiable means, then may we expect to see the House of Commons filled, not with the virtuous, but with the rich and profligate; and when this event shall take place, the consequences need not be pointed out.³⁰

To promote the efficiency of local government representation and the protection of the “Common Good,” Scottish burgh reformers like McGrugar insisted on the accountability of those elected to the communities they represented, something discouraged in the current system of party patronage. “If the representative be chosen by a junto, to acquire the approbation of the people is no longer his object, as it is no longer his interest,” McGrugar explains to his readers:

The citizens have no check on his conduct; and he, regardless of their favour, acts perhaps contrary to their interest... the community must be neglected by its representative, if the people are not the constituents.

This fourth letter also suggests that constitutional improvements like a broader electoral base and regular elections would act “as powerful incentives to stimulate a representative to perform his duty.” The

Associations relative to the same,” to be fully publicized in “all the Edinburgh and Glasgow newspapers”—key methods of correspondence, publicity and national organization taken from McGrugar’s strategy for the Scottish burgh reformers, discussed in the concluding sections of this article: see “To the Public,” *Glasgow Advertiser*, 23-26 November 1792.

²⁹ This was a key principle for the Scottish burgh reformers, as articulated in an influential pamphlet by the jurist Lord Gardenstone, serialized in the Scottish press, where he cites the protection of the “*Common Good*,” alongside the case “to abolish the monstrous systems of self-elected Magistrates and Counsellors,” and “to restore the original just right of election” in the Scots Burghs. See “REFORM OF THE SCOTS BURGHS,” *Glasgow Advertiser*, 4 September-7 September, 1789.

³⁰ “Zeno,” “Letter IV. To The CITIZENS OF EDINBURGH,” *Caledonian Mercury*, 22 January, 1783, 1.

dominance of the Town Council in choosing parliamentary representatives for Scottish Burghs results in “too great influence” at the expense of the material needs of citizens, who “must, in time, be depressed into insignificance.” McGrugar concludes this penultimate letter with a renewed appeal for constitutional reform that rhetorically invokes both natural rights and civic-patriot traditions of political action, with its moral contrast between conquered slaves and active citizens:

Let us then, Gentlemen, remedy the defects of our civil constitution before it be too late, and when an opportunity invites; lest, by fatal delays, the citizens of Edinburgh, from being the subjects of a free state, be, in time, reduced to the condition of slaves.

McGrugar’s final letter, on the front page of the *Caledonian Mercury* for 5 February, 1783, turns from analysis and argument to action, amplifying both the North British and natural rights based arguments for constitutional reform from previous letters while attempting to reclaim Edinburgh’s status as a national capital for Scotland’s political reform movement.³¹ The letter opens with a summary of the main topics from the previous four published in the series, suggesting that both McGrugar and his audience understand these contributions as part of a coherent and interrelated periodical platform for collective political action. As the best response to this kind of compressed print anatomy of the state of Scottish democracy, he encourages his audience to redeem their dormant constitutional rights, asking:

If the result of our enquiries, then, has been to discover such opposition betwixt *our condition* and the *principles of the British constitution*, are you, Gentlemen, willing *still* to remain in *this condition*?... Are you willing to allow yourselves to be excluded from the exercise of your natural rights as British subjects? Are you willing to have your representative in Parliament appointed by others, when it is your privilege to make this appointment yourselves?

McGrugar uses constitutional liberty as a rallying call for a new iteration of civic-based Scottish patriot identity. “Let us arouse ourselves,” he urges:

It is time for us now, at this distant period, to stand forward, and reclaim our original prerogative. It is time for us to emancipate ourselves from all arbitrary restrictions on the exercise of liberty.

After this rousing call for action, McGrugar then pivots towards the very modern organizational mechanisms by which this constitutional reform can be realized. The meeting, committee, and petition, rather than

³¹ “Zeno,” “Letter V, and last. To The CITIZENS OF EDINBURGH,” *Caledonian Mercury*, 5 February, 1783, 1.

the sword, musket, and canon will be the primary means for this new struggle for Scottish freedom, aided by the periodical print platform—the newspaper—which was the basis for this unique effort at initiating constitutional reform. “Permit me, therefore, Gentlemen,” he writes,

to take the liberty to suggest, That a meeting of the respectable citizens of this burgh be immediately called; that the means of obtaining (in a legal and constitutional manner) an alteration of the arbitrary and contracted mode of electing a representative for this city be taken under consideration; —that a Committee be appointed to draw up a proper petition to be laid before the House of Commons.

McGrugar’s call for urgent organizational action for this constitutional redress draws inspiration from contemporary efforts of constitutional activism from both Scotland and England:

We behold the Gentlemen of the counties of Scotland calling meetings, and entering upon resolutions for the extension of *real* qualifications, and the extrusion of *nominal* votes. We behold, too, those burghs of England, who, like us, have been denied the exercise of their just rights, now exerting themselves, in a proper manner, to recover the exercise of *these* rights....

To such noble efforts for liberty, shall not we also join *our* exertions? We have an equal right to apply to Parliament; and the abuses of *our* establishment more loudly demand redress.

The conclusion of this final letter brings together the Scottish civic-patriot and North British constitutional strands animating the rhetorical and ideological strategy of the series in the *Caledonian Mercury*. In a direct challenge to the established Convention of Royal Burghs, McGrugar urges the formal addressees—“THE CITIZENS OF EDINBURGH”—to reclaim their city’s status as a new kind of political capital for the Scottish burgh reform movement. “Remember, Gentlemen, you are placed in a conspicuous rank among the burghs of Scotland,” he reminds his audience, “and your example must have influence.” “The Burghs will look up to their metropolis to *begin* this great work of reformation, and will regulate their proceedings according to *her* exertions,” something borne out in correspondence from the period between burgh reform committees in Aberdeen and Edinburgh.³² As Andrew Mackillop argues in a recent article, “Reform interests in Aberdeen never conceived of their efforts purely in local terms and always sought to align with other like-minded

³² See “Paper VII: Letter from Patrick Barron, Esq; President of the Committee of Aberdeen, to Thomas M’Grugar, Esq; Secretary of the Committee of Edinburgh, Aberdeen, 22nd November, 1783,” in *Political Papers*, III, 18-20; cited in Andrew Mackillop, “Riots and Reform: Burgh Authority, the Languages of Civic Reform and the Aberdeen Riot of 1785,” *Urban History* 44 (2017): 402-23 (415).

groups operating at the Scottish and British levels." "In 1783," Mackillop notes, "Patrick Barron, writing to Thomas McGrugar, secretary of the equivalent committee of burghesses in Edinburgh, acknowledged the city's role as the Scottish capital," and "the Aberdeen reformers of the 1780s deftly balanced ideals of ancient legitimacy imparted by an older Scottish legal framework with a subtle sense of Edinburgh as a natural metropole," the latter which McGrugar actively encourages in this final letter.³³ In this concluding letter McGrugar implores his Edinburgh addressees that "your fate must involve in it the fate of others; and, perhaps, on your conduct, at this period, depends the future freedom or servitude of the burghs of Scotland," giving a distinctive patriotic inflection to this new project of constitutional improvement for the nation; a rhetorical gesture that echoes his opening to the series in letter one citing the "valour and intrepidity in the field" which "distinguished" the efforts of "our ancestors." This time, however, the aim is to harmonize Scottish civil liberties and constitutional rights with English ones, "to boldly step forth and assert our claim to the rights of British subjects."

III

In early 1783 the Merchant Company of Edinburgh took a lead in organizing burgh reform meetings for that year, reported on in the *Caledonian Mercury*. In the 19 February issue of the *Mercury*, only two weeks after the newspaper published McGrugar's final letter, the domestic news section noted a motion from the Merchant Company that attempted to implement McGrugar's plan for burgh reform:

as the freedom of election is very confined in the boroughs of Scotland, particularly in Edinburgh, where so numerous and respectable a body as the Merchant Company have no voice in electing either the Magistrates or the Members of Parliament, it is therefore suggested, that this Company appoint a Committee of their number to draw up a petition, to be laid before the House of Commons, that the election of Magistrates, and the Representatives for this city, may be put upon a more enlarged and liberal plan.³⁴

The meeting also called for

a committee to correspond and co-operate with any other societies or individuals, who may be disposed to join in the measure, with a view of preparing and digesting a plan on a liberal extensive foundation, and such as may meet with the approbation of the citizens at large.

³³ Mackillop, "Riots and Reform", 415.

³⁴ *Caledonian Mercury*, 19 February, 1783, 3.

This appeal for a co-ordinated Scottish reform movement in the *Mercury* elicited responses from other Scottish burghs, like those of Montrose, Dunfermline, Aberdeen, and Dumbarton, who, in turn, published their respective resolutions in the same newspaper with a further call that they be publicized in the pages of the national press.³⁵

An April 1783 meeting of burgh reformers in Edinburgh, with McGrugar acting as Secretary, carried forward the momentum for this patriotic cause as a national movement. Resolutions passed at this meeting included one “to restore the Burgesses, &c. their natural and antient Rights and Privileges,” thus projecting reform as both a restoration of local Scottish burgh democratic prerogatives that also was “consonant to the principle and spirit of the British Constitution”. This meeting initiated the process for establishing a national general convention of burgh reformers in Edinburgh, “in order to deliberate on, and concert said Plan for General Reform”. As in McGrugar’s letter series, the meeting declared burgh reform as motivated by the “spirited and patriotic conduct of the Burgesses of Scotland” seeking to act “in a Peaceable, Legal, and Constitutional manner.”³⁶ That same month, perhaps indicating fears of the rapid momentum of the burgh reform movement by those supporting the constitutional status quo, the *Caledonian Mercury* published a series of letters under the pseudonym of “Atticus” laying out the anti-reform case. The final letter ends with the warning: “Alas! my countrymen, it is to *trade, industry, and improvement of the soil*, that poor Scotland must look up for salvation, and not to the nonsense, the distraction, and the turmoil of politics.”³⁷

While the movement for burgh reform was growing via a dynamic of local burgh organizing, correspondence across burghs, and strategic use of the national press to further this co-ordination, McGrugar capitalized on his “Zeno” profile in the Scottish public sphere to publish his letter series as a pamphlet. His “*Letters of Zeno*” *Addressed To The Citizens of Edinburgh On Parliamentary Representation; And, particularly, on The imperfect Representation for the City of Edinburgh and the other Burghs of Scotland*, was, as he put it in the preface to the expanded new edition in

³⁵ See *Caledonian Mercury*, 17 March, 1783; *Caledonian Mercury*, 2 April, 1783; *Caledonian Mercury*, 14 April, 1783.

³⁶ “Paper VI: Resolutions of the CITIZENS of Edinburgh, agreed to at a General Meeting held in Mary’s Chapel, Edinburgh, on the 21st of April, 1783,” in *Political Papers*, III, 16, 17.

³⁷ “Atticus,” “For the Caledonian Mercury, Letter III, To the CITIZENS OF EDINBURGH,” *Caledonian Mercury*, 21 April, 1783, 1-2. See also “Atticus,” “For the Caledonian Mercury, To the CITIZENS OF EDINBURGH,” *Caledonian Mercury*, 9 April, 1783, 3; “Atticus,” “For the Caledonian Mercury, Letter II, To the CITIZENS OF EDINBURGH,” *Caledonian Mercury*, 16 April, 1783, 3.

August 1783, a response to “the system of which they complain,” that “still remains unaltered,” where “the facts and reasoning they hold out, demand equally the public attention *now*, as at the period of their first publication.”³⁸ His preface amplifies the case for Edinburgh as a centre of a national reform movement from the final letter published in the *Mercury*, arguing that “the subject of which they treat is equally applicable and interesting to every other Burgh of Scotland” (*ibid.*). “When Edinburgh, therefore, is mentioned,” he writes, “let the Author be understood as speaking of *all* the Burghs of Scotland” (*ibid.*, ii). He concludes the preface with a call for a patriotic form of deliberative rationality in the nation’s public sphere, so “that topics of such importance were more frequently made the subjects of public discussion.” “To these objects the minds of the PEOPLE ought to be familiarized,” he implores, “and surely men of superior learning and abilities cannot more beneficially employ their talents, than in diffusing among their Fellow-Citizens a knowledge of the great principles of Constitutional Freedom” (*ibid.*, v).

McGrugar’s project of Scottish constitutional activism which sprung from the pages of the national press eventually developed from a print assembly into the most significant independent Scottish reform gatherings of the 1780s. The leading monthly periodical of the Scottish public sphere, the *Scots Magazine*, published the following notice in its December 1783 issue:

A reformation in the borough-elections of Scotland is ... in agitation. A meeting of citizens was held in Edinburgh for this purpose on Dec. 24 when they took under a consideration a report from the committee appointed at a former meeting, and unanimously approved of it; and appointed the 25th of March 1784 for a general convention of delegates from the different boroughs.³⁹

³⁸ [Thomas McGrugar], “ADVERTISEMENT,” *LETTERS OF ZENO, Addressed To The CITIZENS OF EDINBURGH, On Parliamentary Representation; And, particularly, on The imperfect REPRESENTATION for the City of EDINBURGH, and the other BURGHS of SCOTLAND, A New EDITION, with considerable Enlargements, by the AUTHOR* (Edinburgh: Published by the COMMITTEE of CITIZENS [printed by Campbell Denovan, Publisher of the *Edinburgh Evening Post*], August, 1783), i-v (pp. i-ii). This new edition, one of several reprintings in pamphlet form, added four additional letters in the first series (pp. 27-43) and three more as a Second Series (pp. 47-57), as well as an appendix on the number and distribution of the Scottish parliamentary seats. A footnote described the letters as “originally published in the Edinburgh Newspapers,” rather than solely in the Caledonian Mercury (p. [i]). McGrugar’s first five letters were also reprinted with other material as *The Letters of Zeno and Civis on the Constitution of the Burghs of Scotland* (Aberdeen: the Committee of Burgesses, 1783), which went through at least two editions: see *Aberdeen Journal*, 12 May 1783, 4.

³⁹ *Scots Magazine*, 45 (December 1783): 669.

The role of the national press in this move to a national reform convention was crucial, as was made clear in the 29th December letter from the Edinburgh Committee convened at this December 1783 meeting sent to committees from other Scottish burghs, with McGrugar acting as Secretary for the Edinburgh Committee (and a signatory to the letter). The letter presents directed publicity as the chief means of facilitating communication and organization between the co-ordinating burghs. “You would observe from the newspapers,” the letter opens, “that a General Meeting of the Citizens of Edinburgh was held on the 24th current, and that Thursday the 25th day of March next is now fixed for the Convention of Delegates at Edinburgh.”⁴⁰ The letter encourages the other burgh committees to engage directly with the press both to indicate their plans for attending the national convention and to demonstrate for the public their commitment to what McGrugar’s pamphlet preface calls “Constitutional Freedom”:

We also beg that you will cause insert in the Edinburgh newspapers a short advertisement, expressive of your intention to meet us in the General Convention, and of your resolution to persevere in this business of Reformation, till the great objects at which we all aim are completely obtained.

The letter goes on to emphasize the key role played by this kind of directed publicity in “diffusing among their Fellow-Citizens the great principles” of this project:

Such advertisements we are confident will have a material effect on the Burgesses of the other Burghs that have not yet declared, and will also exhibit to the Public in general, that we are all seriously determined cordially to unite in our endeavours to effect a thorough Reformation of our absurd and tyrannical Systems (*ibid.*, 25).

The form of this constitutional activism in the public sphere complemented McGrugar’s call from his Zeno letters for a visible form of public rationality that was the antithesis to the closed electoral system operating in the burghs, and the lack of transparency over burgh administration in both the Town Councils and in the deliberations of the official Convention of Royal Burghs. Stana Nenadic has argued that in

⁴⁰ WILL. CHA. LITTLE, Preses., THO. M’GRUGAR, Secretary, “Paper IX: Letter from the Edinburgh Committee to the Committee of the other Burghs, transmitted with the preceding Letter, Edinburgh, 29 December, 1783,” in *Political Papers*, III, p. 24.

the agitations in favour of political reform, the gatherings and presentation of empirical evidence had become the basis of a rational and ordered challenge to the status quo.⁴¹

The 1783 Edinburgh meeting, she observes,

furnishes one of the earliest British examples of systematic information-gathering and dissemination as an aspect of protest. ... The purpose of this body of ‘decent and respectable’ citizens was to organise and set in motion a Scotland-wide campaign in favour of burgh reform (*ibid.*).

Fittingly, in Nenadic’s words,

One of the first resolutions was to gather information on the nature of the abuses against which they protested—information on the value and uses of burgh-owned property, on the want of facilities in specific towns, the character of the people who formed the town councils, and the number and wealth of those who favoured change (*ibid.*, 70).

This project of constitutional improvement in the Scottish public sphere, not surprisingly, featured those who combined, as Nenadic writes, “enlightenment thinking, modern commercial practice and the methods of bureaucratic government”; a social grouping that included “lawyers whose role in government and in the societies for enlightened debate and enquiry was considerable,” “those ... in the ‘information industries,’ such as newspaper proprietors and publishers,” and “in the greatest numbers, there were the merchants and financiers—groups of businessmen who were especially representative of a modernising commerce and industry-based urban economy” (*ibid.*, 71-2). These groups were key stakeholders in the modernization of Scotland’s economy, urban geography and civil society during the late eighteenth century, bringing a civic-based patriotism to their efforts to improve Scotland within the Union.

The 1784 Edinburgh convention would bring together representatives from thirty-three of the sixty-six Royal Burghs to approve an extension of municipal and parliamentary voting rights to all resident burgesses. This convention submitted drafts of two reform bills to a standing committee that would subsequently increase burgh approval to forty-nine out of the sixty-six, at an Edinburgh convention held in 1785, and August was set aside for these annual gatherings in the capital for burgh reformers from across Scotland.⁴² The established Convention of Royal Burghs viewed

⁴¹ Stana Nenadic, “Political Reform and the ‘Ordering’ of Middle-Class Protest,” in *Conflict and Stability in Scottish Society, 1700-1850*, ed. T. M. Devine (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1990), 65-82 (69).

⁴² See Archibald Fletcher, *A Memoir Concerning the Origin and Progress of the Reform Proposed in the Internal Government of the Royal Burghs of Scotland* (Edinburgh: printed for A. Black, 1819), 14.

these independent burgh initiatives as an attempt to “unhinge a constitution which has stood the test of ages.”⁴³ Opposed by the powerful Westminster Scottish fixer Henry Dundas, the 1785 bill failed in parliament, gaining the support of only a single Scottish member. After this parliamentary failure the burgh reform movement shifted tactics to emphasize local government administration as the target of its efforts, but the bill’s progress in the House of Commons was repeatedly blocked, until it was finally defeated in a 1792 vote.⁴⁴ Crucially, however, the annual August Edinburgh meetings of burgh reformers were reported on in the pages of the *Caledonian Mercury*, giving a continued legitimacy to the cause for constitutional reform in Scotland’s public sphere in the face of repeated parliamentary failures.⁴⁵

IV

These parliamentary failures in Westminster, however, should not diminish the significance of the burgh reform movement as a new kind of print-based form of political protest in the late eighteenth-century Scottish public sphere. The movement that was first catalyzed in Scotland’s national press continued to feature in its pages, despite (or perhaps because of) these failed parliamentary attempts at reform, which were closely followed for Westminster’s treatment of this national constitutional project.⁴⁶ This decade-long press campaign for burgh reform ignited by the “Letters of Zeno” in the *Caledonian Mercury*, when placed alongside the Edinburgh meetings and conventions which they called for, represent an important example of co-ordinated constitutional agitation in the Scottish public sphere, and one that was uniquely suited to amplify the increasing significance of newspapers as vehicles for patriotic civic reform debates that had reached an impasse in the nation’s formal constitutional spaces, like the Convention of Royal Burghs and, indeed, in Parliament. One of the afterlives of this decade-long project of constitutional agitation in the

⁴³ *ibid.*, 147-9; qtd. in Henry W. Meikle, *Scotland and the French Revolution* (Glasgow: Maclehose, 1912), 24.

⁴⁴ See John Cannon, *Parliamentary Reform, 1640-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 113-14.

⁴⁵ See *Caledonian Mercury*, 19 August, 1786; 16 August, 1787; 23 August, 1788; 20 August, 1789; 7 August, 1790; and 11 August, 1791.

⁴⁶ See *Scots Magazine* 49 (October 1787): 478; *ibid.*, 50 (August 1788): 376-9; “SCOTS BOROUGH REFORM,” *Glasgow Advertiser*, 6 July, 1789; “GLASGOW,” *Glasgow Advertiser*, 19 March, 1790; “MONDAY’S POST: PARLIAMENTARY INTELLIGENCE,” *Glasgow Advertiser*, 5 April, 1790; *Caledonian Mercury*, 7 August, 1790; “Scots Burghs,” *Glasgow Advertiser*, 3 June 1791; [J. Mennons], “GLASGOW,” *Glasgow Advertiser*, 3 June 1791; “HOUSE OF COMMONS: SCOTCH BURGHS,” *Glasgow Advertiser*, 20-23 April 1792.

Scottish national press can be found in the campaign for radical parliamentary reform in the 1790s, which, as Bob Harris has shown,⁴⁷ brought this form of print-based constitutional activism into direct conflict with anxious Scottish local government authorities, and subjected newspaper editors who supported burgh reform, like the *Glasgow Advertiser*'s John Mennons, to charges of sedition for publishing pro-parliamentary reform notices in their pages.⁴⁸

Another direct legacy of this campaign for constitutional improvement in the Scottish public sphere was urban policing. The campaign to “create a policing structure that would be directly accountable to the community”, and not to “self-elected councillors”, as Irene Maver has argued, “was part of the wider movement for burgh reform which surfaced in Scotland during the 1780s.”⁴⁹ Police reform was used as a proxy for key issues raised in the *Caledonian Mercury Zeno* series, like more efficient, accountable and representative forms of civic governance, in part because local policing was a visible means by which burgh reformers could demonstrate the necessity of expanding the base of municipal administration to those “men of property” who were often the most responsive civic stakeholders to the limitations of traditional modes of policing at a time of rapidly growing poor and transient urban populations. Like in the burgh reform campaign, the most public and persuasive vehicles for police reform were newspapers like the pro-burgh reform *Glasgow Advertiser*, which provided extensive, often front-page coverage of the progress made for establishing a local police force in the city during the early 1790s.⁵⁰ As David Barrie has noted, this campaign was also informed by a civic-patriotic imperative which “recognised that the collective responsibility of citizens was central to the physical regeneration and improvement of the urban fabric and the development of polite culture” in Scotland.⁵¹

The “Letters of Zeno,” published in Scotland’s leading national newspaper of the late eighteenth century, continued a tradition of patriotic

⁴⁷ Harris, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution*, 64; Harris, “Scotland’s Newspapers,” 45, 62.

⁴⁸ See Alex Benchimol, “The ‘Spirit of Liberal Reform’: Representation, Slavery and Constitutional Liberty in the *Glasgow Advertiser*, 1789-94,” *Scottish Historical Review*, 99 (2020): 51-84 (72-3).

⁴⁹ See Irene Maver, “The Guardianship of the Community: Civic Authority Prior to 1833,” in *Glasgow, Volume I: Beginnings to 1830*, ed. T. M. Devine and Gordon Jackson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 239-277 (pp. 249, 250).

⁵⁰ See *Glasgow Advertiser and Evening Intelligencer*, 22-25 January, 1790; 3-7 January, 1791; 16-20 April, 1792; 7-11 May, 1792; and 18-21 January, 1793.

⁵¹ David G. Barrie, *Police in the Age of Improvement: Police development and the civic tradition in Scotland, 1775-1865* (London: Routledge, 2012), 77-8.

print protest going back, ironically, for its overriding arguments, to those pre-Union Scottish constitutional bodies, like the Convention of Royal Burghs, who challenged the core terms of the draft Union Treaty over seventy-five years earlier. A 1706 print address from the Convention, as Karin Bowie has noted, “provided a strong attack on free trade from the institution representing the merchants and tradesmen of Scotland’s burghs,” defending Scottish mercantile interests “vulnerable to an English majority in the British parliament.”⁵²

In the ensuing seventy-five years, free trade, industrial expansion, and the growth of a dynamic (and unenfranchised) propertied class in Scotland’s leading cities dramatically altered the terms of what animated patriotic print protest and constitutional agitation in the Scottish public sphere. The Zeno series was effectively arguing against a recalcitrant and unresponsive Convention of Royal Burghs in the early 1780s, and used what it called the “British Constitution” to make a case for an extension of local Scottish government and parliamentary electoral rights in line with English municipalities, and thus sought a deepening of the political Union of 1707. While citing ancient Scottish burghal Setts to argue for a restoration of the rights of burgesses to participate in governance, the letters initiated a movement for constitutional modernization to complement a wider improving imperative in Scotland, using “THE CITIZENS OF EDINBURGH” as agents, who would, to adapt Harris and McKean’s characterization of Scottish urban improvement in the second half of the eighteenth century, “inscribe a new present and future through the elimination of the antique and the embrace of the modern, the rational and the efficient.”⁵³

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⁵² Bowie, *Scottish Public Opinion and the Anglo-Scottish Union*, 96.

⁵³ Harris and McKean, *The Scottish Town*, 6.