Yet, with a long history as autonomous traders, the women of these islands were perhaps more distinctive in Western Europe for privileging economic over sexual reputations. Here was a place where lone women could live and work independently and, with the exception of herring gutting which employed mainly outsiders, most women made a living within a makeshift, non-cash economy dominated by agriculture and hosiery production. They formed multi-generational, often female-dominated households in which their economic contribution was the crucial marker of status. Knitting was 'a non-negotiable part of croft life' (99). It was also fundamental to a system of barter through which women were involved in complex non-domestic negotiations as revealed in evidence to the 1872 Truck Commission. For instance, Mary Coutts from Scalloway knitted shawls and veils for Lerwick merchants who paid her chiefly in tea and dry goods, which she then had to exchange with farmers to obtain meal and potatoes.

The stories women tell and those that may be told about them have gained enhanced salience with the dramatic socio-economic shifts since the 1970s oil boom, 'tradition' now being mined to bolster cultural survival in times of change. 'Crofting' has become symbolic shorthand for a nineteenth-century way of life, a collective memory through which individuals might identify themselves while legitimating pride in lost skills and 'a frame for interpreting the experience of previous generations of women' (37). Abrams's deft handling of the archive renders this frame both analytically meaningful and theoretically persuasive.

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John Barrell, *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006. xv + 278 pp. £50.00. 0 19 928120 3.

At first glance one might wonder what the London Corresponding Society, the seaside resort of Weymouth and Pitt's Hair Powder Tax had in common. The subjects of the essays collected in this volume may indeed be diverse, but as Barrell skilfully reveals, they all represent different aspects of a highly significant change which took place in the political culture of the 1790s. Vicesimus Knox, from whose 1795 pamphlet attacking the growth of corruption and suppression of liberty the title of this book has been taken, was particularly concerned by the apparent disintegration of the public and its boundaries with the private. He saw a society where private pleasures and private interest took precedence over public responsibilities and obligations, and where the spirit of despotism had invaded family life and social intercourse. Private speech became subject to state surveillance; family life became politicised; matters of personal sartorial preference were transformed into hotly contested political issues.

Each of these richly researched essays could stand alone, but together their cumulative effect is a provocative and stimulating depiction of the cultural effects of government repression which Barrell has analysed in such depth elsewhere. The first essay, 'Charing Cross and the City', sketches the political geography of the capital in the late eighteenth century, showing the endless mutability and instability of a city constantly growing and constantly on edge. Pitt's government responded nervously, even hysterically, to the spread of the London Corresponding Society, whose patchy success in the metropolis Barrell plausibly relates to different traditions of participatory local politics. Some of that hysteria manifested itself in the clamp down on supposedly private conversations taking place in coffee houses. Pitt's attempts to prosecute all signs of seditious behaviour in the interests of public safety legitimated intervention in areas traditionally held to be immune from such intrusions. The opposition of the Foxites to these measures, however, shows up the extent to which their concept of civil rights was premised upon an assumption of class difference: their objections hinged upon the right of a gentleman not to be overheard by his social inferiors.

George III is well known to have fashioned for himself a public image as a happy, private, family man: for historians such as Linda Colley this domestication of the royal persona was the key to George's 'apotheosis'. Barrell, however, argues it did nothing but reveal his ordinary imperfections. In abandoning the ritualised splendour of monarchy, George appeared petty, rude and mean and opened himself up to attack from satirists such as Peter Pindar, whose satirical *Trip to Weymouth* is the starting point for Barrell's discussion. Pitt is remembered now for having introduced income tax rather than the hair powder tax, but at the time the measure was highly controversial. Pitt's real motive, Barrell suggests, was to limit the consumption of flour (from which the starch for hair powder was made) in the famine year of 1795. To avoid the nationwide panic which might ensue if such acknowledgement of scarcity was made public, however, the measure was presented as a revenue-raising tax on luxury. The rich contextualisation is intriguing as much for the illumination it sheds on *fin de siècle* hair dressing as for the political and constitutional principles which were raised by the competing claims of the poor for cheaper food or the polite for a marker of their social superiority and by the government's need for political surveillance in 'private' matters in order to identify those who were using powder illegally.

The peaceful domesticity of the 'cottage door' scene was part of the iconography of the loyalist association. It represented a model of industrious, virtuous and deferential working class behaviour. Its aim was as much to provide the rich with contentment as the poor. But in the 1790s such images bore little relationship to the reality of abject poverty suffered by most rural labourers. As Barrell unpicks the gulf between the idealised rural idyll and the much more realistic treatment of the poor in sources such as the *Cheap Repository Tracts*, he shows that here too, private matters, such as the homes and families of the poor, were equally being redefined as legitimate objects of state surveillance in the 1790s.

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