The Historical Journal, 26, 1 (1983), pp. 159–176
Printed in Great Britain

COMMUNICATIONS

THE SOCIETY FOR THE SUPPRESSION OF VICE AND ITS EARLY CRITICS, 1802–1812

M. J. D. ROBERTS
Macquarie University

The Society for the Suppression of Vice was founded in 1802. It held its inaugural meeting at Gray's-Inn coffee house on 22 March of that year[1] after several months of preliminary negotiation.[2] The particular forms of vice which the founders of the society selected for suppression they eventually listed as follows: profanation of the Lord's Day and profane swearing; publication of blasphemous, licentious and obscene books and prints; selling by false weights and measures; keeping of disorderly public houses, brothels and gaming houses; procuring; illegal lotteries; cruelty to animals.[3] In their early years of activity members of the society had to face a considerable amount of hostility and ridicule. This much of the society's history is reasonably well known, partly as a result of research into 'the origins of Victorian morality',[4] partly as a result of research into the urban and labour history of 'the age of the industrial revolution'.[5]

Yet existing accounts of the Vice Society's early activities remain vague, incomplete and sometimes contradictory, even on basic issues. Who, for example, founded the society? (Historians have commonly, though not unanimously, assumed the founders to be evangelicals acting under guidance, or at least inspiration, from William Wilberforce and the 'Clapham Sect'.)[6] More generally, what were the motives of the founders? Why did they choose to define vice in the way that they

[1] For a printed report of proceedings, including a list of those present, see Dartmouth MSS, Staffordshire Record Office, D 1778/V/678. The author gratefully acknowledges permission given by the present earl of Dartmouth to examine these papers.

[2] *Proposal for establishing a society for the suppression of vice and the encouragement of religion and virtue, throughout the United Kingdom* (London, n.d.). Various drafts of the *Proposal* may be found in Dartmouth MSS, D 1778/V/678.

[3] *An address to the public from the society for the suppression of vice. Part the second* (London, 1803), p. 4.

[4] M. J. Quinlan, *Victorian prelude: a history of English manners, 1700–1830* (London, 1965 edn), pp. 202–22; F. K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: the age of Wilberforce* (Cambridge, 1961), pp. 428–36; I. Bradley, *The call to seriousness: the evangelical impact on the Victorians* (London, 1976), pp. 94–118; E. Bristow, *Vice and vigilance: purity movements in Britain since 1700* (Dublin, 1977), pp. 32–50.

[5] L. Radzinowicz, *A history of English criminal law* (4 vols., London, 1948–68), III, 154–60, 174–83; B. Harrison, 'State intervention and moral reform in nineteenth-century England' in P. Hollis (ed.), *Pressure from without in early Victorian England* (London, 1974), pp. 289–322; R. Malcolmson, *Popular recreations in English society, 1700–1850* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 150–7, 172–3.

[6] Bradley, *Call to seriousness*, p. 97; Bristow, *Vice and vigilance*, pp. 3, 33; A. Calder-Marshall, *Lewd, blasphemous and obscene* (London, 1972), p. 76. Cf. Quinlan, *Victorian prelude*, pp. 202–3; and, by implication, Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians*, pp. 428–9.

did? How to explain the breadth and intensity of opposition which their activities aroused? And are these activities usefully interpreted as the work of Victorians 'born before their time'? These issues are my chief concern in this paper.

I

When the Vice Society began its work in 1802 its publicists justified the action by alleging 'a truth too evident to be denied...that vice has of late advanced upon us with almost unexampled rapidity'.[7] This was not, however, the first occasion on which moralists had been driven to make such a judgement on their times. It is worth recalling that for a century or more before 1802 there had been intermittent attempts made to enforce on Londoners a standard of social discipline beyond that enforced by the authorities. The Societies for the Reformation of Manners, for example, had been concerned about the moral state of the metropolis in the 1690s. Their particular targets – Sabbath-breaking, profanity, lewd and disorderly behaviour – are clearly comparable with those of the Vice Society.[8] Between the 1690s and the end of the eighteenth century some public habits came to offend less, some to offend more, or to offend in new forms. Yet, given the continuing distaste of Englishmen of all ranks for the 'continental tyranny' of a strong executive government controlling a professional police force, volunteer policing societies continued to attract support.

During the last thirty years of the century, indeed, the fear of a decline in community standards of behaviour seems to have intensified and, with it, the demand for a 'return' to traditional social values. Concerned citizens made repeated efforts to counteract the social strains imposed by continued city growth and commercial expansion.[9] The most notable effort of the era was that of William Wilberforce who, in 1787, induced George III to issue a proclamation against vice and immorality, and then established a voluntary society to carry it into effect. The objects of this Proclamation Society and of the later Vice Society were nearly identical.[10] The stimuli to which members of both societies were reacting were markedly similar as well – particularly so in the wartime years after 1793. Thus we see, for example, a resurgent interest in the enforcement of Sunday observance. This is justified partly by an appeal to evangelically-influenced theology – applicable to all social ranks – but more particularly by an appeal to community values – believed to be under threat from the lower orders. Society activists frequently lament the growing unruliness and inconvenience of recreations and commercial activities engaged in, chiefly on the Sabbath, by undeferential sections of the city's labouring population, and urge citizens to take action.[11]

[7] *Address to the public...Part the first* (London, 1803), p. 27.

[8] T. C. Curtis and W. A. Speck, 'The societies for the reformation of manners: a case study in the theory and practice of moral reform', *Literature and History*, III (1976), 45–64.

[9] G. Rudé, *Hanoverian London* (London, 1971), pp. 4, 228. Note also the contemporary belief that London experienced a crime wave during the 1790s. This judgement was reinforced by statistics gathered by Patrick Colquhoun, Westminster magistrate and honorary vice-president of the Vice Society during its early years.

[10] R. I. and S. Wilberforce, *The life of William Wilberforce* (5 vols., London, 1838), I, 134; *Report of the committee of the society for carrying into effect His Majesty's proclamation against vice and immorality for the year 1799*, pp. 11–14.

[11] Children and apprentices, servants and skilled tradesmen are identified as forming especially troublesome groups. Wilberforce, *Life*, I, 131; *Address to the public. Part the second*, pp. 48–60; *Statement of the proceedings of the society for the suppression of vice* (London, 1804), pp. 13–16; *Christian Observer*, VII (1808), 203; *Select committee on the state of the police of the metropolis. Second report* (Parl. Papers, 1817, VII), 381, 387–8.

The concern to suppress blasphemous and indecent literature can be associated with the Sunday observance movement as well: the most shocking innovation of the popular entertainment industry during the 1780s and 90s was the Sunday newspaper.[12] The concern with immoral literature, however, went further than this for, here, the degeneracy of the age was more explicitly stated to extend to all levels of society. The Proclamation Society, anxious to control the expanding market for books and ideas among the lower orders, certainly prosecuted the publisher of Tom Paine's *Age of Reason* – an attack on institutional Christianity directed towards the undeferential working man.[13] Yet it also channelled much effort into a campaign to save 'the rising generation' of the respectable ranks in society from the lure of indelicate literature and pornography, and in this campaign the Vice Society eagerly followed.[14] Commercial forces, relying for their success in this case on a recently discovered market among women and adolescents, posed a challenge to traditional authorities in domestic as well as in public life.

Other activities identified for suppression form a varied collection, difficult to label. Most were activities considered harmful to the cultivation of rational habits of behaviour among the urban working population. Some (selling by false weights, lotteries) were social problems made more acute by the strains of wartime. Some (brothels, disorderly public houses, gaming houses) seem to have been the focus of respectable disapproval over the entire century.[15]

There are continuities, then, in motives for action. But there are discontinuities as well. Why, for example, the eagerness to found a new society in 1802? Why the apparent unwillingness to work through existing organizations? A survey of the social and occupational background of the active members of the new society and the criteria of membership which the society adopted may help to explain.

One remarkable aspect of the early history of the Vice Society is the lack of direct links between the organizers of the Proclamation Society (still existing in 1802) and the organizers of the newly formed Vice Society. The new men certainly knew of the existence and objects of the older society yet, of the 29 men who attended the foundation meeting of the Vice Society, only 3 appear in the 1802 membership list of the older society.[16] Indeed, the social catchment areas of the two societies seem, in 1802, to have been distinctly different. Wilberforce had originally intended the Proclamation Society to enlist 'persons of consequence in every line of life, the professions, members of both Houses, merchants in the city, aldermen, etc.',[17] but the society had never achieved this diversity of support and, by 1802, its membership was heavily dominated by peers, M.P.'s and senior Church dignitaries. The Vice Society was indeed a middle-class organization when seen in contrast, drawing the bulk of its active supporters from the City of London rather than from Westminster and West End society. There were no M.P.s or men of title at the first meeting of the Vice Society. There were, however, of attendants with traceable occupations, 8 clergy of the established church (none above parish rank), 5 lawyers,

[12] I. Christie, *Myth and reality in late-eighteenth-century British politics* (London, 1970), p. 314; *Proclamation Society. Report for 1799*, p. 19.

[13] Ibid. p. 12.

[14] Ibid. pp. 11–15; *Address to the public. Part the second*, p. 44; *Statement of proceedings*, p. 12.

[15] *Address to the public. Part the second*, pp. 46–70; P. H. Williams, 'Lotteries and government finance in England', *History Today*, VI (1956), 557–61; Curtis and Speck, 'Societies for the reformation of manners', pp. 49, 56.

[16] *Proclamation Society. Report for 1802*, pp. 15–20; Dartmouth MSS, D 1778/V/678.

[17] Wilberforce, *Life*, I, 133.

2 surgeons and 1 government clerk as well as 1 stockbroker and 3 business proprietors (2 of them booksellers). The impression is strengthened when one looks to developments after 1802. A leading committee member later described his colleagues as 'most respectable [, consisting] chiefly of Gentlemen in the Church, the law, with some also who are engaged in various public departments'.[18] An occupational analysis of committee members in 1805 – at the height of the society's early success – confirms this general view.[19] So does a survey of the attitude of early committee members towards the transaction of its business. We have no precise documentation of the reasons why the society's founders declined to work through the existing Proclamation Society but, reading between the lines of the reported negotiations between the two groups, one senses the impatience of the new men with the lethargy and administrative incompetence of the old – an impatience fully justified if the catalogue of secretarial and financial mishaps in Proclamation Society annual reports is any guide.[20] Indeed, the Proclamation Society itself finally admitted the superiority of the new society in practical law-enforcement when it conceded that 'the more constant residence in town of many of its [the new society's] members, and their various situations and walks in life, have rendered it easier for them to keep a watchful eye over the offenders against public morals, and to apply, when needful, the wholesome correction of the laws'.[21]

Such an admission, while reinforcing impressions of social distinctiveness, also illustrates differences of approach towards methods of operation. The Proclamation Society had always valued the closeness of its contacts with public authorities, especially magistrates. Indeed, it had been an original aim of Wilberforce to encourage society members to become magistrates, thus discharging the social duty expected of men of their rank. The Proclamation Society continued to value its influence with the judiciary.[22] The Vice Society's leaders, however, while they attempted to cultivate contacts with magistrates, often found themselves rebuffed.[23] From an early stage, they appear to have directed their efforts rather more towards supplementary police work than towards influencing the magistracy. They therefore needed to be able to deploy that group of active supporters noted by the Proclamation Society – those aspirant 'urban gentry' resident in London throughout the year and numerous enough to make an impact in every parish. This was a demanding task in a city of 900,000 people. There is, nevertheless, evidence that the new society was prepared to attempt the task and to compensate by numbers for its lack of direct social standing.

[18] John Bowles to Lord Dartmouth, 29 Nov. 1808, Dartmouth MSS, D 1778/Iii/1726.

[19] There were 34 committee members in 1805 of whom 25 can be traced in contemporary London directories, law lists, etc. Of these 25 there were 9 clergy, 3 barristers, 3 attorneys, 4 civil servants, 1 army officer, 3 bankers, 1 stockbroker and 1 book-publisher.

[20] *Proclamation Society. Report for 1799*, p. 3, and *Report for 1802*, p. 12. Relations between the societies may be traced in the Vice Society's *Proposal*, p. 2; Dartmouth MSS, D 1778/V/678; *Address to the public. Part the second*, pp. 93–6; *Orthodox Churchman's Magazine*, v (1803), 396–7. The Proclamation Society virtually confined its activities to fund-raising on behalf of the Vice Society in late 1803 and, with Wilberforce's encouragement, ceased operations altogether in 1805 when its president, Bishop Porteus of London, became too frail to oversee its remaining business: Wilberforce, *Life*, III, 236.

[21] *Orthodox Churchman's Magazine*, v (1803), 396.

[22] Wilberforce, *Life*, I, 134; *Proclamation Society. Report for 1799*, p. 16, and *Report for 1802*, p. 11. Cf. J. Pearson, *The life of William Hey* (2 vols., London, 1822), II, 115–20.

[23] *Statement of proceedings*, p. 10; *S.C. on police* (P.P. 1817, VII), 381, 387.

The Proclamation Society, it may be noted, had never been a large society. Membership stood at 152 in 1802 and had been stationary for some years. The Vice Society, however, starting with a nucleus of 29 in March 1802, attracted 561 members by early 1803 and continued to expand rapidly. A year later there were 829 members and, by the end of 1804, approximately 1,200.[24] In addition, the new society founded or encouraged the activity of like-minded local groups in a wide variety of London parishes and provincial towns. Evidence of their membership, activities, and even existence, is sparse – at least one 'provincial society' may have been a practical joke played on the London committee, and other societies led a discontinuous existence[25] – but the total impression gained is that the Vice Society in the first decade of its existence set out to be and, to an extent, became a mass membership society. The impression is confirmed by other indicators – the size of the annual subscription, for example, and, in particular, the eagerness of the Vice Society to enrol women members.[26] A brief review of the early membership lists of the foundation society suggests that, in London at least, the rank and file of people attracted into the society do not differ markedly in occupational range from the managing elite of the society. Men in professional and commercial life, together with their wives, figure prominently in the lists. The largest single occupational group is clearly that of the clergy (fifteen per cent of the total in 1803, sixteen per cent in 1805). It is true that, after negotiations with the Proclamation Society, the Vice Society attracted a substantial number of supporters of rank and title, but this group did not dominate the new society as it had the old.[27]

There was, however, one major respect in which the Vice Society was prepared to restrain its search for members among the respectable in the community. Even

[24] Dartmouth MSS, D 1778/V/678; *Address to the public. Part the first*, pp. 5–20; *Address to the public. Part the second*, p. 93; R. Watson, *A sermon preached before the society for the suppression of vice... To which are added the plan of the society, a summary of its proceedings, and a list of its members* (B.L. shelf-mark 4473.f.2(10)) (London, 1804), pp. 41–72; *Statement of proceedings*, p. 20. There appear to be no surviving membership lists between 1804 and 1825 (when membership had dropped to 236): *Society for the suppression of vice* [*:Report*] (London, 1826), pp. 13–21.

[25] The society at Oxford, whose proceedings are described in *Occasional report of the society for the suppression of vice*, No. VI (London, 1812), p. 10, apparently never existed. (See endorsement on Bodleian Library copy of the report.) Between 1802 and 1812 the London committee reported the establishment of at least thirteen provincial societies (apart from Oxford) and claimed to be in correspondence with individuals in several other places. Activities seem to have been most marked in large ports (Hull, Bristol), naval bases (Chatham) and county towns or fashionable resorts (Gloucester, York, Brighton). The London parish societies are less well documented: the preferred method of operation appears to have been through existing parish officers. There is, however, a detailed account of the foundation and work of the Shoreditch society (founded 1806) in *S.C. on police* (P.P. 1817, VII), 381–8.

[26] The Proclamation Society set a two-guinea annual subscription; the Vice Society 'suggested' an annual contribution of one guinea. The Proclamation Society in its final throes agreed to the entry of women members but appears never to have enrolled any: *Proclamation Society. Report for 1800*, p. 9. The Vice Society subscription list for 1803 shows that thirty-one per cent of its subscribers were women, and the 1804 list thirty-three per cent. Both these figures are unusually high when compared with figures for other contemporary voluntary societies: F. K. Prochaska, 'Women in English philanthropy 1790–1830', *International Review of Social History*, XIX (1974), 442–5.

[27] By 1804, *c.* 40 members of the Proclamation Society had joined the Vice Society. See also Dartmouth MSS, D 1778/V/678: 'List of names for which the society is indebted to the Rt.Hon. Lord Radstock'. This list of 210 names (dated June 1804) is weighted heavily towards the titled.

before the inaugural meeting was held, it had been decided to limit membership to Churchmen.[28] This was an odd decision from several viewpoints. It was a rule which the Proclamation Society had not troubled to adopt. It was a rule which, as we shall see, was bound to offend dissenters and even to puzzle many evangelical Churchmen. Above all, it was a rule which, on its face, seemed to contradict the rhetoric of the new society's recruitment campaign. If England was indeed infected with the spirit of licentiousness and of rebellion against authority,[29] then surely all sincere support should be welcomed? The founders of the society thought differently. A decade of war against 'jacobinical' France had left them with a deep distrust of groups who, like English dissenters, had at any stage admired what was happening in France or criticized the traditional institutions of English public life. To their mind, a Godless, Sunday-less, licentious and violent France was a standing example of the consequences of rebellion against traditional values and institutions, and a warning to the English of the intentions of the Almighty should they fail to turn from their (less developed) wickedness.[30] It was, no doubt, easy to ridicule this confused and apocalyptic vision in 1802. (The society was founded within a week of the signing of the peace treaty with France at Amiens.) But it was less easy to do so after war broke out once more in May 1803 and, even before then, the more anxious could detect signs of a revival of the local 'spirit of rebellion' in the victories of 'English jacobins' at Norwich, Nottingham and Westminster during the parliamentary elections of 1802.[31]

The religious test, then, places the Vice Society firmly in the era of patriotic wartime conservatism. It reminds one that the Vice Society was not the first society for general community purposes to impose an ideological test on members. The precedent had been set by the loyal associations of the early 1790s – mass-membership associations set up with government approval to counteract the popular radicalism of the political corresponding societies.

Indeed, there is a strong case for arguing that the Vice Society was the delayed heir to this form of association as much as it was the heir of the movement for reform of manners. While this is not a new finding,[32] it is instructive to chart the extent of the links between the two movements. The most obvious link was one of organization: Vice Society publicists explicitly acknowledged the work of the loyal associations in making voluntary public 'combinations' respectable.[33] There was also some overlap of personnel: John Reeves, the founder of the 1792 Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers is listed as an early member of the Vice Society and at least two of his colleagues held committee positions in the early years of the society.[34] Other links were more subtle. It is interesting to note the popularity of both movements among similar social groups,[35]

[28] *Proposal*, p. 1; *Orthodox Churchman's Magazine*, I (1801), 428.

[29] *Address to the public. Part the first*, pp. 27–31.

[30] Ibid. pp. 93–4, 98.

[31] C. Emsley, *British society and the French wars 1793–1815* (London, 1979), pp. 91–6; A. D. Harvey, *Britain in the early nineteenth century* (London, 1978), pp. 127–35, 230.

[32] Quinlan, *Victorian prelude*, pp. 203–4.

[33] *Address to the public. Part the first*, p. 38; *Anti-Jacobin Review*, XV (1803), 95–6; *Cobbett's Political Register*, V (1804), 77.

[34] The two colleagues were Francis Freeling of the General Post Office and John Bowles, loyalist pamphleteer: E. C. Black, *The association: British extraparliamentary political organization 1769–1793* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), pp. 240, 242–3.

[35] Ibid. p. 233.

and particularly interesting to note the formation, in the late nineties, of a Society for the Reformation of Principles – a Vice Society in embryo – by a group of pious high churchmen with loyalist connexions.[36]

The uncovering of this side of the Vice Society's ancestry brings us to a particular issue, already mentioned – the question of the part played by evangelicals in the foundation of the society. If aggressively orthodox Churchmen were so prominent at the foundation of the society, and if there was so relatively slender a connexion between Wilberforce's Proclamation Society and the new society, why the persistent belief in evangelical initiative? It is certainly true that some evangelicals were active in the early Vice Society. A loyalist commitment did not, of itself, dampen evangelical enthusiasm for the cause. Indeed, most evangelicals in 1802 were eager to demonstrate their political reliability.[37] It is no anomaly, therefore, to find church evangelicals present at the inaugural meeting of the society.[38] However, they were in a clear minority on this occasion and, as we shall see, remained so even after belated reinforcement from some (not all) members of the more socially prestigious Clapham group in 1803–5.[39] The impression of their early strength in the society has probably been based as much on the millennialist rhetoric of the society's early publications[40] as on evidence of actual participation. Assertions, however, that the troubles of the times were a prelude to some moment of divine judgement on the corrupt state of human affairs, though conventionally associated with evangelical and non-orthodox religion,[41] were not the exclusive property of these groups. Indeed, they had become commonplace sentiments during the 1790s among a significant

[36] *Memoirs of William Stevens* (London, 1812), p. 155; J. Bowles, *Reflections on the political and moral state of society at the close of the eighteenth century* (London, 1800), p. 154.

[37] See, for the loyalist activities of a leading Proclamation Society supporter, Pearson, *Life of Hey*, II, 138–9, and generally, V. Kiernan, 'Evangelicalism and the French revolution', *Past and Present*, I (1952), 44–56.

[38] Anthony Clarke, stockbroker, chairman of the inaugural meeting and early co-treasurer of the society, was a supporter of evangelical causes: *Annual Biography and Obituary*, V (1836), 20. The Revd Henry Budd, chaplain of Bridewell Hospital (1801–31), foundation member and early committee man was a well-known evangelical, as was Henry Hoare, banker and long-serving co-treasurer of the society. Perhaps a third of early vice-presidents and committee members can be assumed to be evangelicals on the basis of their support for contemporary evangelical causes such as the Church Missionary Society and (from 1804) the British and Foreign Bible Society.

[39] Wilberforce first appears in the membership lists of the society in mid-1804, shortly after his earliest known diary reference to the society: Wilberforce, *Life*, III, 186. (I have not been able to locate the original of this diary entry. It no longer appears among the Wrangham MSS, which hold the only surviving entries between 1801 and 1814. I am grateful to C. E. Wrangham, Esq., Rosemary House, Catterick, for permission to consult these MSS.) Wilberforce held no office in the society during these early years. The first prominent Clapham evangelical to hold office was Lord Teignmouth who joined the society as vice-president in 1805.

[40] See note 30 above.

[41] See generally, Quinlan, *Victorian prelude*, pp. 96 ff.; J. F. C. Harrison, *The second coming: popular millenarianism 1780–1850* (London, 1979), pp. 66 ff. For an example drawn from the writings of an evangelical founder-member of the Vice Society, see *A memoir of the Rev. Henry Budd* (London, 1855), p. 82: '[17 June 1803] Well, we have war again! A respite of two years has been given us, and we have neglected to improve it. Peace has brought prosperity, and prosperity licentiousness, and licentiousness has brought back the Divine anger. When it will cease, God only knows! It may cease in our ruin. It is idle to say, the French are worse than ourselves. They are the sword in the hand of God. He punishes commonly the better nation by the worse.'

section of orthodox Churchmen. We may confirm this – and at the same time give a specific example of the mixture of motives which propelled early members into the Vice Society – by referring to the writings and career of one particularly prominent member of the society, the pamphleteer John Bowles.

Bowles (1751–1819) was the barrister son of a City of London printseller[42] who made his public reputation in 1792 as the author of a pamphlet against Tom Paine. He was quickly recruited to the cause of 'religion and government' (perhaps by Pitt personally) and became both a government propagandist and (to the Vice Society's later misfortune) a recipient of government favours.[43] It would be oversimplifying, however, to call him a mere 'trading anti-Jacobin'.[44] By the end of the decade he was finding out how personally inconvenient his strong ideological beliefs could become. Cobbett, a former friendly colleague, described him in 1803 as 'in the main...a good man', but one not given to discretion: 'This is one of your true "*prudent* men and *safe* politicians", who seldom know how to keep out of mischief, and, when they are in it, never know how to extricate themselves.'[45] By the time that this was written, Bowles had managed to fall foul both of the government and of the Foxite-Radical opposition. (He offended the government by deploring the signing of a peace with France before the legitimate, i.e. Bourbon, rulers had been restored to power. He offended the opposition by denouncing the Foxite duke of Portland as a profaner of the Sabbath, and the borough corporation of Nottingham as a supporter of Gallic indecency and impiety during the 1802 general election campaign.) He was even falling out with his firmest allies of the late 1790s, William Windham and William Cobbett, for although both deplored the 'premature' peace with France, they equally deplored Bowles's growing 'puritan' obsession with the regulation of moral behaviour.[46] Bowles, like his later colleagues in the Vice Society, whole-heartedly accepted the view that the French revolution had been brought about (and intensified) by tolerance of social insubordination, religious infidelity and sexual laxity. Like them also, he feared that he could detect early signs of a similar process of moral collapse taking place among the English. And, like evangelicals, he was willing to suggest that a continuation in wickedness by both humble and great could only lead to a divine judgement on the nation as a whole.[47] Unlike evangelicals, however, he was a firm upholder of traditional authorities in Church

[42] *Gentleman's Magazine*, LXXXIX, 2 (1819), 565.

[43] *Hansard*, 1st ser., XIV (1809), 321; A. Aspinall, *Politics and the press c. 1780–1850* (London, 1949), pp. 163, 166.

[44] The phrase is Cobbett's though the assessment has been accepted by some later writers: *Cobbett's Political Register*, XV (1809), 601 ff.; Quinlan, *Victorian prelude*, p. 99; Bristow, *Vice and vigilance*, p. 41.

[45] William Cobbett to William Windham, 20 Jan. 1802 [?1803], Windham papers, British Library Add. MSS 37853, fos. 66–7.

[46] Ibid.; J. Bowles, *Reflections at the conclusion of the war* (London, 1801); [Letters between William Adam and John Bowles respecting the duke of Bedford] (London, 1803); J. Bowles, *Thoughts on the late general election as demonstrative of the progress of jacobinism* (London, 1802).

[47] J. Bowles, *Reflections on the political and moral state of society at the close of the eighteenth century* (London, 1800), pp. 134, 172; J. Bowles, *A dispassionate inquiry into the best means of national safety* (London, 1806), pp. 107–8. There is a danger here of arguing in a circle because it is probable that Bowles himself was the author of much of the Vice Society's early publicity. (See note 49 below.) There is, however, some evidence that Bowles's ideas (if they *were* his) were edited by more moderate colleagues before publication: *Anti-Jacobin Review*, XIV (1803), 288–9. And we have independent evidence of similar modes of thought among other activists, e.g. in *S.C. on police* (P.P. 1817, VII), 381.

as well as State so that the cultivation of his moral perceptions had taken place within the close-knit circle of middle-class high churchmen who gathered around Joshua Watson and the emerging 'Hackney Phalanx'.[48] Given this background, Bowles must have found the distinctive objects of the Vice Society highly attractive. There is no evidence that he was among its founders but, within a year of its foundation, he appears as a leading member of its committee, and shortly afterwards, his recent political opponents identify him as the author of the society's first *Address to the public.*[49] In the years between 1803 and 1809 Bowles was, as we shall see, very likely the society's most active executive member.

It would be straining the evidence to claim that John Bowles was an entirely representative member of the early Vice Society. His past connexion with the world of high politics of itself disqualifies him. Yet his writings and activities do hint, in their idiosyncratic way, at most of the reasons why the Vice Society was founded, why it took the form it did and why it gained its early supporters. Bowles accurately records middle-class anxieties about social order which came with the expansion of London and the spread of alarmingly 'independent' ideas and behaviour among sections of the working population. His response is also representative in the sense that he, in company with colleagues of similar occupational backgrounds, was prepared actively to support public authorities in the enforcement of traditional religious and social values and to demand of them that they set an example of compliance with these values in their own behaviour.

II

Given its antecedents, the Society for the Suppression of Vice was unlikely to come into existence unopposed. Some of its opponents it was prepared to identify in advance – those with a stake in the proceeds of vice, those who thought the society's views alarmist and its methods dangerously novel, those too indifferent or too timid to welcome the exposure of social evils.[50] Even so, it is clear that the founders had little idea of the extent, the tenacity and the respectability of the opposition which the society was to arouse.

A first opportunity to test general reaction came with the publication in 1803 of the society's *Address to the public.* This declaration of objects provoked a variety of responses. On the one hand, the society drew full support from the neo-conservative periodical press, both political and religious.[51] The *British Critic*, edited by the loyalist clergy, Beloe and Nares, was uncritically approving. The *Orthodox Churchman's Magazine*, edited by the anti-infidel enthusiast W. H. Reid, particularly commended the propriety of restricting membership of the society to Churchmen. And the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, while concerned that the society might be too respectful of the unregenerate among the upper ranks, went to considerable trouble to prove to its readers that the cause was in the hands of loyal Churchmen and not puritan (i.e.

[48] E. Churton, *Memoir of Joshua Watson* (London, 1861), I, 85; A. B. Webster, *Joshua Watson: the story of a layman 1771–1855* (London, 1954), pp. 15, 24.

[49] *Orthodox Churchman's Magazine*, IV (1803), 14–15; *Annual Review and History of Literature*, III (1805), 225. Before joining the Vice Society, Bowles makes a brief appearance as a member of the Proclamation Society: *Proclamation Society. Report for 1802.*

[50] *Address to the public. Part the first*, pp. 71–3.

[51] For information about the religious and other predispositions of the periodical press I have drawn chiefly on F. E. Mineka, *The dissidence of dissent: the Monthly Repository, 1806–1838* (Chapel Hill, N. Carolina, 1944), pp. 47–84.

evangelical) fanatics whose activities it so deplored.[52] On the other hand, journals of Foxite, rationalist, dissenting persuasion were hostile from the first.[53] This was to be expected. The opposition of certain sections of the evangelical and 'old-fashioned' conservative press, though, was less predictable. The foremost of conservative critics was William Cobbett. Still a firm anti-radical in 1803, Cobbett published and then strongly endorsed the attack of 'A Beneficed Clergyman' on the new society. The society offended Cobbett and his correspondent on the grounds that it was a voluntary organization acting independently of traditional authorities in Church and State. It was therefore an 'insinuation' on the competence of those authorities, a stalking-horse for puritans and, by reason of its undisciplined enthusiasm for the cause, 'a standing conspiracy against the quiet and tranquillity of society... [giving] the laws... an extension and a force which it never was intended they should have'.[54] Some 'puritans' were inclined, in part, to agree. Of course, evangelicals generally deplored vice, but they also deplored the imposition of a Churchmanship test on members of a society for general social purposes. And some evangelicals went further than this. Critics in the Unitarian *Monthly Repository* and in the Clapham-directed *Christian Observer* deplored what they saw as an attempt to coerce the public by regulation of outward behaviour rather than an attempt to touch the conscience. Both suggested that such a policy could lead all too easily to a campaign of law enforcement carried out exclusively against the lower orders by a band of enthusiasts prepared to put ends before means.[55]

Fears of partial and unscrupulous behaviour were not put to rest by the society's early activities. The list of convictions which it published at the end of 1803 indicated the direction its activities had taken. Of the 678 London convictions obtained since foundation, 623 were for profaning the Sabbath, chiefly by Sunday trading. In addition, the society was attempting to use its influence with magistrates to suppress other disorderly public amusements, particularly those involving drinking, gambling and indecent behaviour.[56] Among its other activities, it attached particular importance to the suppression of obscene literature. Although it had secured only seven convictions in two years, its leaders seemed confident that this, above all other activities, would rally support and mitigate doubts about the necessity for its work.[57] They were to be disappointed. Those who had failed to welcome the founding of the society were not converted by the sight of the society in operation. The most persistent attacks came once again from the Foxite press, led by the *Morning Chronicle*, but Cobbett, too, kept up an interest as did uneasy potential supporters from among the evangelicals. By mid-1804, indeed, the society had gained sufficient notoriety to become the butt of jokes at popular London theatres.[58]

[52] *British Critic*, XXIV (1804), 213–14; *Orthodox Churchman's Magazine*, I (1801), 428–9, and IV (1803), 114–16; *Anti-Jacobin Review*, XIII (1802), 198–9, and XIV (1803), 281–94.

[53] *Annual Review*, III (1805), 225–31; *Monthly Magazine*, XIX (1805), 641.

[54] *Cobbett's Political Register*, IV (1803), 528–31, and V (1804), 54–7, 76–80, 112–21. See also the attack in *Gentleman's Magazine*, LXXV, I (1805), 554.

[55] *Christian Observer*, II (1803), 298–301, and VI (1807), 736; *Evangelical Magazine*, XI (1803), 407, and XV (1807), 530; *Monthly Repository*, VI (1811), 411–15.

[56] *Address to the public. Part the second*, pp. 11, 46–68, 87–91; *Statement of proceedings*, pp. 4–9, 13–17. In addition to the 623 Sunday trading convictions, the society recorded another 2–3,000 'warnings' or conditional discharges for Sunday trading offences.

[57] *Address to the public. Part the second*, pp. 14–45; *Orthodox Churchman's Magazine*, V (1803), 423.

[58] Ibid. VI (1804), 401–4.

Committee members had earlier determined to ignore 'false, malignant and anonymous' attacks on the society, but it was not long before they felt compelled to counter-attack.[59] Warning members not to be deceived by persistently hostile misrepresentations in the press, they set about publicizing their own side of the case. Charges of oppressing the humble but not the great were met by accounts of interventions to prevent Sunday work at Windsor Castle and to suppress indecency at the opera.[60] Allegations of excesses in policing the laws and in gathering evidence for prosecutions were also parried – though, as one opponent noted, with 'more zeal than skill'. In fact, revelations made as part of a campaign to rebut press attacks on the society's use of agents provocateurs ignited a conflict which was to spread to the society itself.

Ever since the early months of the society's existence, there had been rumours about its methods of evidence-gathering. The 'spy' issue was a particularly sensitive one among Foxite whigs and radicals who, for the past decade, had put up with considerable harassment from government agents and loyalist informers.[61] The issue, though, had the potential to arouse those other groups already identified as being uneasy about the work of the society – the conscience-prone Church evangelicals and the old-fashioned conservatives with a concern to defend English liberties against the encroachment of self-interested information-gatherers.[62] (The Vice Society relied, in practice, on a variety of types of agent – on gentleman volunteers and on subsidized parish officers as well as paid employees; but it was this last group which offended opinion most widely.) By 1804 it had become clear that the society was paying agents for evidence against traders in obscene literature which had been obtained by dubious means. This was not hearsay. Apparently encouraged by some *obiter dicta* of the judge in Bertazzi's case (a successful early prosecution by the society of the supplier of indecent literature to a girls' boarding school),[63] the committee made its position plain to press critics: '[I]f the rat is only to be hunted to his hole by the ferret, and iniquity can only be tracked to its burrows, by beings like itself, there is an end of all objection against the use of informers.'[64]

It took some time for the full implications of this doctrine to become apparent to the rank and file of society supporters. In July 1804, however, an explicit defence of the use of 'artifice' was included in the quarterly statement of proceedings to members, and full-scale debate erupted within the society. At the general meeting

[59] *Statement of proceedings*, pp. 17–23.

[60] Ibid. pp. 9–10; *Society for the suppression of vice: occasional report, containing a letter from 'a lover of real pleasure and decency'* (London, 1805), pp. 7–9.

[61] Black, *The association*, p. 264; Quinlan, *Victorian prelude*, pp. 71–2.

[62] *Christian Observer*, II (1803), 301; J. Pratt, *Eclectic notes* (London, 1865 edn), p. 306; *Cobbett's Political Register*, V (1804), 56. Note also *A letter to a member of the society for the suppression of vice: in which its principles and proceedings are examined and condemned* (London, 1805). (I have been unable to locate a copy of this pamphlet, but the copious extracts reprinted in the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, XXIII (1806), 195–202, reveal that the anonymous author claimed a 'warm and undeviating attachment' to the established church. His attitude to volunteer reformers and 'puritans' was closely similar to Cobbett's.)

[63] *Address to the public. Part the second*, pp. 32, 37–8. See also the approving remarks of Bishop Watson in his *Sermon preached before the society for the suppression of vice* (London, 1804), pp. 13–15. In spite of these endorsements from the eminent, users of 'artifice' ran some practical risks. For example outraged juries might refuse to convict the 'victims' of deception, and the publicity generated by such cases might increase rather than depress the trade of the accused: *Annual Review*, III (1805), 230.

[64] *Cobbett's Political Register*, V (1804), 78–9.

of February 1805, supporters and opponents of artifice met in open conflict. The encounter was inconclusive. Zachary Macaulay, editor of the *Christian Observer*, split the committee by contending 'from Scriptural authority' that it was never permissible to 'do evil that good may come'. However, the defenders of the society's right to use artifice 'in extreme cases' (led by John Bowles) continued to insist that the depraved should not be allowed to rely on the scruples of the virtuous. The debate was adjourned to the annual meeting in May.[65] Both sides used the opportunity to rally support. Surviving evidence suggests that London evangelicals were particularly active.[66] We know, for example, that their May delegation was led by William Wilberforce in person and that, before attending, Wilberforce had lobbied the (usually inert) upper hierarchy of the society in a determined attempt to outflank the executive committee. Wilberforce's letter to Lord Dartmouth, the society's president, gives some idea of the approach adopted:

> Your Lordship and I have both lived long enough in the world to be aware of the effects likely to ensue to the credit and (as efficiency much depends on credit) on the efficiency of our Society, by its being known that many of its members have been forced to withdraw because they would not sanction the principle of using deceit to discover and punish offenders, especially when we take into account that great aggravations and misrepresentations will, as usually happens, take place.[67]

The annual meeting itself produced a relatively short debate – though one long enough to shock Wilberforce by demonstrating 'the extremes to which the justifiers of artifice hurried'. The issue was then, by agreement, removed from open discussion and entrusted to 'a conference between three Gentlemen on each side'. Wilberforce reported the final result in his diary for 28 May: 'Private meeting about use of fraud, when came to a compromise by their agreeing not to practise falsehood.'[68] The evangelical victory seemed complete.

The influence of the evangelical victory on the activities and reputation of the society was however, less clear-cut than Wilberforce's optimism would suggest. First of all, there was a distinction to be drawn between influencing policy and actually implementing it. What evidence we have suggests that the waning of early enthusiasms among the leaders of the society left Bowles and a handful of colleagues in an even stronger position to control the ordinary business of the society after 1805 than in the years before.[69] In addition, the 'compromise' of 1805, though it was

[65] *The British Press*, 18 Feb. 1805, p. 3, col. 4.

[66] Pratt, *Eclectic notes*, 356–8; *Christian Observer*, IV (1805), 156–9: 'Report of a committee of the society of the friends of immorality, vice and irreligion'. S. Meacham, *Henry Thornton of Clapham 1760–1815* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), p. 165, identifies the author of this last article as Henry Thornton but fails to recognize the satirical intention behind the piece, describing it as a 'heavy-handed attack on critics of societies for the prevention of vice'.

[67] Wilberforce to Dartmouth, 11 May 1805, *Historical manuscripts commission: 15th report*, appendix, part I (Dartmouth MSS) (3 vols., London, 1896), III, 288–9. The original is now among the Dartmouth MSS on deposit at Stafford R.O., D 1778/III/475. I have been unable to trace any reply by Dartmouth to this letter, but the reply of one of the vice-presidents lobbied (unsuccessfully) at the same time survives: J. A. Park to Wilberforce, 13 May 1805, William Wilberforce papers, William Perkins Library, Duke University, North Carolina.

[68] *The British Press*, 17 May 1805, p. 3, col. 3; Wilberforce, *Life*, III, 236: diary entries for 12 and 28 May 1805. The original diary entries for this period are apparently lost (see note 39 above) and the printed sections have been expurgated. The description of 'E. a lawyer, coarse, but able, their [i.e., justifiers' of artifice] grand advocate' must surely, however, refer to Bowles.

[69] John Bowles to Lord Dartmouth, 29 Nov. 1808, Dartmouth MSS, D 1778/Iii/1726.

written into the society's rules, did not bar the society from using paid agents as such nor did it deflect the society from pursuit of its socially contentious goals.[70] Enemies already acquired proved difficult to placate.[71] Indeed, the most famous and most damaging journalistic attack the society ever sustained took place as late as January 1809. This was Sydney Smith's survey of the society's publications for the *Edinburgh Review*.[72] Smith's criticisms of the society were, by that stage, well-established whig-radical orthodoxy: the society usurped the role of traditional authorities, it stimulated religious fanaticism, it weighted the scales of justice, it operated on a double standard ('a Society for suppressing the vices of persons whose income does not exceed 500 l. *per annum*'), and it alienated the lower orders by attempting to coerce rather than educate them. By 1809 the society had learned a little more how to counter such charges: it could point to the support which it received from (some) magistrates, to the tangible benefits its work conferred on sections of the London small-trading community and their customers, to the undoubted public outcry which would ensue if it were to attempt to regulate 'private' (i.e. upper-class) behaviour as effectively as 'public' behaviour.[73] Even so, the growing sophistication of the society's counter-argument was no match at the time for Smith's style:

> Men, whose trade is rat-catching, love to catch rats; the bug destroyer seizes on his bug with delight; and the suppresser is gratified by finding his vice. The last soon becomes a mere tradesman like the others; none of them moralize, or lament that their respective evils should exist in the world. The public feeling is swallowed up in the pursuit of a daily occupation, and in the display of a technical skill. Here, then, is a society of men, who invite accusation, – who receive it (almost unknown to themselves) with pleasure, – and who, if they hate dulness and inoccupation, can have very little pleasure in the innocence of their fellow creatures.[74]

The pre-1805 prejudice against the society's activities was, therefore, not dispelled. And, by 1809, other circumstances were undermining the position of the society as well.

One of the pre-conditions for the society's early success was, as we have seen, an atmosphere of patriotic and ideologically-charged wartime alarm. This atmosphere could not be expected to last indefinitely and, by 1809, attitudes to the war had become rather more complex than had been the case a decade earlier. The decline of 1790s loyalism affected the Vice Society in several ways. The first, and most sensational, impact was a personal one. To explain this impact we need to recall the pre-1802 career of the society's most conspicuous early member, John Bowles. Bowles, it has been noted, was rewarded for his efforts on behalf of government during the 1790s by a series of official appointments – appointments of the sort which, after Pitt's death in 1806 and the decline in enthusiasm for war, attracted increasing attention from restive critics of government both inside and outside parliament. The climax of this anti-waste, anti-corruption campaign came early in

[70] *S.C. on police* (P.P. 1817, VII), 388, 392, 482; *Society for the suppression of vice: occasional report*, no. V (London, 1810), pp. 1–6.

[71] *The trial of Joseph Powell, the fortune-teller* (London, 1808), pp. 17–21. Note also the evidence in *S.C. on police* (P.P. 1817, VII), 388, describing the inability of Shoreditch activists to recruit paid agents after 1808 when their existing agents declined offers of re-appointment 'from motives of personal safety'.

[72] *Edinburgh Review*, XIII (1809), 333–43.

[73] *Society for the suppression of vice: occasional report*, no. V, pp. 7–9, and no. VI (London, 1812), pp. 2–3.

[74] *Edinburgh Review*, XIII (1809), 338–9.

1809.[75] The chief focus of scandal was the duke of York whose mistress had allegedly been selling army promotions, but one of the lesser victims was John Bowles, commissioner for Dutch prizes since 1795. Bowles and his fellow commissioners, it was now alleged, had been drawing a salary and investing public money for private purposes long after the business of the commission had ceased to exist. The delight of Foxites like Samuel Whitbread and of radicals like Cobbett was unrestrained.[76] It was perhaps even more serious for the affairs of the Vice Society that Bowles's principal accuser was the evangelical Henry Thornton, chairman of the house of commons finance committee. Thornton, a representative of the commercial interest, had a genuine commitment to the cause of economical reform and this, no doubt, provided his over-riding motive for moving against the Dutch commissioners. It is interesting to note, however, that Thornton had known (and generally disapproved of) Bowles for several years before 1809, and it may be that this acquaintance explains Thornton's conspicuous failure to join the Vice Society even after other leading Clapham evangelicals had done so.[77]

Thornton and Bowles were opponents, too, on other issues. Bowles, a committed high Churchman, fully endorsed the 'Church of England rule' in the Vice Society. Thornton, an active evangelical, had been since 1804 treasurer of the British and Foreign Bible Society, the most successful of the new pan-evangelical voluntary organizations. And this contrast helps us to identify a second source of difficulty for the Vice Society in an era of less intense 'Church and King' loyalism. There had existed, before the war with France, a fairly strong tradition of co-operation between dissenting and Church evangelicals in pursuit of common religious and social goals. This co-operation, interrupted by the tensions of the 1790s, had been resumed with remarkable success in 1804 with the foundation of the Bible Society.[78] (The success of the Bible Society was indeed so complete that it helped to frighten high Churchmen into a further round of sectarian confrontation with dissent in the years towards the end of the war[79] but, in the first decade of the new century, the pan-evangelical impulse seemed formidably strong.) In such a changed atmosphere,

[75] Harvey, *Britain in the early nineteenth century*, pp. 155–6, 206, 242.

[76] *Hansard*, 1st ser., XIV (1809), 308–9; *Cobbett's Political Register*, XV (1809), 601–11. The Dutch commissioners' financial position was a complex one and they made lively efforts to rebut the allegations. Judgement was finally given against them in the court of Exchequer and they were ordered to refund £100,000 to the government. In giving judgement, however, the bench cleared the commissioners of any intention to defraud and, much to Bowles's satisfaction, praised them for having performed their business 'with great diligence, industry, integrity, and talent': *The English Reports*, CXXXVI, 884–911; Churton, *Memoir of Joshua Watson*, pp. 91–2.

[77] Meacham, *Henry Thornton*, p. 83. Thornton refers disparagingly to 'my new friend Bowles' when discussing Hannah More's unhappy relations with journalists in a letter to William Wilberforce dated 19 Sept. 1804 (Wrangham MSS). His 1805 attack on Bowles in the *Christian Observer* has already been mentioned (note 66 above).

[78] Harvey, *Britain in the early nineteenth century*, p. 76. For full modern discussion, see R. H. Martin, 'The pan-evangelical impulse in Britain 1795–1830' (Oxford D. Phil., 1974).

[79] Harvey, *Britain in the early nineteenth century*, pp. 77–8; Webster, *Joshua Watson*, p. 34. John Bowles, it is worth noting, though driven from public life in 1809, took full advantage of the following upsurge in high church sentiment. In 1811, in company with Watson and H. H. Norris, he played a central role in the foundation of the National Society (the Church's answer to the British and Foreign School Society) 'though it was not thought expedient that his name should appear upon the committee': Churton, *Memoir of Joshua Watson*, I, 91, 102 ff. Bowles's high church friends remained loyal to the end. When he died in 1819 they erected a tablet to his memory in Bath abbey: *Gentleman's Magazine*, XC, 2 (1820), 305.

the exclusiveness of the Vice Society was bound to seem increasingly anomalous. It has already been noted how the society's restrictions on membership offended both dissenting and Church evangelicals. Some of these were later prepared to admit that the society of 1802 had needed to placate influential potential supporters by adopting their prejudices, but they were less prepared to accept that such prudence was necessary a decade later.[80] Some Church evangelicals were prepared by this time to go even further than moral disapproval for, in 1810, there emerged a 'society for promoting the external observance of the Lord's Day, and for the suppression of public lewdness'. The history of this society (and of a similar society founded in 1809) is obscure, but it did admit as members all believers in the Trinity and did lay down the rule that fifty per cent of its committee be Churchmen.[81]

Finally, the changing atmosphere of the later war years seems to have had an effect on the distribution of power within the society itself. No doubt, an acquaintance with the practical problems of law enforcement would eventually have strengthened the influence of the society's professional agents and advisers over the gentlemen of the committee in any case. We have seen that Sydney Smith professed to believe the development inevitable. The process was, however, probably hastened by the decline in ideological enthusiasm among members. Even before Bowles's eclipse, the society was suffering from the failure of the majority of committee members to participate in the transaction of society business.[82] We would need the society's records to determine who took decisions under these conditions. The most likely candidate for the role (after Bowles) is George Prichard, the society's long-serving solicitor and secretary.[83]

The cumulative result of these developments – both inside and outside the society – was a crisis in the affairs of the organization. The crisis came to a head in 1809–10. The disgrace of John Bowles in 1809 deprived the society of its most active committee member. Even before this blow, the society had lost the services of its foundation president, the strategically placed Lord Dartmouth.[84] Many rank and file members seem to have drifted out of the society at this time as well: in 1810

[80] *Christian Observer*, x (1811), 181. For examples of attacks on the Bible Society by leading supporters of the Vice Society, see *Anti-Jacobin Review*, xxiii (1806), 197–8; also Marianne Thornton to Hannah More [1805 ?], Thornton MSS, Cambridge University Library, Add. 7674/1/L, vol. iii, fo. 114. (This last letter refers to Lord Radstock's resignation from the Bible Society. Radstock was an enthusiastic supporter of the Vice Society – see note 27 above.)

[81] *Christian Observer*, ix (1810), 524; xi (1812), 851. In addition to its non-exclusive membership policy, the 1810 society also adopted rules requiring its members to act personally (not through agents) and to support a policy committing the society to pursuit of all offenders, regardless of social rank.

[82] Bowles to Dartmouth, 29 Nov. 1808, Dartmouth MSS, D 1778/Iii/1726.

[83] Prichard is first mentioned as secretary in 1806: *H.M.C.*, Dartmouth MSS, iii, 290–1. By 1817 he was clearly in control of the general business of the society: see his evidence before *S.C. on police* (P.P. 1817, vii), 390 ff. His influence in the society must have been sustained because he was able to ensure in 1836 that his son succeeded him as society secretary: F. Boase, *Modern English Biography* (6 vols., London, 1965 edn), ii, 1639.

[84] Dartmouth was lord chamberlain to George III. He appears to have resigned as president of the Vice Society at the end of 1808. His reasons for resigning are not clear. He was already in ill health (he died in 1810) but it is probable that he wished to cut his links with the society in any case. Bowles, in attempting to dissuade him from resigning, speaks of his belief that 'the downfall of the Society... would be greatly accelerated by the misfortune [of Dartmouth's resignation]', an admission which suggests that the society was already in trouble: Dartmouth MSS, D 1778/Iii/1726.

the society announced a temporary suspension of operations because subscriptions were falling so far short of expenses.[85]

These years, then, mark a watershed in the history of the Vice Society. The society did, in fact, survive and, by 1812, was able to report its ability to resume activities on a restricted scale.[86] But the society in 1812 was a significantly changed organization in goals, methods and leadership from the society which had begun operations in 1802. Apparently aware of the problems created by the breadth of its original interests, it tended increasingly to focus its attention on the control of blasphemy and obscenity.[87] It was activity in this field which brought it back into public view in the years of post-war radical unrest. The activity suited the society because it required money and expertise rather more urgently than a mass membership – and the society by 1812 had clearly given up the struggle to attract and retain a mass membership:

> It is a lamentable but well known fact, that the immoral and unthinking portion of a community form its far greatest proportion; and when to these are added those whose Judgments are seduced by the groundless calumnies, with which the vicious incessantly assail an Institution, at open war with their practice and propensities, the Society must from its very nature be unpopular. But such unpopularity is rather an argument in its favour than against it; and the union of the truly virtuous, small as their number comparatively may be, would be fully adequate to check the confederacy of the wicked against the Laws expressly passed for the protection of the public morals...[88]

The elite which remained to resist the onslaught of vice was at least now united in its commitment to the cause. The ambivalent critics of the society's early years had, by 1812, generally made up their minds to support the society and its work. We do not have precise lists of the society's leadership in 1812 but we can deduce from press comment that Church evangelicals, in particular, had made their peace with the society by this stage.[89] And this ensured that the battle-lines between supporters and critics of the society – between moral regulators and moral libertarians – were at last firmly drawn.

III

It should now be clear that the Vice Society in its early years was distinctly the product of its far from Victorian times. We have seen that there are some aspects of its organization which appear to link it more with later (and recognizably Victorian) social reform movements than with its 'aristocratic' immediate forerunners such as the Proclamation Society – the attempt to recruit an extended membership, for example, and the demand for a relatively high degree of practical, and morally introspective, ideological commitment from members. Yet, even in the context of its times, it was hesitant about pioneering new forms of public combination[90]

[85] *Society for the suppression of vice: occasional report*, no. V, p. 1. [86] Ibid. no. VI, p. 1.

[87] Bristow, *Vice and vigilance*, p. 42; W. H. Wickwar, *The struggle for the freedom of the press 1819–1832* (London, 1928), pp. 36–7. The society did not entirely lose interest in other fields. For post-1810 Sunday trading activities, see the society's *Occasional report*, no. VI, pp. 1–2, and evidence of the society's secretary to *S.C. on police* (P.P. 1817, VII), 390. In spite of the single-object societies founded in 1809–10 (see note 81 above), no permanent organization emerged to relieve the Vice Society of this task until the Lord's Day Observance Society was founded in 1831.

[88] *Society for the suppression of vice: occasional report*, no. VI, p. 5.

[89] *Christian Observer*, IX (1810), 319–20, and X (1811), 180–90.

[90] Compare, for example, the activities of the anti-slavery movement described by Howard Temperley in Hollis (ed.), *Pressure from without*, pp. 31–3.

and, in contrast to the elaborate volunteer organizations which were developed to apply 'pressure from without' on unregenerate law-makers during the 1820s, 30s and 40s,[91] it displayed little interest in achieving social goals by political means. The few demands which it made on legislators were almost always procedural rather than substantive in nature: the aim was to assist volunteer citizens to enforce existing law, than to secure changes in that law.[92] I would therefore argue that in operational terms the early Vice Society was several, highly contingent mutations away from becoming a pressure group of conventionally Victorian type.

A similar comment may be made about the early Vice Society's definition of goals. It can be recognized, on reflexion, that even the conception of 'vice' taken up by the society has a distinctively pre-Victorian range of overtones. The vice which the society most deplored can, broadly speaking, be identified as disorderly and culturally rebellious group behaviour (behaviour most visible at the time among traditionally dependent sections of urban society). The concern with sensual gratification among individuals in society at large – a concern which later became central to received notions about vice[93] – was, in this earlier period, subsidiary and is, in any case, more plausibly interpreted, not as a pre-Victorian emanation of Victorian conscience but rather as a historically specific mixture of concern for property rights and public order blended with atavistic assertion of supposedly distinctive national values at a time of national emergency.[94]

The founders of the Vice Society, then, were still defining vice primarily in terms of social indiscipline. And one can see why this should be so in an era when this group in particular – city-dwelling members of the professional and commercial middle classes – had come to the sharp realization that traditional means of instructing the mass of the population in their social duties were ceasing to act effectively. The Vice Society was only one of a number of responses to this perceived crisis. Other responses included loyalist associations, schemes for the overhaul of urban police forces and the judicial system, plans for the distribution of improving literature, and plans for the extended provision of formal schooling.[95] The great (though temporary) advantage which the Vice Society was able to claim for itself

[91] Hollis in ibid. pp. 14–20; D. Hamer, *The politics of electoral pressure: a study in the history of Victorian reform agitations* (Hassocks, 1977), pp. 9–37.

[92] *Address to the public. Part the first*, pp. 60–2, *Part the second*, pp. 46–9, 62–3; *Society for the suppression of vice: occasional report*, no. V, p. 8; *S.C. on police* (P.P. 1817, VII), 390, 482, 533–4. On the hostility/indifference of later moral reform societies to state involvement in the enforcement of morals (though *not* to the enactment of legislation declaratory of 'principle'), see Harrison in Hollis (ed.), *Pressure from without*, pp. 304–7.

[93] J. Honey, *Tom Brown's universe: the development of the Victorian public school* (London, 1977), pp. 194–6, documents a similar mutation of meanings taking place at the same time in a rather different social setting. For a sketch of a general pattern of moral evolution into which both examples might fit as illustrations of transition from an era of 'social control' to an era of 'socialization' (cultivation of individual conscience), see B. R. Wilson, *Contemporary transformations of religion* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 18–20.

[94] *Trial of Joseph Powell*, pp. 17, 25–7, and see notes 41 and 47 above.

[95] On police and public order, see Radzinowicz, *History*, III; also note 9 above. On popular literature, see R. K. Webb, *The British working class reader 1790–1848* (London, 1955), pp. 36–45. On schools, and the overlap of motives between supporters of the early Sunday schools and supporters of the Vice Society, see A. Wadsworth, 'The first Manchester Sunday schools' in M. Flinn and T. Smout (eds.), *Essays in social history* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 100–5, supplemented by T. Laqueur, *Religion and respectability: Sunday schools and working class culture 1780–1850* (London, 1976), pp. 21 ff. The educational enthusiasms of John Bowles are referred to in note 79 above.

was its ability to make an immediate impact on public behaviour – an impact which, it professed to believe, could be brought about without the need to meddle with traditional institutions or values. It was mistaken in this belief as its critics soon established. For a time, however, it attracted the approval and support of a substantial number of concerned citizens.