One of the points on which Wellington’s contemporaries were agreed was that ‘public opinion’ had become a much more influential force in postwar politics than it had been hitherto. Thus whichever way the term was defined – as opinion expressed in public or the opinion of ‘the public’ – the evidence was thought to indicate unparalleled growth: of the number of publicising events and media such as county and civic meetings, petitions and newspapers; and in the size and influence of pressure groups deploying those events and media, such as the Anti-Slavery Society or the Catholic Association.

There was some debate, however, about the causes of this growth. Some felt that it was due principally to the spread of education and the proliferation of information about the political system, not least through the agency of Parliament itself in the form, inter alia, of turning a blind eye to the publication of the debates. Others, such as William Mackinnon, who published a famous book on the subject in 1828, ascribed it to the growing wealth of ‘the middle class’ – a social group which he was prepared to define with considerable elasticity as those heads of families with an annual income of £60–£3,000 and who comprised some 45 per cent of all heads of families. It was these two somewhat different propositions that the Whigs were happy to join together to justify reform: public opinion representing ‘the march of intellect’ and the new wealth of the ‘middle classes’ had to be appeased in the interests of social stability.

The influence of ‘public opinion’ has also become a matter of historiographical debate. Until comparatively recently, there was a common assumption that the ‘constitutional revolution’ of 1828–32 was brought about principally by the impact of public opinion upon a Parliament dominated by a recalcitrant aristocracy. Britain, according to an argument that took root at the time, was in the first stages of an economic, social and religious revolution that had produced a new professional and industrial middle class that was eager to acquire political power. A similar development was alleged also to have taken place in Ireland with the emergence of

P. Jupp, *British Politics on the Eve of Reform*  
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a Catholic middle class with a firm foothold in the professions and in trade. It was therefore 'pressure from without' organised principally by middle-class leaders that was responsible for the three measures that toppled the old order: the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, Catholic emancipation and parliamentary reform. Although the types of pressure clearly varies – from the chapel-based petitioning in favour of the repeal of the Test Acts to the constituency-based demand for parliamentary reform expressed in the 1830 and 1831 elections – the elite had bowed to the force of public opinion.²

However, in the last decade or so, there has been growing unease about this thesis. The principal sceptic is Jonathan Clark, who argues in his English Society 1688–1832 that the collapse of the old order was not due to external forces fuelled by their growing economic and cultural importance. Britain in 1830, he insists, was an ancien régime state in which agriculture (and not industry) and religion (and not rationalism) were still supreme. What brought about the downfall of the Wellington government in November 1830 (and therefore the advent of a pro-reform government) was the split that took place in his party on the repeal of the Test Acts and Catholic relief. The collapse of the old order was therefore brought about by divisions within the political elite on the vital matter of religion rather than the irresistible force of public opinion.

As the relationship between Parliament and the wider public is central to both arguments, this chapter and the one that follows are designed to shed some light upon it. In this chapter, the spotlight falls principally on aristocratic and middle-class opinion and the media by which it was shaped and the means by which it was expressed.

PRINT AND THE SHAPING OF OPINION

Although the printed word was the principal medium by which opinion was shaped, it is sometimes easy to overlook the variety of forms that it took. In this period there were five that were particularly important to the aristocracy and the middle classes: the newspaper – which appeared in daily, bi- or tri-weekly and weekly forms; the periodical; the almanac; the book; and the pamphlet. However, the printed word was not the only medium of importance. Others that should be included were images in the forms of statues, busts, medals, portraits and caricatures.