
John Binns (1772–1860) was one of a number of expatriate Irishmen who played a key role in the development of a popular brand of militant radicalism in 1790s England, influenced by the heady experience of the French Revolution and the insurrectionary politics of Tom Paine. He was born in Dublin to a prosperous ironmonger who drowned when his son was just two years old. In 1794 Binns moved to London with his elder brother Benjamin and quickly became involved in radical politics, joining the London Corresponding Society (LCS) within months of his arrival in the capital. In October 1795 he chaired an open-air meeting at Copenhagen Fields to protest against two anti-sedition bills and a few months later travelled to Portsmouth as an LCS delegate, activities to which he alludes in the following excerpt from his autobiography, which chronicles the circumstances that have ‘carried me into crowds, given me strange companions, made me a fugitive from thief-takers, and the inhabitant of many prisons, from the Bastile to the Tower of London’. Binns’s arrest in Birmingham in 1796 led to the first of several periods of incarceration as a result of government purges. The LCS’s professed solidarity with the United Irishmen brought him into close association with other English-based Irish republicans, notably Arthur O’Connor and Father James Coigley, with whom he was tried for treason in 1798. Although Binns escaped conviction on this occasion, he was subsequently imprisoned without charge for almost two years in Gloucester jail, after which he emigrated to the United States in 1801. He settled in Philadelphia, where he established a popular newspaper, the Democratic Press, and served as an alderman from 1822 to 1844. In his short introduction to his *Recollections* Binns reveals that it was first suggested that he write his memoirs shortly after his arrival in America, and that he subsequently preserved ‘letters and papers as have presented themselves containing matter to assist my recollection’. His stated autobiographical objective, therefore, is the ‘full and frank disclosure of facts’, cleansed of all ‘unkindly feelings’ towards the living and the dead.

On the thirty-first of October, 1795, four days after the meeting near Copenhagen House, a royal proclamation ‘by and with the advice of the Privy Council,’ was issued, stating that, immediately before the opening of the present session of Parliament, a great number of persons were collected
in the fields in the neighborhood of the metropolis; and divers inflammatory speeches were delivered, &c. &c., and forbidding any such seditious and unlawful assemblies. Two bills were submitted to Parliament by the ministers, one ‘for the preservation of his Majesty’s person and Government, and against treasonable and seditious practices and attempts,’ and the other ‘for more effectually preventing seditious meetings and assemblies.’ These bills, after an unusually-general violent and protracted opposition, passed both houses of Parliament, received the royal assent, and became laws.

Every effort was made by the societies associated to obtain a reform in Parliament, by innumerable public meetings; by the municipal corporations throughout the kingdom; and by the Whig party in and out of Parliament, to modify or prevent the passage of those bills. They were, however, in defiance of all opposition, passed, by large majorities in both houses. Among the provisions in those laws, was one prohibiting any meeting for political purposes of more than fifty persons at one time and place, unless the meeting was called by the sheriffs or other legally constituted authorities. On the passage of these bills into laws, the London Corresponding Society sent circulars to all the societies with which they were in correspondence, and to influential friends in the large towns in England, detailing a plan by which meetings in favor of Parliamentary reform might be held, without subjecting those who assembled to the pains and penalties of the law. Finding that these communications did not produce the effects desired, the society resolved to send delegates to some of the large towns in England, to awaken public spirit, and organize societies for parliamentary reform. I was the first delegate appointed, and Portsmouth the place selected as the town to which I should go. Portsmouth was then, and I believe is now, the principal naval station and dock-yard establishment, and the most strongly fortified town in England. Why it was selected as the first place to send a delegate, I do not recollect ever to have heard. I went, attended to the duties assigned me, visited the dock-yards, naval depots, and some of the largest ships afloat and on the stocks, naval and mercantile. Owing to contrary winds, a large fleet of West India merchant ships, more than two hundred and fifty sail, waiting for convoy, were then assembled in the port. I saw this fleet, under convoy of several ships of the line, frigates, and sloops of war leave the station under a favorable breeze. It was a most imposing and beautiful sight. It was so considered even by the people of Portsmouth, who crowded the piers and wharves to view the departure of the fleet and convoy.

While on this mission I visited Portchester Castle. It was a short distance from Portsmouth, and at that time the principal depot for French prisoners of war. Two of the principal shopkeepers of Portsmouth accompanied me. On application for admission at the castle gate, we were told by the sentinel and officer on guard, that we could not be admitted without an order from the governor. One of the gentlemen who accompanied me said, ‘Why, that is something new.’ ‘Yes,’ said the officer, ‘it is in consequence of some delegate