As a British centre of both print and ‘organised cultural activity of all kinds’, Newcastle was second only to London. Its four weekly newspapers, two of which – the *Tyne Mercury* and the *Newcastle Chronicle* – were vocally liberal, were the most prominent in northern England. The source material concerning songwriters and songs is exceptionally rich. The ephemera and stock lists of its major popular printers are largely extant, and the energies of John Bell preserved many unpublished songs. Such is the vitality of its song tradition that it might be supposed altogether exceptional, of little use as a representative study. I would rather attribute this to the self-conscious activities of Victorian Geordies, who – thanks to Bell’s volume and the long lives of singers like Blind Willie Purvis and William Mitford – were deeply conscious of the tradition they inherited, and were at pains to acknowledge this legacy in print and in archival collections. Accordingly, though Bell’s activities are central to our understanding, we cannot unduly privilege his contemporary importance. Newcastle may not have been so different from other cities, whose popular song culture has subsequently been neglected and lost.

Relative to some of those cities (Sheffield, Manchester, and Nottingham in particular), Newcastle was no hotbed of popular radicalism in the 1790s. Wilkite enthusiasm of the 1760s had not palled into apathy, yet ongoing disaffection lacked a marked Jacobin or subsequent Luddite character. Nor
was it a bastion of Home Counties conservatism. Its notable Literary and Philosophical Society, akin only to a similar body at Manchester, was liberal and enlightened in its interests and membership, yet, in contrast to its failed predecessor, the Philosophical Society, discussion of religion or politics was prohibited.8 Newcastle’s popular attitudes were far from generally loyalist. Those involved in song culture expressed robustly unorthodox views. But the city possessed no definite partisan character, making it an appropriate microcosm of the kingdom. The geographical extent of its influence was certainly distinctive, however, not merely south towards York and west into Cumbria, but north into Scotland.9 Within this small, compact city itself, its popular printers, songwriters, and singers, all operated within a remarkably small area around the centre and the quayside: compared with London, Newcastle certainly punched above its weight. An examination of its song culture across the period should serve not only to counter any vestigial sense of metropolitan hegemony, but also to flesh out the findings of the previous chapters.

Newcastle c.1797

In another case study of late eighteenth-century Newcastle, Kathleen Wilson draws attention to ‘extremes of luxury and want’, entitling a section ‘The rejection of deference: Newcastle’.10 These phrases speak of a city at the end of a century of growth, change, and spasmodic improvement. A threefold increase in coal production brought prosperity and problems, as a burgeoning urban population increasingly relied upon a widening hinterland for basic resources.11 New mercantile interests after the Seven Years’ War broke existing coal monopolies, yet failed to secure representation in local government.12 The resultant discontent with what was perceived as a closed oligarchy was mirrored on every level in a town still tarred with Jacobitism, and boasting a significant Scottish element.13 An extremely large Dissenting community, headed by Scots Presbyterians but including Unitarians, Baptists, Independents, Quakers, Methodists, Congregationalists, Glassites, and Catholics, was severely underrepresented in the franchise.14 Wilson identifies an unusual ‘absence of active popular participation’ in politics and ceremonials, which cast ordinary citizens as ‘observers’ or ‘passive recipients of patrician munificence’ on public occasions.15 Yet this oligarchy did not go unchallenged. ‘In apparent opposition to this constellation of power, party divisions, a politically conspicuous citizenry, a lively press, tavern and club life, and increasingly complex strategies of political organisation contested the forms and substance of elite hegemony.’16

Newcastle’s press was symptomatic of this contestation of hegemony.17 One clear attempt to engage in civic life was the publication in 1807 of what purported to be the first guide to the city, published by and for the Akenhead family of printers, whose shop was centrally situated on the north