

BRITAIN'S FIRST TERRORIST

In the 1770s, George III was facing a strong challenge from Britain's American colonies. As the situation escalated rapidly towards revolution, the king faced an additional annoyance at home. **JESSICA WARNER**, author of a new biography of John the Painter, explains how a disaffected Scot terrorised Britain's dockyards and caused panic throughout the country

WHO COULD have guessed that James Aitken, a humble house painter by trade, would one day become the most wanted man in Britain? He was a hopelessly ordinary young man, one of hundreds of thousands who wandered the English countryside looking for work and women. A former employer remembered only that he "went by the name of John". He attracted so little attention, aroused so little interest, that no one knew "whither he went, or what road he took". If they took the time to notice him, it was to laugh at his Scottish accent, his stammering, his shabby clothes.

Born in 1752, in Edinburgh's Old Town, James Aitken was the eighth of twelve children. When he was just seven his father died. When he was nine he was admitted to Heriot's, which at the time was a school for orphans. He did not distinguish himself. In 1767, his schooling completed, he was apprenticed to a house painter.

Ripe for conversion

It was not an auspicious start for a man bent on "accomplishing some great achievement". In his confessions (there are two of them) he speaks of his true ambition: to become an officer and in so doing win fame and fortune. There is something very Scottish about this – the British officer corps had more than its fair share of Scots – but it is also the wish of a social conservative, of a man who wants to be at the top of the pecking order and not at the bottom. His humble circumstances did not make him a republican; still less did they make him a working-class radical.

Nor was he a Scottish patriot. For all of the anti-Scots prejudice that he encountered later

in life, first in England and then in America, he never wavered in his goal: to make a mark, not for his homeland, but for himself. When asked to say where he was from, he did not say Scotland; he described himself only as "a native of Europe".

In 1772, he left Scotland for good. At first he tried his luck as a journeyman painter in London. When he tired of this, he turned to crime, holding up stagecoaches on Finchley Common. He was very nearly caught. In his panic he decamped to Virginia. That was in 1773. He worked briefly as an indentured servant, only to run away from his master at the first opportunity. All told, he spent two years in colonial America, leaving only when

hostilities were imminent. He was a witness to the events leading up to the revolution, but there is no sign that he was as yet sympathetic to it.

That did not happen until after he returned to England, no richer than when he had left. It was at this point that he became increasingly rudderless, tramping the English countryside, sometimes painting houses, sometimes breaking into them. He assumed aliases, joining and deserting the army on at least three occasions.

He was ripe for a conversion experience, and this duly happened in an Oxford pub. Several men, already in their cups, were discussing the war. They all agreed: the war depended on the navy, but the navy depended on the royal dockyards. Take away these and the war was as good as lost. Such ineluctable logic had an electrifying effect on Aitken. That

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Jessica Warner (www.Jessica-Warner.com) is an assistant professor at the University of Toronto and author of *John the Painter: Britain's First International Terrorist* (Profile Books, 2005)



James Aitken,
known as
John the
Painter, as
engraved in
1777

John the Painter

PROFILE OF A TERRORIST JAMES AITKEN 1752–1777

PERSONALITY: Aitken was insecure, self-absorbed, and quick to take offence (but so was everyone else in 18th-century Britain). For example: when he calls on a stagecoach to stop and is “disregarded and laughed at,” he flies into a rage and fires at the passengers. No one is hurt.

SIGNIFICANT RELATIONSHIPS: None, other than a misplaced (and unrequited) adoration of Silas Deane, the American envoy in Paris and a laughable bumpkin. There are no women in his life, aside from the occasional prostitute, but this does not distinguish him from other men in their early twenties. On at least one occasion he rapes a woman, a shepherdess in Basingstoke.

POLITICS: Conservative. He wishes to rise above his class, not lift it up. Hence his utter disregard for ordinary men and women. “Burning a house is nothing to me,” he is supposed to have said. He makes good on this boast by attempting to burn down Portsmouth and Bristol. He is more than a conservative: he is a sociopath.



JOHN AITKEN:
Commonly called **JOHN the PAINTER.**
Convicted of setting Fire to Portsmouth Dock.
Published on the Act directed by 17th Decr 1776

The condemned man: James Aitken awaiting trial in Winchester County Jail, 1777

same night he came up with a plan: he would single-handedly destroy the great royal dockyards and in so doing would win the war for America. If he died in the process, his memory would live on; if he lived, he would return to a hero's welcome, and an officer's commission, in America.

Over the next nine months he visited each of the major dockyards – Chatham, Woolwich and Deptford in the east, Portsmouth in the south, and Plymouth in the west – taking copious notes at each. He did more: he designed a cannister that would function as a slow-fuse device, allowing him to start fires and escape before they spread.

The incompetent terrorist

From this point forward his misadventures multiplied, bringing him into contact with a succession of increasingly unlikely characters: the American envoy in Paris, a double agent in London, a jail house snitch, and the great crime-fighter of his day, Sir John Fielding.

The envoy was Silas Deane. Like everyone else, Deane was at first put off by Aitken's wild appearance and demeanour, describing his eyes as “sparkling and wild,” his countenance, too, as “rather wild, and at the same time somewhat expressive, his hair deeply inclined to the red, and his face covered with red freckles”. Even so, Deane gave Aitken's scheme his blessing, along with a trifling sum (three pounds). He gave Aitken two other things: a passport authorised by Louis XVI and the name of a man to contact in London. The one, when it was discovered in a Portsmouth lodging house, would be used to convict Aitken; the other, unbeknownst to Deane, was a double agent working for the British government.

Once back in England, Aitken proceeded to Canterbury. The original plan had been to have five incendiary devices built there, one for each of the dockyards he planned to destroy. But he needlessly drew attention to himself, getting into a fight with two grenadiers and later arousing the suspicion of his landlady. Spooked, he left Canterbury with just one completed device.

His first target was Portsmouth, the largest of the royal dockyards. He arrived there on 5 December 1776. He was looking for a likely spot to set a diversionary fire, and this he found in a rickety lodging house run by Elizabeth Boxell.

His fantasies exceeded his abilities. His first attempt to burn down the rope house, a building nearly a quarter of a mile in length, came to naught when his matches failed one after the other. Night fell, and he found himself locked inside the rope house, his clothes matted with tar and hemp. The following morning, Elizabeth Boxell gave him



the boot after she caught him trying to start a fire in his room. He proceeded to Portsea, just outside the dockyard, and found new lodgings, in a house belonging to a widow. Her name was Anne Cole, and little did she suspect that he had selected her house precisely because it was a firetrap. He left his bundle with her, planning to retrieve it after setting fire to the dockyard and before setting fire to her house. It contained all of his worldly possessions, including the one he prized the most: the passport signed by Louis XVI.

He never returned. “Did you open that bundle?” the crown prosecutor later asked Anne Cole. “It was not tied close, and I saw it a little way open,” she had to admit. “What did you see in the bundle?” “I saw some books and other things,” she answered, adding, just a little too defensively, that she had resisted the temptation to reach inside.

Aitken's bad luck continued once he was back inside the dockyard. His incendiary device, which he placed in the south hemp



ABOVE *Arrival of the Fire Engine* by Rowlandson. Pumps like this would have been used to extinguish the Portsmouth and Bristol fires

LEFT Aitken designed a cannister with a slow fuse, so he could escape before fires took hold. He had it made, rather poorly, by an apprentice brazier

BELOW Caught red-handed: The gimlet, powder flash and bottle of turpentine found on Aitken at his capture



house, failed to ignite. (Even its maker, an inexperienced apprentice, had to admit that it was “very bad soldered.”) It was only when Aitken made a second attempt on the rope house that he succeeded, starting fires in three separate locations and escaping before they were noticed. By the following morning, the rope house was in ruins and Aitken was halfway to London.

Flushed with success, he showed up at number 4 Downing Street. This was the house of Dr Edward Bancroft, Deane’s contact in London. Aitken not only told him everything, he asked for money so that he could complete his mission. Bancroft was flabbergasted. Fearful of being exposed, he hustled Aitken out of his house. He did, however, agree to a second meeting, at the Salopian Coffee house on Charing Cross Road. He heard Aitken out, but refused to get involved.

Bancroft’s rebuff had the effect of further unhinging Aitken. He headed west, to Bristol and from there to the dockyard at Plymouth.

The latter, however, had by now been placed on alert, and so he returned to Bristol, whose busy quay, with its packed ships and warehouses, presented an inviting target. He made repeated attempts, always under cover of darkness, to burn down the city.

He did little actual damage. A warehouse was destroyed; another was badly damaged. But by now everyone’s nerves were frayed. Suspicion naturally fell on the Americans and their sympathisers. The fires were the work of “our enemies,” one newspaper insisted. “Nothing,” it added, “is more certain than their diabolical intentions”. Another newspaper supplied them with a motive. Knowing that Britain was “likely to gain a decisive victory in the field,” they were “endeavouring, by the most hellish plots, to undermine her glory, and prevent her success”.

Feeding the fire of paranoia

The panic spread. Innocent men were arrested. Copycats set fires in other towns, without, however, causing serious damage. In Liverpool, citizens formed patrols and were asked “to keep a strict look out on all loitering persons being in or coming to the town.” Landlords in particular were asked to report “any lodgers or inmates in their houses, whom they have just cause to suspect”.

In Parliament, the ministry took advantage of the panic to rush through a bill allowing American privateers to be held indefinitely without charges. Among the reasons given for suspending habeas corpus was the need to deal with persons who “have been or may be brought into this kingdom, and into other parts of

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his Majesty’s dominions.” In the ominous words of the bill itself, “it may be inconvenient in many such cases to proceed forthwith to the trial of such criminals, and at the same time of evil example to suffer them to go at large”.

As a result of the so-called American High Treason Bill, privateers, the unlawful combatants of their day, were held indefinitely, some in the prison hulk *Jersey*, others in Wallabout Bay off Brooklyn, and still others in British prisons.

The temptation is overwhelming to substitute Guantanamo Bay for Wallabout Bay, the American Patriot Act for the American



Sir Frances Buller (“Judge Thumb”), one of the prosecutors assigned to Aitken’s case

High Treason Bill. But that is where the analogies end. With the exception of the American High Treason Bill, which was allowed to lapse at war’s end, Aitken’s crimes did not cause ordinary Britons to discard their most cherished values. This is brought home by the steps taken to capture and convict him.

First for his capture. Aside from the Bow Street Runners, who were little more than glorified bounty hunters, 18th-century Britain was entirely lacking in a professional police force. The first attempts to hunt down Aitken, variously initiated by the Navy Board, the Admiralty, and the commissioner in charge of the royal dockyard in Portsmouth, had been hampered by professional jealousies and a lack

of coordination. This went on for nearly two months, during which time Aitken was able to move and act with impunity.

Late in January of 1777, the Admiralty took over the investigation, offering £1,000 to anyone

who could find and capture Aitken. This brought the price on his head to £2,735. This, along with Aitken’s basic ineptitude, had the desired effect. After breaking into a house in Calne, he was chased all the way to the Hampshire village of Odiham. There he surrendered without a struggle. On his person were discovered a pistol and the tools of his trade (turpentine, an awl, and a powder flask), along with various items stolen from the house in Calne.

Eyewitnesses from Portsmouth and Bristol were able to identify Aitken, but there was still insufficient evidence to indict him for his fires.

A SUPERPOWER AND THE YOUNG MEN WHO HATED IT

Transferred to London, and brought face to face with the famous magistrate and crime-fighter Sir John Fielding, Aitken stubbornly refused to confess. A week passed.

Frustrated, the ministry paid a Welshman to befriend Aitken. His name was John Baldwin. Like Aitken, he was a painter by trade. And like Aitken, he had once lived and worked in Philadelphia. Baldwin, playing on Aitken's loneliness, had no difficulties gaining his trust. For two weeks he visited him in the New Prison at Clerkenwell. Glad of a friend, Aitken talked and talked, revealing names and places. When he gave the address of Anne Cole's house in Portsea, his fate was sealed. There, untouched, was the bundle he had left behind, and in it the passport authorised by Louis XVI.

A life's ambition realised

Aitken was tried in Winchester on 6 March 1777. He was not told the charges against him until that day, although he had to have had an inkling. He had no counsel and no way of knowing which witnesses would be called

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against him. Nor did he have the means to call witnesses of his own. At the end of the day, he was a condemned man, with less than a week to live.

For all that, his trial was scrupulously fair, if only by the iniquitous standards of 18th-century justice. The typical capital case lasted just twenty minutes – Aitken's lasted seven hours, and felons always operated at a disadvantage, being deprived of counsel and kept in the dark until the day of their trial. The trial was fair, and so, for that matter, were

On 3 November 1763, plenipotentiaries from Britain, France, and Spain, wearied by months of machinations, signed the Treaty of Paris. The Seven Years' War was over. Britain was the victor and to it went the spoils: the French possessions in Canada and the Indian subcontinent, territories in Africa, islands in the West Indies. Blessed with vast colonies and possessed of a large and efficient navy, Britain emerged from the war the most powerful and most hated country of its day.

No one expected this state of affairs to go unchallenged. But the source of the challenge was unexpected. It came not from France, Britain's traditional enemy, but from America. Saddled with a war debt in excess of £135 million, the ministry of George Grenville took the momentous step of directly taxing the 13 American colonies. The reaction was immediate. When Parliament imposed a Sugar Act in 1764,

evasion verged on civil disobedience; when it imposed a Stamp Act in 1765, civil disobedience flared into riot. From this point forward it mattered little what Parliament did. The damage had been done and it was only a matter of time before scattered riots and protests took the form of revolution in 1775.

These events were watched with great interest by bored and idle young men on both sides of the Atlantic. They besieged the American delegation in Paris, and they importuned Washington and his aides, pledging, in the stilted words of one, to fight "in the cause of the liberty against the oppressors". Their ranks included future US statesman Alexander Hamilton and Nathan Hale (later hanged as a spy by the British

BELOW: North's Coercive Acts of 1774 punished the Americans for the Boston Tea Party and helped lead to revolution

during the coming war) neither of whom had seen his 21st birthday when hostilities broke out in 1775. And they included James Aitken.



The able Doctor, or America Swallowing the Bitter Draught.

the means used to secure his confession. He was not tortured or subjected to sleep deprivation or isolation; nor was he under any compulsion, aside from his own insecurities, to confess to Baldwin.

James Aitken was hanged in Portsmouth on 10 March 1777. To the disgrace of hanging was added another indignity: his corpse was hung in chains at the entrance to Portsmouth harbour. There it remained until some sailors, years later, took it down, "placed it in a sack, and left it in the chimney-corner of a public house in Gosport".

After his death, his confessions, both of them heavily edited, were published. They do not flatter him. But in them he achieved his

larger goal in life, and that was to be remembered. One editor, probably one of Sir John Fielding's clerks, understood him all too well: "The subtlety, and shrewdness of the offender, bespoke him the man of ability, while his conduct in other respects betrayed him a fool". **H**

JOURNEYS

BOOKS

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Sir John Fielding, who was blind, the most famous magistrate in London, painted by Nathaniel Hone, 1762

