

PROLOGUE: THE MANY LIVES OF GILBERT IMLAY

How can you love to fly about continually – dropping down, as it were, in a new world – cold and strange! – every other day? Why do you not attach those tender emotions round the idea of home, which even now dim my eyes?

Mary Wollstonecraft to Gilbert Imlay, 10 June 1795¹

Consciousness does not determine life, but life determines consciousness

Karl Marx, from *The German Ideology*, 1845–6²

The American Gilbert Imlay (c. 1754–c. 1828) was a man of many talents and trades. Described by one commentator as ‘unscrupulous, independent, courageous, a dodger of debts to the poor, a deserter, a protector of the helpless, a revolutionist, a man of enlightenment beyond his age, a greedy and treacherous land booster’,³ Gilbert Imlay was all of these and more. In many ways a prototype of the American conman, Imlay constantly had to reinvent himself as he tried to survive on the murky margins of a late eighteenth-century transatlantic world deeply divided by international political rivalry, ideological conflict and military tension. Although by no means a major historical figure in his own right, Imlay unwittingly acted as an interface between figures of much greater historical significance. Their diverse and often mutually exclusive ideas and ambitions, dreams and schemes he frequently borrowed and then disseminated across continents and across the Atlantic, whilst invariably serving his own, usually less honourable interests.

An officer in the American Revolutionary Army, Imlay set out to try his luck across the Allegheny Mountains in the Ohio Valley not long after hostilities between Britain and her American colonies had ended, most probably in the early spring of 1783. As a deputy surveyor for Jefferson County, Imlay was soon deeply invested in the Kentucky land bubble, rubbing shoulders with prominent historical figures – as well as wholesale land-jobbers – such as Daniel Boone, Richard Henderson, John Filson, General George Rogers Clark, Benjamin Sebastian, General James Wilkinson and Henry (‘Light-Horse Harry’) Lee. Of these, Imlay could count Wilkinson, Sebastian and Lee among his closest friends and trusted legal representatives; they were also his partners in business, as well

as in crime. Having piled up more debts than he could handle while successfully eluding sheriffs' summonses and court writs, Imlay quietly left the West in late 1785. Back East, Imlay invested – and lost – his remaining assets in a venture in the triangular trade, after which he disappeared from America some time during the summer of 1787. It is not known what he did or where he was during the next few years, but evidently he put his experiences in Kentucky to good use. When we next hear from him, in 1792, he is in London and the author of *A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America*, which quickly became one of the decade's most widely disseminated and influential books on America's trans-Alleghenian West. In 1793 Imlay followed up on the success of his *Topographical Description* with an epistolary novel, *The Emigrants*, America's first frontier novel, and the nation's only Jacobin novel.

Widely regarded in Europe as an expert on the topographical conditions and commercial potential of the American West and as a friend of the French Revolution, Imlay on the eve of the Terror gained access to the group of intellectuals and revolutionaries that had gathered around the notorious radical Thomas Paine at his Paris home in the Faubourg Saint-Denis – a group that included such Francophile expatriates and Revolution tourists as the radical scientist and philosopher Thomas Cooper, the novelist Helen Maria Williams and her lover, the radical publisher and merchant John Hurford Stone, the poet, land-jobber and merchant Joel Barlow, the businessman and co-editor of the liberal *Analytical Review* Thomas Christie, and Mary Wollstonecraft, the founder of modern feminism. During his stay in France, Imlay is also known to have had dealings with a number of prominent French politicians, including the minister of foreign affairs, Lebrun, and the Girondist leader Brissot de Warville, as well as the Venezuelan freedom fighter General Francisco de Miranda and Hector St John de Crèvecoeur, French diplomatic, merchant and renowned author of *Letters from an American Farmer*.⁴ Most scholars of the Romantic era would associate Imlay with his tempestuous and ill-fated liaison with Wollstonecraft; less well known is Imlay's involvement in the spring of 1793 in the Girondist cabal – masterminded by Brissot – to launch a rebellion in Kentucky against the Spanish interests in Louisiana. Imlay prepared two reports on the West for the French government, in the first of which he proposes to take a small army of saboteurs into Louisiana to destabilize Spanish rule there.⁵ The documents were duly presented to the notorious Committee of Public Safety, but nothing was done with them for soon afterwards the Girondists were ousted from the National Convention, Brissot went to the guillotine, and Genet, the Minister Plenipotentiary of the French Republic to the United States, was recalled to France. After a last chance meeting with Wollstonecraft on the New Road in London in the spring of 1796, Imlay disappeared from her life and by and large from public life altogether. As Imlay embarked on a succession of progressively shadier trades and

business ventures, the initial impact of his topographical writings continued to be felt in the decade's political debates and polemics in both Britain and the United States, leaving a long trail in the print history of the period.

Space and mobility were central to Imlay's life and activities. He was a man who moved often and who moved fast. In the early 1780s, when the Appalachian Mountains still formed a formidable barrier between the East and the West, Imlay was slipping into and out of the Kentucky back country as easily as the hero of his novel *The Emigrants* moves across the vast regions of the 'Old North West.' Contemporary correspondence from, to and about Imlay reveals a picture of a man who is said to have been sighted in Richmond, or believed to be in New Jersey; presumed to have been in New York, but expected soon in Baltimore; just left Charleston but thought to be en route to Louisville or Lexington. In Europe, Imlay moved with equal ease in and between England and France, despite restrictions imposed on domestic and international travel during the Anglo-French War. He was a man who was seldom where he said he would be, and when he was, would not be there for long. His itinerant lifestyle was the mark of a man who was invariably involved in clandestine and often plainly illegal mercantile activities – varying from land-jobbing to racketeering and from slave-trading to blockade running. Inevitably, Imlay was not someone to leave many lasting impressions, let alone documented traces of his presence and activities.

This relative paucity of source material has rendered it hard to reconstruct the complete story of Imlay's life. Except for the three years of his life that he lived in the shadow of Mary Wollstonecraft, the known facts about Gilbert Imlay's life have until now been sketchy, as well as scattered over an extraordinarily wide range of archives and other depositories. Given the illegitimate nature of his business activities, much of the source material for this book has been located in court archives, notably in Kentucky. A substantial part of that material has so far been untapped by researchers (indeed, it is not infrequently unsorted and uncatalogued). Another major source of information has been the private and business correspondence of individuals who had dealings with Imlay. Even so, since Imlay's side of the correspondence is often missing, writing this biography has been somewhat similar to trying to prove the existence of a black hole: more often than not, Imlay's presence and movements can only be established vicariously by observing the movement of satellites orbiting him.

Over the past few decades, Wollstonecraft's biographers have thoroughly researched the three years Imlay spent with her – roughly, from March 1793 to March 1796. It was unavoidable that they should have been primarily guided in their explorations by Wollstonecraft's surviving letters to her lover. However, Wollstonecraft's letters to Imlay have put him at a double disadvantage. Not only have Imlay's letters to her not survived – so his side of the story is missing – but

her letters to Imlay were also carefully edited prior to publication by her then husband, William Godwin.⁶ Mourning the recent death of his wife, Godwin was eager to present her to the world as a woman capable of extraordinary empathy and sensibility, who was driven to distraction in a world dominated by materialism, greed and soul-destroying trade – a world epitomized, in Godwin’s mind, by Gilbert Imlay. Unsurprisingly, scholars in the field of British Romantic studies have come to know Imlay above all as the philanderer who abandoned Mary Wollstonecraft – and their infant daughter – and drove her to attempt suicide twice. No one’s reputation and character would have emerged unscathed from the kind of heart-rending account that Wollstonecraft gives of her affair with Imlay in her letters to him. Taking their cue from Godwin, most Wollstonecraft scholars have therefore generally concurred with Godwin that in rejecting Wollstonecraft’s love, Imlay behaved like ‘the base Indian [who threw] a pearl away, richer than all his tribe.’⁷

Without aspiring to materially challenge or replace it, this book aims to correct and nuance the abiding image of Imlay as Wollstonecraft’s infamous lover. But, more importantly, *Citizen of the World* wants to complement existing accounts of Imlay by recounting the full story of his life. Relatively little research has been done into Imlay’s life after his relationship with Wollstonecraft ended, and hardly any into the thirty-five years, or so, which he spent in America before he came to Europe. In the final analysis, Imlay may be one of the main chapters in Wollstonecraft’s biography, but even during the rosy days of their affair, Mary Wollstonecraft played second fiddle to Imlay’s true mistress – speculative trade. This is the first study to treat the figure of Gilbert Imlay as an individual in his own right. Hence the research for this biography has been focused specifically on the underexposed and largely unexplored periods in Imlay’s life, particularly his American years.

Gilbert Imlay was in many ways a paradigmatic figure of his time. He belonged to that generation of Americans, born in the 1750s, whose lives were crucially shaped by the revolutions in America and France – the two historical events that sent cataclysmic shock-waves through the late eighteenth-century circumatlantic world order and that, it is generally accepted, ushered in political modernity and marked the birth of the modern subject. Swept along by the strong current of historical events, this generation was indelibly marked by its historical moment. The dawn of liberty may have boosted human agency, but, ironically, the revolutionary process that paved the way for liberty largely dictated the experiences of those caught up in it. Hence the lives of many men of Imlay’s generation – Joel Barlow, James Swan, Samuel Blackden, Nathaniel Cutting, Mark Leavenworth, Benjamin Hichborn and scores of others – evolved along remarkably similar lines. It was their active involvement in America’s bid for liberty and republicanism that gave these men direct access to the revolu-

tionary process that would later unfold in France; it was their neutral American passports that would enable them to amass fortunes in the wartime trade with the French Republic. In the case of Joel Barlow and Gilbert Imlay, the dictates of history and geography prescribed almost identical scenarios for their lives. Both Imlay and Barlow served in the Revolutionary Army, after which they became speculators in western land; in Europe they became avowed republicans, combining a career in trade with a life of letters; during the Anglo-French war they became purveyors to the French government and proposed plans to help France reconquer Louisiana, after which they drifted into relative anonymity.

Gilbert Imlay's life in all probability began on 9 February 1754 in the township of Upper Freehold, Monmouth County, New Jersey, where the Imlay family had been established since the late seventeenth century – lending their name to present-day Imlaystown, Monmouth County. As far as we know, it ended on 20 November 1828 in the parish of St Brelade's, on the Channel Island of Jersey. Yet the neat geographical symmetry suggested by his place of birth (New Jersey) and death (Jersey) is an ironic counterpoint to the lack of reliable information Imlay's biographers have had to contend with.⁸ How did this New Jersey-born adventurer become a citizen of the world before finding his last resting place on the Isle of Jersey? The answer is contained in a curious tale of reverse transatlantic emigration.

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