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THE IDEA OF BRITAIN AND THE CREATION OF THE FIRST BRITISH EMPIRE

The essence of what happened to the idea of Britain in the eighteenth century is that it mutated from an essentially sectarian idea into one founded on ideas of empire and racial superiority.’ Part of this process was the secession of the inhabitants of the pre-1763 anglophone colonies on the mainland of North America during the last quarter of the eighteenth century and their replacement, at the centre of imperial activity outwith Britain by the Scots and to a certain extent by the Irish, so that the Britain of 1829 (Catholic Emancipation) or 1832 (Parliamentary Reform) or 1837 (the Accession of Queen Victoria) was well and truly a very different construct from that of 1707 or even 1763.² Although it is obvious that change must have occurred, the profound nature of that change is not always appreciated. The idea of ‘gentlemanly’, pre-industrial capitalism helps explain the economic changes which underpinned the use of Britishness as a unifying concept for a society negotiating the passage from the early modern world of the Renaissance and Reformation to the thoroughly modern yet still pre-industrial war economy forged by the British to achieve world domination between 1793 and 1815.³ Britishness has

always been about state building, but during the eighteenth century the focus shifted from dynastic power to financial power through the control of trade, and in the process the political state turned away from a model of power centred on an executive monarchy, to a limited monarchy which represented and safeguarded an alliance of landed and commercial wealth.⁴ Finance, trade and agricultural improvement became part of the same process. While the political history of Hanoverian Britain appears detached from the economic and social dynamic which would eventually subsume it; the politics of the period represent political conflict amongst the landed and commercial classes in which divisions over the superiority of interest between land and commerce was, until mid-century, obscured by the conflicting dynastic loyalties represented by Hanoverians and Jacobites; after unification of loyalty to one dynasty represented by George III was accomplished, divisions of a different nature emerged over constitutional reform, ironically made into a clear issue of principle by the completion of the transformation of dynastic identity.⁵

The landed conservative elite who consolidated their hold on power against a potentially absolutist monarchy by supporting the change of regime in 1688, and maintained their privileged position at the end of the eighteenth century by maintaining their unity, were open to ideas of civic responsibility which looked back to the classical world and to ideas of encouraging commercial and financial wealth, which gave them a modern outlook that really did make them different from landed elites elsewhere in Europe. ‘If the English went to Italy to see Antiquity,’ Roy Porter has commented, ‘foreigners came to England to see Modernity.’ That modernity was largely urban, but it was an urban world peopled by men and women who owned land in the country. Later in the process more and more people who did not own land began to behave like people who did, and they could do so if they could get access to money through finance, through trade, through the professions, and even through shopkeeping!⁷ If some of the ways to wealth were still unacceptable to

gain access to this society initially, wealth usually found a way in the end, and if this threatened the civic culture of traditional landed society, after 1798 such niceties appeared irrelevant in the face of the beast summoned from beyond the known political world by the success of the French Revolution.⁸

While the loss of much of a North American empire clarified the limits of British imperial power during the eighteenth century, the ability of the British state to survive that loss displayed remarkable resilience, based on the state's ability to tap the elaborate world and wealth of British finance as it grew from 1688.⁹ The British state was built on money which enabled it to finance ever more complex military campaigns based essentially on the need to prevent the emergence of a dominant European power in the form of France, but which had the unexpected effect – unexpected, that is, to the British ‘gentlemanly elite’ – of first engaging Britain in prolonged imperial conflict with France overseas, and then compensating for persistent defeat in continental Europe between 1792 and 1812 by seeking victory elsewhere in a way which echoed the imperial basis of the elder Pitt's year of victories in 1759.¹⁰ Finance as the key which allowed this transformation to happen reinforces the importance of 1688 in British history, not for constitutional reasons, but because it brought the British into contact rather than conflict with the Dutch and the culture of imperialism and finance which formed the basis of Dutch economic success during the seventeenth century.” The British state, formed under the tutelage of its Dutch king William III and II [of Scotland], would succeed the Netherlands as a Protestant, financial, imperial power and agent of European expansion. It was able to do this because an ethos of landed political power was married to that of financial (but not necessarily industrial) gain in a way that sheds entirely new light on the cultural context of eighteenth-century political patronage.¹²

Historians had long known of the eighteenth-century British ‘financialrevolution’, but recent work has endeavoured to relate the context of this financial revolution to the state,

quite deliberately identified as an ‘English’ state. Why? First and foremost, because this great financial wen of profit and despair was located in London, and the apparatus of the state which fed on this invisible market of money and exchange was centred there, if only on a scale which would be considered modest indeed in modern times.¹³ One aspect which could be added to Brewer's work is reference to the banking system which grew up in Scotland during the eighteenth century, not quite independent of the mother market in London – indeed, spawned by a Scot who had emigrated there but who extended his operations to Scotland in the 1690s, William Paterson, founder member of both the long-lived Bank of Scotland in 1695 and also of the briefly active Company of Scotland Trading to the Indies.¹⁴ The failure of one organisation and the survival of the other illustrated the domestic nature of Scottish banking, offering cheap credit through adventurous use of paper money, but not really a banking or financial system able to become part of overseas trade and empire. After the failure of the Darien scheme, banking in Scotland developed along very different lines indeed from the London financial markets, although it continued to provide a disproportionate number of recruits for its personnel.¹⁵ The shift to a society built on finance and commerce rather than land and power was British in the sense that it included key members of the Lowland Scots, Welsh, Protestant Irish and American Colonial political elites who saw land as representing political power, but recognised that the nature of the state that was emerging was founded on commerce and finance; and responded to that positively or negatively.¹⁶ Thus being British over the course of the eighteenth century became less and less a matter of being Protestant and more and more about being Capitalistic before what that term represented had yet been imagined by those exposed to it.

The landed interest were the landowners who paid the land tax, the principal support of the doubling of taxation which occurred after 1688. In fact, the increase in taxation did not actually fall on the landowners. Why? Some, chiefly

away from the south-east of England, were able to escape its worst effects. Others were able to pass part or most of the burden on to their tenants. Brewer points out ways the landed class benefited from the financial commercial state through access to salaries from government offices and by cautious participation in financial investment. By the 1740s there were more opposition MPs – not those one would readily think of as sympathetic to financial wealth – than government supporters amongst those with money in the public funds.¹⁷ However, while willingness to hold wealth in the stock market increased over the century, access to public office by the gentry actually increased their snobbery towards trade. So while fewer younger sons of the landed class entered trade directly, more of them invested in it or in the public debt whose interest was paid by a land tax, the true cost of which they increasingly passed on to their tenants, just as the British passed the cost of empire building in India on to the native princes (and their subjects) who came into contact with them.” Younger sons of the gentry increased their access to salaried posts attached to the state through the military, bureaucratic government posts, or through the East India Company.

The financial interest, by contrast, was identified with the public debt. It was an interest made up of bankers, investors, speculators and others who 'lived parasitically off the state's need to borrow money to fund its wars'.¹⁹ They underwrote government issues of stocks and they arranged to feed and pay the British army abroad. These were two connected functions, as many of those who made fortunes out of government contracts invested those fortunes in government bonds, ensuring that they were fully subscribed. Most of those active in this market were Whigs in politics, and many of them were Dissenters in religion. They consistently attracted the hostility of the landed interest. These were wealthy men who refused to buy land as the social expectations of the age demanded, and Geoffrey Holmes summarised the ill feeling against them by noting that: 'to many in the landed interest it seemed monstrous that Londoners

whose new riches were giving them access to political influence should evade both the heavy taxation and social responsibilities which an extensive landed interest incurred'."

The apotheosis of the policy of debt, of course, were the victories of the Seven Years War, when an amazed British elite found itself in possession, after the peace of Paris, of a world empire, just years after facing setback after setback at the hands of the French. If it seemed a divine victory, it was apparent to all that it was a victory for finance and commerce, economic products of liberty – tangible proof that time was not on the side of the absolutist French state. Having won the Empire, generations of scholars have studied British reaction to the problem of trying to govern it. Some have emphasised political patronage, others a now lost political ideology rooted in the history of Ancient Greece and Rome, and still others were determined to write it out of history as something they did not like; a 'patrician' phenomenon which had nothing to do with the culture of ordinary working people in England.²¹ Of these different perspectives, it is that drawn from the Classical World which holds most force in trying to understand the origins of British empire. The so-called first British Empire was as quintessentially English as Sir Walter Raleigh, involving as it did the idea of planting the English overseas on the model of the Mediterranean colonisation by the Greeks and Phoenicians. Read with care, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* is a manifesto for English colonisation, imbued with a confidence that those who did not recognise the superiority of Utopian culture, and refused the opportunity of assimilation to it, deserved to suffer expropriation in the face of its needs.” The centrality of Classical scholarship to Renaissance England ensured that its elite conceived of colonisation as transplantation rather than imperial overlordship. This was implicit when Benjamin Franklin predicted that the American colonies would become a mighty empire in their own right, when Archibald Grant of Monymusk agreed with him, and particularly when the elder Pitt, as Earl of Chatham, declared in the House of Lords that when Parliament ceased to have sovereignty over North America he advised every

gentleman in Britain to sell his lands and emigrate to that country. The greater partner in a federation, he declared, would control the less, and render it subordinate.²³

It was a transplantation of population, but also an expropriation of native peoples, whether it be in Ireland, the West Indies or Virginia. People who were hunter-gatherers, whether Gaelic or Indians, had no rights to the land over which they hunted and gathered. Instead, there was a strong belief that ‘only the act of tillage mixed labour with the land’, and created the right of ownership, whether as smallholder, agrarian improver or colonial planter.²⁴ In early English colonisation, it was not personal labour which conferred such a right but power in a feudal sense over such labour. Empire was not necessary to expropriate native peoples, but empire was necessary if the goal was power, conquest and sovereignty rather than emigration and settlement. The American Revolution essentially was fought over the question of whether empire was necessary in the extended English polity represented by the idea of Britain. In an immediate British context, the Irish experienced expropriation (twice: by the Old English during the Middle Ages, and then again by the ‘New English’ during the Reformation that came to England but not to Ireland), whereas the Welsh and the Scots did not, which may be more a reflection on the fertility of Ireland and the inhospitable environment of Wales and Scotland than an indication of Hibernian lack of ‘Britishness’.²⁵ In an American context it provided a ready-made ideological construct for those who had ceased to regard themselves as British to cheerfully and self-righteously eliminate those who lived in the wilderness but had no right to possess it. Those who carried out this process were then themselves American in the tradition of Thomas More’s Utopian culture.

What the English proto-empire in America spawned, before the middle of the eighteenth century, was an economic system which acted as a system of financial circulation holding distant colonies of settlement in the Western hemisphere together and connecting them to the markets emerging in Amsterdam and London. After 1707 the colonies in one

sense became British too, although in time the idea of extending a British identity to them in terms of an imperial state would provoke resistance, and then rebellion.²⁶ After 1783 Canada and the British West Indies remained as a reminder to more modern British imperialists of what might have been, but the transplanted English and purportedly British American colonial world of the eighteenth century lost its centre and its purpose after 1783. What evolved in this process of transatlantic plantation and loss for those involved in its economy was an extra-European development of the complex financial system first spawned by William III’s incorporation of England into his war effort against France after 1689. This would provide the decisive basis for the creation or re-creation of British empire in Asia after 1783.²⁷ The key word is ‘decisive’, for the link between east and west in the British Empire continued to be central until 1815. As Adam Smith predicted in 1776, British trade to independent America grew after 1783 rather than declined.²⁸ Jeffersonian Republicans hoped to make the United States an Empire of Liberty, but it still drew its supplies from what was no longer a mother country as it faced west and south in the North American continent, and ultimately north, which led in 1812 to a renewed clash between Britain and the United States over the issue of whether there would be any British America at all.²⁹ As a result of that conflict it was 1815, rather than 1783, which marked the real end of a comprehensive British role on the North American continent, and it was no coincidence that this development coincided with British victory in Europe and the security it provided for its Asiatic empire.

In an important study of London colonial merchants and financiers we can see this process at work in some detail. A substantial number (ten out of twenty-three) of the financiers featuring in the work of David Hancock were Scots. The others were divided between origins in provincial England or London. This contrast with the figures for London merchants’ origins overall given by Hancock, of whom 80 per cent were English and only 5 per cent were Scots. His

merchants were outsiders by and large, attracted to London by the opportunities offered by being at the centre of a state which was increasingly becoming an empire, a metropolis poised between overseas and inland trade.³⁰ How did their trading interests survive the break-up of the first British Empire? For some, it marked the occasion to retire from trade, to join the landed elite at a higher social level than that of the decayed gentry from which many of the merchants studied by Hancock sprang. For others, the opportunities of India beckoned as British influence expanded there, investing in ships, lending money to the East India Company, and sending goods to India as freight on East India Company ships. Scots like Richard Oswald or Alexander Grant used connections in the East India Company known as ‘husbands’ to obtain space on East India Company vessels preparing for their outward voyages, and they often used fellow Scots like Andrew Moffat or Laurence Dundas, known to them from days before they lived in London, as their partners in making these arrangements to trade privately through the medium of the company. Other trading connections took them, or at least their money, to Africa, where the exotic juxtaposition of British and imperial influences can be seen in the game of golf played on Bance (or Bunce) Island off the coast of Sierra Leone, described by a friend of Linnaeus who was on a visit to Africa in **1773**. As the players struck their balls towards each of the two holes on ‘the course’, their play epitomised the overseas trade which so changed Britain in the course of the eighteenth century as more and more of its commercial and political interests were led further and further abroad. The players were dressed in Indian cotton, attended by African caddies dressed, if that is the word, in tartan loin-cloths made from woollen material manufactured in Glasgow. They were in Africa to buy slaves to take to America.³¹ Their presence demonstrated how four continents were united by trade centred on the financial and mercantile expertise of London.

In this outward movement the Scots were important. The crisis with the American colonies coincided with their

determination to assert an equal role within the Union, rooted in historical ideas about the concept of Britain which Scots had been developing from the time of the Reformation.³² These intellectual ideas became imperial when the area under the authority of the British Crown expanded overseas. If the Anglo-Irish looked to the American colonies for an example of how to assert their rights in relation to authority rooted in an imperial crown, a significant and articulate number of Scots realised that Franklin was right about the fabulous wealth to be made from the American continent, and viewed it as essential that the ‘British’ state, under a new constitution built upon imperial authority in London, keep control of that continent and that wealth. This was what the Union of Scotland and England had been about, in their eyes; the surrender of sovereignty to a larger state which would tap the potential wealth of the polite and commercial society that represented the end of history and the final state of civilisation.³³ They lost. The Scots became notorious as a Loyalist nation in America, despite the fact that there was considerable popular sympathy for the Americans in Scotland itself. What had been unimaginable by Scots like Adam Ferguson, Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh and sometime secretary to the peace commission sent by the North ministry to negotiate with the Americans in **1778**, was that their dream of greater glory would be realised in Asia rather than on the *tabula rasa* they imagined America to be. To them a British empire in Asia was impossible and would bring about corruption and decay.³⁴ Their student, Henry Dundas, swept aside their niceties with the vigour and ruthlessness of a successful Scottish advocate in possession of a brief for a wealthy client, at a cost which became apparent only after **1815** in terms of increased social conflict and dislocation.³⁵ At the time of the American crisis the loss of America and the growing influence of the Scots entrenched the unity of Crown and Parliament at the centre of empire.

Some English commentators such as Josiah Tucker, Dean of Gloucester Cathedral, felt that the loss of America thus

represented a positive good for England and for Britain. Tucker realised that if America was going to become a fabulous continental empire, its subjugation of Britain and England was inevitable.³⁶ Tucker argued, like a good ancient Athenian, that Britain had to become independent of its colonies before they outgrew it, since otherwise the Empire would be ruled by those in the provinces rather than the metropolis, and by a people in which slave-owning was well established, which augured ill for the future of British liberty. Both Tucker and Samuel Johnson were acutely aware of a truth that still haunts Americans today – the words of liberty and freedom sound hollow in the mouths of those who live on the labour of others. Tucker called for a British Declaration of Independence from America; for him ‘the heart of the American problem for Britain was less the maintenance of imperial control than the preservation of essentially English institutions which the claims of empire were calling into question’. If the Americans invoked the authority of John Locke, Tucker emphasised Locke’s authorship of the feudal as well as colonial *Fundamental Constitution of Carolina*, and his possible involvement in Monmouth’s rebellion of 1685 in order to present him as an advocate of both slavery and rebellion, like the American colonists themselves.

The reaction of the British elite to the failure of the Americans to participate in Britain marks the end of the so-called First British Empire, which was in fact neither truly British nor a true empire. The Classical analogy was to the Greek dispersal of population about the Mediterranean, and especially to the foreign shores of Asia Minor, rather than the Roman Augustan Empire, which Adam Ferguson held out as a source of civic virtue and commercial security.³⁷ Harold Macmillan once famously remarked that the postwar British would become Greece to America’s Rome, the older civilisation tempering and teaching the wealthier but less sophisticated junior.³⁸ But to the emerging British elite who would coalesce around the younger Pitt, the Americans had to go because they were like so many Greek city-states, forever quarrelling amongst themselves and able to unify only to

defeat external threat rather than achieve order and wealth in their own society. When the Americans proved these critics wrong in that crucial year in European history, 1789, it would be the American who had come to model himself on the political career of the younger Pitt, Alexander Hamilton, who would be able to draw on the ideology of British union to bring about the birth of an American state which, ironically, became imperial in the hands of his own arch-enemy, the self-styled revolutionary, Jefferson.³⁹ It was Jefferson who would purchase the vast wilderness of Louisiana from Napoleon to keep the British out of the centre of the American continent, determined to use the opportunity to perpetuate the politics of settlement in opposition to social and economic development dependent on commercial and financial wealth.⁴⁰