

The Eighteenth-Century Background



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If the emphasis in our study of nineteenth-century Britain is on change, it would be all too easy to present the earlier age as one of stability. This is particularly so because those who direct or affirm change generally see, or at least describe, what came before as static, in need of reform, and, thus, in some fashion undesirable. This chapter, in contrast, sets out to show the *dynamism* of late-eighteenth century Britain, and to discuss its rapidly changing economy, society, culture and politics, in order to provide both a background for the remainder of the book, and an explanation of important aspects of the early decades of the nineteenth century. It is important to read this chapter because it helps to explain the origins of important trends and problems in the twentieth century, and provides the context for judgements of what came later. It is also necessary to underline the extent to which there was not one Georgian or eighteenth-century 'age' nor one set of influential beliefs, against which the nineteenth century can be seen as developing.

Key issues

- ▶ What was the nature of late eighteenth-century Britain?
- ▶ What were the principal pressures for change, and what developments occurred?
- ▶ How successfully were the political and social systems coping with change?
- ▶ What was the importance of Britain's imperial position?

1.1 Society and state in the eighteenth century

In 1776 Britain's most populous colonies in North America declared independence; Adam Smith, a Glasgow professor of economics, published his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations*; Edward Gibbon, an enlightened MP, brought out the first volumes of his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; and, in 1777–9, the world's first iron bridge was erected at Coalbrookdale in Shropshire. Each was an aspect of modernity. The American Declaration of Independence made it clear that the revolution that had begun the previous year was to lead to a new state that would destroy the unity of the British empire. It also asserted a set of principles that suggested a radically different political system and culture. The *Wealth of Nations* provided the basis for modern economic theory and argued the case for the free trade that was to become the ideology of the nineteenth-century British state, and the cause of much prosperity, as well as much hardship. In place of a cyclical theory of history, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* suggested that progress was possible, and that it was not inevitable that a fresh wave of barbarians would destroy Britain as it had done Rome. The Coalbrookdale bridge, designed in 1775 by Thomas Farnolls Pritchard, showed progress in action. It had a 120-foot span, and carried the road on arched ribs springing from the bases of two vertical iron uprights. The construction details were worked out by experienced iron-founders. Wrought iron had long been a valued decorative material, but the replacement of charcoal by coke smelting meant that reliable and precise cast iron became available.

Change was certainly coming from a series of developments that are collectively known as the 'Industrial Revolution'. The development of industry and trade, agricultural improvement, and the construction of canals and better roads, led to a growth in national wealth and a gradually emerging new economy. The percentage of the male labour force employed in industry rose from 19 in 1700 to 30 in 1800, while, because agricultural productivity increased, that in agriculture fell from 60 to 40. The British economy developed powerful comparative advantages in trade and manufacturing and greatly impressed informed foreign visitors. A sense of economic change and the possibilities of progress was widely experienced in the later eighteenth century and can be glimpsed in depictions of industrial scenes, such as Coalbrookdale. Heroic paintings were produced in praise of scientific discovery and technological advance, for example by Joseph Wright of Derby. In the Frog Service that Josiah Wedgwood designed for Catherine the Great of Russia, each piece of china was painted with a different British scene. These included not only aristocratic landscapes, such as Stowe, but also the Prescott glass works on Merseyside. From the 1730s and 1740s, the majority of British commentators argued that modern achievements were superior to those of former times, especially the ancient world. A culture of improvement lay at the heart of much innovation and the diffusion of new techniques and machinery, although art, architecture, furniture, and much else in the cultural world, all used classical designs.

What kind of society and state were these changes arising from and impacting upon? As with any other period, it is possible to present diverse views, and indeed there has been considerable diversity in recent treatment. Two major themes can be defined. The first focuses on aspects of modernity, rationality, secularism and change; while the second offers a more conservative account stressing continuity and, in particular, the continued



Adam Smith (1723-90)

The founder of modern economics and Professor of Logic at Glasgow University in 1751. He is famous for his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776). This argued the case for free trade that was to become the ideology of the nineteenth-century British state, and the cause of much prosperity as well as hardship.

impact of a more traditional religious world view. The first view is generally 'optimistic'. It sees a rising middle class and an age of reason, a polite and commercial people, aristocratic ease and elegance, urban bustle and balance, a land of stately homes and urban squares: Castle Howard, Blenheim, Bath, the West End of London, Dublin and the New Town of Edinburgh.

Different images and views can also, however, be stressed. Serious disease played a major role in what was a hostile environment. Although the plague epidemic of 1665–6 was the last grave attack in Britain, there were still other major killers, including a whole host of illnesses and accidents that can generally be tackled successfully in modern Europe. Smallpox, typhus, typhoid, measles and influenza were serious problems. Although progress was made in tackling smallpox, the facts of life remained grim, and disease was a subject of anxiety and bewilderment. Primitive sanitation and poor nutrition exacerbated the situation. Glasgow, for example, had no public sewers until 1790, and the situation thereafter remained inadequate for decades. There and elsewhere the limited nature of the housing stock led to the sharing of beds, which was partly responsible for the high incidence of respiratory infections.

Problems of food storage and cost ensured that the bulk of the British population lacked a balanced diet even when they had enough food, which many of them did not. Poverty remained a serious problem. The Workhouse Test Act of 1723 encouraged parishes to found workhouses to provide the poor with work and accommodation, but too few were founded to deal with the problem, especially as the population rose from mid-century. Gilbert's Act of 1782 gave Justices of the Peace (JPs) the power to appoint guardians running Houses of Industry for the elderly and infirm. Workhouses, however, remained less important than 'out relief': providing assistance, and sometimes work, to the poor in their own homes. Under the Speenhamland system of outdoor relief introduced in 1795, although never universally applied, both the unemployed and wage-labourers received payments reflecting the price of bread and the size of their family. Payments to families were made to the man, a measure that was in keeping with the male-centred nature of society and specifically the role of the man as head of the household (see Chapter 14).

Social structures and attitudes were not challenged by the educational system. The majority of children did not attend school, the distribution of schools was uneven, and the curriculum of most seriously limited. It was generally argued that education should reflect social status and reinforce the status quo, and thus that the poor should not be taught to aspire. The educational opportunities of women were particularly limited. Illiteracy was widespread, being more pronounced among women than men, and in rural than in urban areas.

The inegalitarian nature of social and educational structures was mirrored in the judicial system. Crime was linked to hardship, with bad winters sending theft figures up. The criminal code decreed the death penalty, or transportation to virtual slave labour in colonies (from 1788, Australia) for minor crimes. The game laws laid down harsh penalties for poaching and permitted the use of significant force by landlords. Many who were transported died under the harsh conditions of their long journeys, a counterpart to the treatment of Africans sent as slaves to Britain's colonies in the New World.

1.2 Political and religious tensions

A feeling of insecurity helps to explain that, in so far as there was an aristocratic and establishment cultural and political hegemony, it was in part bred from elite concern, rather than from any unchallenged sense of confidence or complacency. Aristocratic portraits and stately homes in part reflected a need to assert tradition and superiority and to project images of confidence against any potential challenge to the position of the elite.

Indeed, there were bitter political and religious tensions. Union with Scotland and, more generally, the Settlement which followed the Glorious Revolution, was put to the test in 1714–16. William III's sister-in-law and successor, Queen Anne (1702–14), had numerous children, but none survived childhood. By the Act of Settlement of 1701, the house of Hanover, descendants of James I through his daughter, were promised the succession, and this led to George, Elector of Hanover, becoming George I in 1714. This was not immediately contested, but discontent rapidly developed in both England and Scotland. George replaced Anne's Tory ministers by a Whig ascendancy that left the Tories no place in government service. This reflected George's distrust of the Tories, whom he saw as sympathetic to Jacobitism – the cause of the exiled Stuarts – and also the difficulty of operating a mixed Whig–Tory ministry, although he also saw the danger of being a prisoner of a Whig majority.

The Jacobite rising of 1715–16 was the most serious response. Although it centred on Scotland, there was also a rising in North-East England in 1715. This led to an advance on Preston where the Jacobites were defeated, as the Scots had been in 1648. Thereafter, Jacobitism remained a threat, but not one that was central to political life. Indeed, until the next Jacobite rising in 1745, divisions among the Whigs took precedence. They focused on competition for ministerial office as well as on differences over foreign policy. The most powerful Whig in this period was Robert Walpole, a Norfolk gentleman landowner. Although he led those Whigs who were in opposition in 1717–20, thereafter he was in office until his fall and retirement in 1742. In 1720–2, Walpole benefited from the fall-out of the South Sea Bubble, a major financial scandal in 1720 that compromised leading ministerial figures, and also from the unexpected deaths of his

two leading Whig opponents, Stanhope and Sunderland. He swiftly rose to dominate politics.

Walpole was invaluable to George I (1714–27) and George II (1727–60) as government manager and principal spokesman in the House of Commons, and as a skilful manager of the state's finances. He also played a major role in the successful elections of 1722, 1727 and 1734. Aside from his policies, Walpole was skilful in parliamentary management, and in his control of government patronage. He helped to provide valuable continuity and experience to the combination of limited monarchy with parliamentary sovereignty. While Walpole maintained a Whig monopoly of power, he took more care than his predecessors not to support policies that would alienate Tory opinion. In particular, his refusal to extend the rights of Dissenters contributed to a lessening of religious tension. As Dissent came to be seen as less of a threat, so it became easier to lessen tensions between Whigs and Tory clerics.

The Walpolean system had its defeats, most publicly the failure of the Excise Scheme of 1733, a plan to reorganize indirect taxation, but it lasted until 1742, the longest period of stable one-party rule in a system of regular parliamentary scrutiny. Then, Walpole succumbed to a combination of hostility from the reversionary interest – the active opposition of Frederick, Prince of Wales – and a sense that he was somehow losing his grip. Against Walpole's wishes, Britain had gone to war with Spain in 1739 – the War of Jenkins' Ear – and he was blamed for the failure to win hoped-for victories.

Walpole's fall led to a period of political instability as politicians vied for control, but, from 1746, Walpole's protégé, Henry Pelham, 1st Lord of the Treasury since 1743, was in a position to pursue Walpolean policies: fiscal restraint, unenterprising legislation, maintaining a Whig monopoly of power and the status quo in the Church, and seeking peace. If this political system maintained social inequality, that was very much what those with power expected. This was a society that took inegalitarianism for granted, although there was a certain amount of social criticism. In *The History of the Life of the late Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great* (1743), Henry Fielding offered a satirical indictment of false greatness: 'the Plowman, the Shepherd, the Weaver, the Builder and the Soldier, work not for themselves but others; they are contented with a poor pittance (the Labourer's Hire) and permit us the GREAT to enjoy the Fruits of their Labours.' The blatant corruption of the political system led to considerable criticism. In John Gay's *The Beggars' Opera* (1728), Walpole was referred to as if a crook with a series of aliases: 'Robin of Bagshot, alias Gorgon, alias Bluff Bob, alias Carbuncle, alias Bob Booty ...'

The religious establishment could similarly be probed both for effectiveness and for failure, some of it self-serving. Alongside pluralism, non-residence, appointments due to patronage, and a very unequal system of payment of clerics, there was conscientiousness and the provision of regular services in most parishes. Methodism developed in the 1730s, but this, and other, aspects of religious enthusiasm reflected not so much a failure of the Church of England as the contradictions inherent in a national body that had to serve all as well as enthusiasts. In addition, there was an international dimension to Protestant evangelicalism, so that it is not explicable solely in English terms.

1746 also saw the final crushing of Jacobitism. In 1745, Bonnie Prince Charlie – Charles Edward Stuart, the elder grandson of James II – had successfully raised much of Scotland for the Stuarts. In November 1745, he invaded England. The Jacobites did not only want a Stuart Scotland, not least because a Hanoverian England would not allow the existence of

a Jacobite Scotland. Carlisle fell after a short siege, and Charles Edward then advanced unopposed through Lancaster, Preston and Manchester, reaching Derby on 4 December. Opposing forces had been outmanoeuvred. However, this was very much an invasion. The Highland chiefs were discouraged by a lack of English support (as well as by the absence of a promised French landing in southern England). They forced Bonnie Prince Charlie to turn back from Derby on 6 December. This may well have been a defining moment in English history. Had the Jacobites advanced they might have won, ensuring that the new state created in 1688–9 and 1707, with its Protestant character and limited government, would have been altered. Although Jacobites called for a restoration of liberties, and a balanced constitution, Jacobite victory might have led to a Catholic, conservative, autocratic and pro-French England/Britain, or, in turn, such a state might have provoked a violent reaction akin to that of the French Revolution.

Instead, Charles Edward was eventually heavily defeated by William, Duke of Cumberland, the second son of George II, at Culloden near Inverness on 16 April 1746. The Whig Ascendancy was not to be overcome from outside. Thanks to this victory, as well as to a growing economy, an expanding population, and a powerful world empire, there was strong feeling of national confidence and superiority. This replaced seventeenth-century anxiety and a marked sense of inferiority *vis-à-vis* Louis XIV's France. Whig confidence broadened in mid-century into the cultural moulding of the notion and reality of a united and powerful country. It was no coincidence that 'Rule Britannia' was composed in 1740. Cultural nationalism and xenophobia were other aspects of growing assertiveness. In part, this was a continuation of earlier anti-Popery and, in part, involved a response to cosmopolitan influences. Thus, John Gay's English-language ballad-operas, such as *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), were a response to Italian opera. In addition to the new cult of Shakespeare, the Royal Academy, founded in 1768, and its long-serving first president, Sir Joshua Reynolds, advanced the dignity of British art.

Britishness was one response to the need to create a political culture to accompany the new state formed in 1707 by the Act of Union. Sympathetic Scots made a major contribution. Yet Britishness was also in many respects a product of English triumphalism and, in part, a vehicle for it. Conceptions of Englishness, not least of the notion of a chosen Protestant nation, and of a law-abiding society, were translated into Britishness. There was a sense of superiority over Scotland, Wales, Ireland and the rest of the world. Although, in the period 1714–45, many people thought England was being ruined by the rising national debt and becoming corrupt and weak under the Hanoverians, mid-century victories helped to produce a self-confidence in England's destiny. The English dimension of Britishness is one that for long received insufficient attention, but was highlighted by separatists in the twentieth century. They, however, emphasized the extent to which the creation of Britain rested in large part on military conquest, and underplayed the vitality of England as a model. In part, the skill of the concept of Britishness rested on its ability to draw on assessments of Englishness but not to associate them too closely with England. Alongside Britishness, there were still vigorous senses of local, provincial and national identities.

Englishness/Britishness was contrasted with Continental Europe. It was argued that the English were free, and this contributed to a public myth of uniqueness. The Common Law was seen as a particularly English creation, was contrasted with legal precepts and practice in, above all, France, and enjoyed marked attention. Liberty and property, and freedom

under the law were cried up as distinctly English. Foreign commentators observed a lack of deference to the King and to aristocrats in elections and in the life of counties, even though the reality was that, as the century progressed, wealthy aristocrats grew richer and controlled more and more boroughs. The Whigs in power grew complacent and intellectually bankrupt. They forgot the demand made in the 1680s by the 1st Earl of Shaftesbury and the Exclusion Whigs for a freeholder franchise in all boroughs.

The defeat of Jacobitism was one stage in a struggle with France that led to fighting in 1743–8 and 1754–63 (although war was declared only in 1744 and 1756). They ended with the Thirteen Colonies on the eastern seaboard of North America, and the British possessions in India secure, with Canada and the French bases in West Africa and the West Indies captured, and with the Royal Navy unchallengeable at sea. Key victories included three in 1759, the ‘year of victories’, James Wolfe’s outside Québec and the naval victories of Lagos and Quiberon Bay. Two years earlier, the East India Company, an English private company, was established as the most powerful power in Bengal when Robert Clive defeated the Nawab of Bengal at Plassey.

Imperial conquest does not conform to the mores of the late twentieth century and there is profound ambivalence, not to say amnesia, towards Britain’s imperial past. At the time, however, victories and conquests abroad were deplored by few. Britain was ruled not by Quakers, but by a political elite determined to pursue national interests and destiny across the oceans of the world, and this resonated with the aspirations of the wider political public. Truly a world that is lost, but one that cannot be disentangled from the history of the period.

1.3 Towards the Industrial Revolution

It was not only Britain’s global position that was changing. There was also a series of developments in the economy and society that contributed to the move towards what has been subsequently termed the ‘Industrial Revolution’. Neither economy nor society were static, and for centuries the pressures of an increasingly insistent market economy had encouraged change, a process facilitated by the availability of investment income and the absence of internal tariffs. The amount of coal shipped annually from the Tyne rose to 400,000 tons by 1625 and to well over 600,000 in 1730–1, much of it going to London. Coal represented a major development as a fuel source. It gave a more predictable heat than timber. Coal was the main fuel in sugar refining, brewing, glass-making, salt-boiling and brick-making by 1700. The ability to create and apply power was increased with the steam engine. The first one was developed by Thomas Savery in 1695, and improved by Thomas Newcomen, with his Atmospheric Engine of 1712. This pumped water out of coal mines and Cornish tin mines.

The initial value of the steam engine was specific to particular locations. Population trends were far more widespread in their impact. After population growth from 1500, the English population fell between 1660 and 1690, probably, in part, due to enteric fevers and gastric diseases, but, thereafter, the population began to pick up. The population for England and Wales probably rose from 5.18 million in 1695 to 5.51 in 1711 and 5.59 in 1731 and, despite a serious demographic crisis in 1741–2, 6.20 in 1751. Thereafter, it rushed ahead, to 8.61 million in 1801.

Average age at first marriage fell from the 1730s to the 1830s, particularly from the 1730s to the 1770s. Infant mortality rates fell in the second half of the eighteenth century, maternal rates throughout the century, and adult rates particularly in the first half of the century. Marital fertility among women aged 35 and over rose from mid-century. The rise in marital fertility was probably the consequence of a fall in stillbirths, and this can be seen as evidence of rising living standards.

The rising population affected both rural and urban England. In the countryside, where the bulk of the population lived until the mid-nineteenth century, rising demand for foodstuffs benefited landlords and tenant farmers, not the landless poor. Agricultural wages remained below fifteenth-century levels in real terms. The position of the rural poor was further hit by enclosure. About a quarter of England's agricultural land was directly affected by enclosure through Acts of Parliament, of which there were 5,265 for England alone in 1750–1850. Much of the Midlands in particular was enclosed during the century. Enclosure made it easier to control the land, through leases. Rents and land values rose to the profit of landowners. Enclosure also made it easier to control people, as many peasant farmers became labourers. Enclosing landowners created wide disruption of traditional rights and expectations, common lands and routes. The propertyless lost out badly, especially with the loss of communal grazing rights. This was not a rural society of simple deference and order, but one in which aristocratic hegemony was seen as selfish by many, as custom was displaced by harsh statutory enactments. Landed society celebrated its position and spent its money on splendid stately homes and on surrounding grounds which increasingly developed away from geometric patterns and towards a naturalistic parkland style that was developed by 'Capability Brown'. This was to become part of the visual character of Englishness, a counterpoint to the hedgerows of the enclosed worked landscape. Both reflected the power relationships of the period.

Some of the rural population migrated to the towns, helping to counter the impact of the higher death rates there. The percentage of the population living in towns, defined as settlements with more than about 2,000 people, rose from about 17 in 1700 to about 27.5 in 1800. The most important by far was London. In 1700, it had more than half a million people and in 1800 more than a million, making London by then the most populous European city and over ten times larger than the second city in England. As a result, London established notions of urban life. Through its central role in the world of print, London shaped news, opinion and fashion. It was the centre of finance and government, law and trade. The West End of London established the 'classical' style of Georgian town-building. London was disproportionately important to the character of England, in so far as such a concept can be used. It helped promote the interaction of bourgeois/middle-class and aristocratic, urban and rural thinking and values, and also helped secure the influence of commercial considerations upon national policy. Furthermore, London helped to mould a national economic space, although it is clear that specialisation for the London market was accompanied by the persistence of more local economic patterns.

London was the Britain/England visited by most foreigners who praised its constitution and society and held them up as a model. Institutions and practices such as trial by jury, a free press, Parliamentary government and religious toleration were widely praised, although their problems and limitations could be overlooked.

The extent to which London offered different prospects to those of landed society was captured by George Lillo in his play *The London Merchant* (1731). This delib-

erately focused on ordinary people. 'A London apprentice ruined is our theme' declared the prologue. In the dedicatory preface to the printed version, Lillo claimed that tragedy did not lose 'its dignity, by being accommodated to the circumstances of the generality of mankind ... Plays founded on moral tales in private life may be of admirable use'.

Other towns also expanded and played a major role. In 1700, there were only five English towns with more than 10,000 inhabitants: Norwich, Bristol, Newcastle, Exeter and York. By 1800, the number (27) included important industrial and commercial centres in the north and midlands, such as Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, Sunderland, Bolton, Birmingham, Stoke and Wolverhampton. Smaller towns also expanded.

Urban economies were helped by the growing commercialisation of life and by the rise of professions such as law and medicine. The infrastructure of, and for, money transformed the nature of the domestic market and of townscapes. New covered markets and shops were opened, as were banks and insurance offices. In a world of 'things', where increasing numbers could afford to purchase objects and services of utility and pleasure, towns played a central function as providers of services as much as of commercial and industrial facilities. Theatres, assembly rooms and subscription libraries, matched shops. Parks and walks replaced old town gates and walls. This helped bring renewed cultural activity to provincial centres. The dynamic character of urban life was seen in the number of town histories published – 241 between c.1701 and 1820. This was civic pride with a purpose. Town life was presented as the cutting edge of civilisation. Towns were crucial to provincial culture and also to the vitality of the middling part of society, which was subsequently to be known as the middle class.

Towns were also the nodes on the transport system. This expanded greatly with the creation of turnpike trusts, authorized by Parliament to raise capital and charge travellers in order to construct turnpike roads. By 1770 there were 15,000 miles of turnpike road in England, and most of the country was within 12.5 miles of one. Although turnpike trusts reflected local initiatives, a national system was created. Travel was made faster and more predictable by the development of stagecoach services, the cross-breeding of fast Arab horses, the replacement of leather straps by steel coach springs, and the introduction of elliptical springs. The time of a journey from Manchester to London fell from three days in 1760 to 28 hours in 1788.

Speed was less important for the coal moved by the new canals developed from the 1750s. They cut the cost of transporting bulk goods. By 1790, the industrial areas of the Midlands were linked to the Trent, Mersey, Severn and Thames. This was not new technology, but the rate of canal construction reflected demand from a rapidly burgeoning economy as well as the availability of investment and a sense that change was attainable and could be directed. The last was most important to what is known as the Industrial Revolution. A belief in its possibility and profitability fired growth.

This was a case not only of more of the same, important as that was, but also of changes in the nature of the economy, society, and culture. The relative importance of industry as a source of wealth and employment rose, and England became less agricultural. Industrialisation contributed powerfully to a culture of improvement, a conviction that modern achievements were superior to those of former times, and an, at times, heroic exultation of the new world of production, seen for example in paintings of industrial scenes such as Coalbrookdale.

Coal and steam power were increasingly important. Coal was not only a readily transportable and controllable fuel. It was also plentifully available in many areas, although not in most of south or east England. Combined with the application of steam power to coal mining, blast furnaces, and the new rolling and slitting mills, this led to a new geography of economic activity. Industry was increasingly attracted to the coalfields, especially to the north-east, to south Lancashire and to south Staffordshire. James Watt's improvement to the steam engine made it more energy efficient and flexible. In the 1790s, developments in metallurgy made it easier to produce malleable iron. Other industries, such as textiles, also benefited greatly from technical developments which increased productivity, and created a sense of ongoing improvement. In his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith regretted expenditure on successive wars but continued:

though the profusion of government must, undoubtedly, have retarded the natural progress of England towards wealth and improvement, it has not been able to stop it. The annual produce of its land and labour is, undoubtedly, much greater at present than it was either at the Restoration [1660] or at the Revolution [1688]. The capital, therefore, annually employed in cultivating this land, and in maintaining this labour, must likewise be much greater. In the midst of all the exactions of government, this capital has been silently and gradually accumulated by the private frugality and good conduct of individuals, by their universal, continual, and uninterrupted effort to better their own condition. It is this effort, protected by law and allowed by liberty to exert itself in the manner that is most advantageous, which has maintained the progress of England towards opulence and improvement in almost all former times, and which, it is to be hoped, will do so in all future times.

This assessment of economic progress as dependent on freedom, the rule of law and limited government was to be very important to the English conception of national history and development. It failed to give much attention to the social problems arising from economic growth.

1.4 Challenges and political failure

While it is important not to exaggerate the scale of economic change, especially the number of factories, it was more extensive in Britain than elsewhere in Europe or the world. Industrialisation was to make Britain's the most powerful economy in the world, but this did not prevent a series of major political failures in the last third of the eighteenth century, including the loss of the Thirteen Colonies in the War of American Independence (1775–83) and defeat at the hands of Revolutionary France in 1793–5. The first reflected widespread, although far from universal, American suspicion of the policies and intentions of George III (1760–1820), and a British failure to adapt parliamentary sovereignty to the needs and aspirations of colonists. The British government under-estimated the extent of opposition and then found it difficult to conduct the war successfully.

Major American towns, such as New York in 1776 and Philadelphia in 1777, could be captured, but decisive victory eluded the British, and in 1777 they lost one army at Saratoga. Furthermore, after France (in 1778) and Spain (1779) entered the war, the British were in a more vulnerable position, as these powers could contest British control of the sea. In 1781, the army in Virginia was surrounded and forced to surrender at

Yorktown. This led to a collapse of confidence in the war, the fall of Lord North's government, and a willingness to concede independence. This was done in 1783. The British also had to cede territory to France and Spain.

The loss of America raises questions about the effectiveness of British government, but it was far from easy to govern transoceanic empires in a flexible fashion. It is more instructive to note the essential political stability of Britain in the 1750s–1780s. This description may seem surprising, as this was a period noted for constitutional disputes, especially in the 1760s, 1782–4 and 1788–9, and also for extra-parliamentary action, some of it radical, for example the Wilkesite agitation of the 1760s and the Yorkshire Association movement of the 1780s. However, discord was compatible with a stable political system, although a degree of ambivalence towards the notion of a loyal opposition helped to blind many contemporaries to this. Ministries were stable as long as they could avoid unforeseen problems and retain royal confidence. They did not lose general elections. Lord North, Prime Minister 1770–82, won the elections of 1774 and 1780, but was brought down in March 1782 by his inability to secure a satisfactory solution to the American Revolution.

William Pitt the Younger, Prime Minister 1783–1801 and 1804–6, won the elections of 1784, 1790 and 1796, but nearly fell in 1788–9 due to George III's apparent madness, and resigned in 1801 because he could not persuade George to accept Catholic emancipation, giving votes to Catholics as part of a process of extending full civil rights. Pitt the Younger brought an important measure of stability after the political chaos and general loss of confidence of 1782–3. He revived government finances and helped ensure a revival of British international influence. In 1787, British-encouraged Prussian intervention in the United Provinces (the modern Netherlands) overthrew the pro-French Dutch government.

More generally, British government relied on co-operation with the socio-political elite, and lacked the substantial bureaucracy and well-developed bureaucratic ethos that would have been necessary had they sought to operate without such co-operation. This co-operation extended to newly prominent social and economic interests. They were incorporated into the state, while those who were not offered incorporation in large part found their aspirations contained and their interests treated in terms of elite paternalism..

The major challenge to this system came from the French Revolution. This began in 1789, and aroused widespread interest in England. As the revolution became more radical, very clearly so from 1791, most of this interest became more hostile to the Revolution. The French threat to Britain's Dutch ally in the winter of 1792–3, led in 1793 to the outbreak of war. Both the domestic response and the war itself caused major problems. Radicalism was encouraged by the example of France. This led both to government action and, from 1792, to a wave of loyalism in England. The government sought to suppress radical organisations. Habeas Corpus was suspended, radicals were tried for sedition, and their newspapers suffered from the rise in newspaper duty. The Treasonable Practices Act and Seditious Meetings Act of 1795 sought to prevent denunciations of the constitution, and large unlicensed meetings. These measures hindered the radical societies.

Radicalism was weakened by its association with France. Parliamentary reform, which had been widely supported in the 1780s, was not pressed forward. The francophile and increasingly radical Earl of Shelburne, who had been Prime Minister in 1782–3, found that his ideas were increasingly unpopular. In 1787, he had written, 'it is the Public which

decides upon measures with us'; but this public was not identical with the population. In 1790, the total electorate in England was only about 300,000. In 1791, Shelburne praised the French National Assembly for determining that the right of making peace and war came from the nation, not the Crown, and he urged the British government to 'follow the example of trusting the people'. In 1798, Shelburne pressed the Lords for parliamentary reform 'while it could be done gradually, and not to delay its necessity till it would burst all bounds'. Yet, the political world had become more conservative and cautious thanks to the Revolution. Reform was retarded. Signs of popular agitation were increasingly viewed with suspicion. Trade unions were hindered by the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800.

These moves owed much to the acute problems of the war years. The cost and economic disruption of the war led to inflation, the collapse of the gold standard of financial exchange which supported the issue of paper currency by the Bank of England (1797), the introduction of income tax (1799), the stagnation of average real wages, and widespread hardship, particularly in the famine years of 1795–6 and 1799–1801. These problems were accentuated by the benefits that others, such as farmers, drew from the economic strains of the period. Aside from serious food rioting, there were also, in 1797, naval mutinies that owed much to anger over pay and conditions. The mutinies threatened national security.

Yet, despite this, the country did not collapse. The greater popularity of George III in the 1790s helped. He cultivated the image of being a father to all and did not inspire the negative feelings that focused on his French and Spanish counterparts. The association of radicalism with the French also helped to damn it for most people, not least because of the anarchy, terror and irreligion associated with the revolution. Patriotism received a new boost in the lengthy struggle, which was less divisive than the War of American Independence. In response to the French Revolutionaries and their allies, nationalism was defined in a conservative fashion, and conservatism was increasingly nationalist in tone and content. War with France was justified on moral grounds. Loyalism was a genuine mass movement. The widespread volunteer movement helped raise forces to repel any planned invasion. In the 1800s, *God Save the King* came to be called the national anthem.

The war sorely tested Britain. In July 1791, London audiences applauded the final lines of George Colman's new play *The Surrender of Calais*:

Rear, rear our English banner high
In token proud of victory!
Where'er our god of battle strides
Loud sound the trump of fame!
Where'er the English warrior rides,
May laurelled conquest grace his name.

This was not to be the experience of British forces when war broke out in 1793.

In 1794, the British were driven from the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium), in 1795 the French over-ran the United Provinces, and from 1796 Britain was threatened by invasion. Despite important naval victories, especially the Glorious First of June (1794), Cape St Vincent (1797), the Nile (1798), and Copenhagen (1801), in 1802 the government had to accept the Peace of Amiens which left Britain isolated and France dominant in western Europe.

The abortive Irish rising of 1798 and the unsuccessful French attempt to intervene encouraged an Act of Union between Britain and Ireland in 1800; the Act came into effect

on 1 January 1801. Following the 1707 Act of Union between England and Scotland, it created a single state for the entire British Isles, although it was to have only limited success in producing a lasting primary British identity. Alongside such an identity, national allegiances remained, particularly in Ireland.

Napoleon had seized power in France in 1799, and in 1803 distrust of his aggressive expansionism led to a resumption of the conflict. In the face of preparations for invasion, volunteer units manoeuvred along the south coast. In 1805, the French tried to achieve a covering naval superiority in the Channel, but their complex scheme was mishandled and thwarted by an alert British response. Cancelling his invasion plans, Napoleon turned east to attack Austria. En route from Cadiz for Italy, the Franco-Spanish fleet was intercepted off Cape Trafalgar by Horatio Nelson on 21 October 1805, and heavily defeated, with the loss of 19 ships of the line, in the greatest of all British naval victories. Nelson, however, died in the moment of triumph.

Trafalgar did not prevent Napoleon from defeating Austria (1805) and Prussia (1806). French control of much of Continental Europe helped encourage a sense of British distinctiveness and superiority. Napoleon then sought to exclude Britain from European trade. This proved impossible, but indicated the threat posed by French dominance. Napoleon's attempt to impose control on Spain and Portugal provoked bitter resistance from 1808 which was aided by British troops. Initially, the British struggled to protect Portugal, but they were increasingly able to challenge the French position in Spain. By late 1813, the Duke of Wellington was leading the British army into south-west France. By then, Napoleon had been defeated in Russia (1812) and Germany (1813). With France invaded in early 1814, Napoleon was forced to abdicate. He sought to regain power in 1815, but on 18 June was defeated at Waterloo by an Allied army under Wellington in which the British played a key role. By then Britain was dominant through much of the transoceanic European world.

1.5 Conclusion

Countries do not change overnight at the passing of one century and the beginning of another. Indeed, many of the key aspects of change that we associate with the nineteenth century had their roots deep in the previous period; there were also key continuities. Urban and industrial growth and social change had begun to make themselves felt prior to 1800. For ten years or more either side of that same date, Britain was consumed by a sense of unease, born from the long-running effects of the French Revolution but also from the demands for reform of its own people. The French Revolution was accompanied by fears that the same forces might be at work in Britain; even following Napoleon's final exile in 1815, the British state continued to act as though revolution was a possibility. Peterloo in 1819 and the Cato Street Conspiracy (1820) were just two of many events which added a certain authenticity to these fears. As we shall see the book unfolds, however, the revolutionary threat in Britain was limited; change was a feature of life but so too was a high degree of social stability and what we might call 'managed' change. Government would grow; popular participation in politics would become a feature of life; the urban world would expand massively; Britain's Empire would straddle the globe. It is important to remember, however, that the men and women of the eighteenth century had (admittedly reduced) experiences of these very same things, too.

Summary

- ◆ It is possible to offer very different accounts of eighteenth-century Britain.
- ◆ Alongside a stress on the rise of a rational, genteel 'middle class' society centred in and on the growing towns, less optimistic facets can be emphasized.
- ◆ The political background was not as stable as is sometimes thought, but Britain avoided revolution.
- ◆ The century closed with defeat abroad and social tension at home.
- ◆ Aspects of continuity as well as of change mark out the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Points to discuss

- ◆ How far was there major change prior to the nineteenth century?
- ◆ How stable was the eighteenth-century political system?
- ◆ Why did Britain avoid a revolution comparable to that in France?

References and further reading

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