

TRANSACTIONS OF THE ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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BRITAIN AND THE WORLD IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: I, RESHAPING THE EMPIRE

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BY the end of the eighteenth century Britain was a world power on a scale that none of her European rivals could match.¹ Not only did she rule a great empire, but the reach of expeditionary forces from either Britain itself or from British India stretched from the River Plate to the Moluccas in eastern Indonesia. Britain's overseas trade had developed a strongly global orientation: she was the leading distributor of tropical produce throughout the world and in the last years of the century about four-fifths of her exports were going outside Europe.² Britain was at the centre of inter-continental movements of people, not only exporting her own population but shipping almost as many Africans across the Atlantic during the eighteenth century as all the other carriers put together.³ It is not surprising therefore that British historians have searched for the qualities that marked out eighteenth-century Britain's exceptionalism on a world stage. Notable books have stressed, not only the dynamism of the British economy, but developments such as the rise of Britain's 'fiscal-military state'⁴ or the forging of a sense of British national identity behind war and empire overseas.⁵

¹ This paper is greatly indebted to work of the scholars who have contributed to the *Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. II, *The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998).

² Phyllis Deane and W. A. Cole, *British Economic Growth 1688–1959, Trends and Structures*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1969), 86.

³ David Richardson, 'Slave Exports from West and West-Central Africa; 1700–1810: New Estimates of Volume and Distribution', *Journal of African History*, XXX (1989), 11.

⁴ John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State 1688–1783* (1989).

⁵ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven, 1992).

Yet formidable as the British overseas undoubtedly were in European terms, it would be a mistake to read back too many nineteenth-century scenarios even into the later eighteenth century. Large parts of the world were still wholly beyond the reach of effective British commercial let alone military penetration, and it hardly needs saying that the history of the British empire was a chequered one rather than a story of uninterrupted growth. Against all contemporary expectations, empire in North America ended in humiliating defeat at about the same time that a great territorial empire was coming into existence in the apparently unpromising soil of India. Assessment of Britain's role in the world therefore needs to take account of the constraints and limitations that shaped it as well as of the British strengths that gave it its dynamism. It thus seems to require other dimensions as well as the British one. Eighteenth-century historians have much to learn from historians of later imperialism, whose work seeks to explain the extent of empire or world-wide influence in terms of conditions in the non-European world as well as those in Britain or Europe.

Such an approach seems to be particularly relevant to what will be the central theme of this address, the problem of why the British empire began to change course from the mid-eighteenth century, as territorial empire failed in America but succeeded in Asia. As late as the Seven Years War, empire in North America appeared to be a resounding success, not only in economic terms, as the rapidly growing colonial population consumed more and more British exports as well as contributing a major share to Britain's re-export trade in tropical commodities, but also in military and in ideological terms. Large numbers of American troops enlisted for the war. Even as the slide towards resistance and insurrection was beginning, American commitment to British values, at least as they interpreted them, and to their conception of a British empire, seemed to be unshaken. By contrast, for most of the eighteenth century, the metamorphosis of a British presence in India that was confined to the East India Company and its few trading enclaves into a territorial empire seemed utterly inconceivable. For Europeans to presume to displace the great Mughals over sizeable parts of their empire would have seemed to be a laughable proposition and in any case, an Indian population, as the supposedly cowed victims of immemorial despotism assumed to be totally alien to British *mores*, would be both improbable and unwelcome subjects for an empire conceived as one of freeborn British people.

Whatever British preferences may have been, the future of the empire ultimately depended on what was possible in America and India. Gordon S. Wood in his distinguished book on *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* is only the most recent of many scholars who have emphasised the role of change within the colonies in bringing down

the British empire in America. He argues that, while colonial America in mid-century might appear to be increasingly amenable to government from afar, as it became more hierarchically stratified and its elites became more Anglicised, in reality a 'democratic revolution' was gathering pace that was 'changing everything'. It was to sweep away imperial authority as it radically altered the contours of American society.⁶ While change in America undermined empire, change in India seems to have made it possible. Old stereotypes about an unchanging pre-modern Asia now have no standing. Professor Bayly, who has contributed so much to our understanding of them, has written about 'the indigenous processes that made empire possible'.⁷ Recent historians of eighteenth-century India have tried to show that it was far from being a society in dissolution, as used generally to be supposed. The rulers of the regional states that succeeded to the authority of the Mughal emperors have been depicted as building up administrative and military structures on which the East India Company and its servants could batten to create new colonial regimes. Some of those who had served the new Indian states evidently found no great difficulty in transferring their allegiance to the British. While men like George Washington, Benjamin Franklin or Henry Laurens, who had applied their military, administrative or commercial skills to the service of the British empire as late as the Seven Years War, were within a few years to become that empire's enemies, at almost the same time it was acquiring a new set of allies, also with military, administrative and commercial skills. Men with names like Yusuf Khan, Ganga Govind Singh or Manohar Das have a right to be put alongside Robert Clive or Warren Hastings as the creators of a British Indian empire.

If developments in North America and India were making European empires of rule increasingly difficult to sustain on one side of the globe, while possibilities of empire, previously undreamed of, were opening up on the other side, what of the role of the British themselves? Were they no more than the victims or beneficiaries of processes beyond their control? To go to that extreme would surely be to fly in the face of all the evidence about Britain's political, economic and military muscle, and of her ambitions, even if the outcome of those ambitions was not always what was intended. Britain's rulers in the eighteenth century had expectations of what was involved in empire which changed during the course of the century. Attempts to give effect to changing expectations had important consequences. It is arguable that an empire as it was operating in the early eighteenth century could have retained the loyalty of the colonial elites and thus have survived at least some

⁶ (New York, 1991), 124 ff.

⁷ *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World 1780-1830* (1989), 13.

degree of social upheaval in America. Until it was too late and armed resistance had actually broken out, few American notables were, however, willing to exert themselves to preserve the kind of empire that the British seemed to be intent on imposing on them in the 1760s and 1770s. On the other hand, against all expectations, it proved possible to create such an empire in India, significant numbers of Indians of wealth and standing being willing to commit themselves to its support.

I

There is a long-standing debate about change and continuity in eighteenth-century attitudes to empire, which until recently has been almost entirely confined to the thirteen colonies. The case for continuity throughout the century has obvious attractions. From a metropolitan perspective, the configuration of the landed and commercial elite, who wielded power from the late seventeenth until well into the nineteenth century changed little and their underlying objectives can be presumed to have remained more or less constant.⁸ More concretely, the Navigation Acts, which defined the commercial purposes of empire, survived with no fundamental change right through the century. Nevertheless, historians have argued for major changes of course within these parameters. The origins of a second British empire have been sought even before the loss of America.⁹ Scholars like C. M. Andrews and Lawrence Henry Gipson saw a new 'imperialism', based on rule over territory and people replacing in mid-century what they called the 'mercantilism' of trade regulation as the guiding principle at least of the British American empire.¹⁰ This view has recently been restated by Daniel Baugh.¹¹

If concepts such as a new imperialism or a second British empire seem to imply both too sharp and too purposeful a break to be appropriate for the changes that were occurring in mid-century, there can be little doubt that attitudes were changing significantly. In crude outline, the contribution from colonies was being given a much higher

⁸ This is the theme of P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688–1914* (1993), ch. 2.

⁹ Vincent T. Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire 1763–1793*, vol. I, *Discovery and Revolution* (1952), 3.

¹⁰ Charles M. Andrews, *The Colonial Background to the American Revolution: Four Essays in American Colonial History* (New Haven, 1924), 125; Lawrence Henry Gipson, *The British Empire before the American Revolution*, vol. XIII, *The Triumphant Empire: The Empire Beyond the Storm* (New York, 1967), 182.

¹¹ 'Maritime Strength and Atlantic Commerce: The Uses of "a Grand Marine Empire"', in Lawrence Stone, ed., *An Imperial State at War: Britain from 1689 to 1815* (1994), 210.

place in calculations about Britain's prosperity and, crucially, about her security. Enhanced expectations about the importance of colonies led to an increasing concern that metropolitan authority should be effectively exerted over them. At the same time new territorial acquisitions were making the empire much more diverse ethnically and new patterns of governance were of necessity being devised for new territories.

The British empire of the first half of the eighteenth century developed a powerful rhetoric of liberty. This rhetoric was embodied not merely in conventional political writing but also, as Karen O'Brien has demonstrated for Britain¹² and David Shields for the American colonies,¹³ in poetry. The British empire was depicted as an empire over the seas as distinct from the territorial empires of conquest established by imperial Rome or by Spain and to which France was alleged now to be aspiring. Whereas Britain's old rivals for maritime empire, the Dutch were accused of seeking to confine and restrict trade to their own advantage, the British dominion of the seas was conceived, as Dr O'Brien puts it, as a 'cosmopolitan fantasy of the empire as the bringer of a universal British peace and free trade in an era of navigation acts and continuous warfare'.¹⁴ Poets were echoed by writers on political economy, who believed that 'The Power attained either by Policy or Arms, is but of short Continuance, in Comparison to what is acquired by Trade. Commerce is founded on Industry and cherished by Freedom.'¹⁵ Under the peaceful sway of the British empire over the seas, commerce would bring the peoples of the world together for their mutual benefit.

Rhetoric and practice were of course different things. This was indeed the age of restrictive navigation acts and of periodic maritime war. Nevertheless, there is an element of truth, however distorted and exaggerated, behind the rhetoric of British commitment to peaceful dominion of the seas in the first half of the eighteenth century. The concept of a British blue-water strategy, as formulated by Daniel Baugh, is a helpful one, so long as it is used with the precision that he uses it. He sees it as a strategy for national defence through the deployment of naval power predominantly in European waters. Colonial trades were to be defended because they contributed a large proportion of the resources needed to sustain that naval power.¹⁶ A blue-water strategy

¹² 'Protestantism and the Poetry of Empire' in Jeremy Black, ed., *Culture and Society in Eighteenth-century Britain* (Manchester, 1997), 146–62.

¹³ *Oracles of Empire: Poetry, Politics and Commerce in British America 1690–1750* (Chicago, 1990).

¹⁴ 'Protestantism and Poetry', 147.

¹⁵ John Harris, ed., John Campbell, *Navigantium atque Itinerarium Biblioteka; or a Compleat Collection of Voyages and Travels*, 2 vols. (1744–8), I, p. vii.

¹⁶ 'Great Britain's "Blue-Water" Policy, 1689–1815', *International History Review*, X (1988), 33–58.

was not, however, aimed at imposing a naval hegemony throughout the world. This would have been beyond Britain's capacity and was not attempted. There was no regular deployment of warships in Asia before the 1760s or on the West African coast at any time in the century. Even in the Caribbean the peace-time British naval presence was a limited one.

British trade throughout much of the world was thus of necessity conducted outside any imperial context. In Asia for most of the eighteenth century the British were participants in an Asian commercial economy linked to Europe but by no means dependent on it. British trade in textiles or tea was made possible not by force but by the existence of highly organised cash cropping and artisan production on which the British could draw through the expertise of Asian merchants. On the West African coast the British were the largest purchasers of slaves, but there too they were dependent on indigenous merchants, whose prices they could not regulate and who could not be made to submit to their conditions. Even dealings with other European colonies usually took place without much coercion on the British side. The British could exploit their privileged position in Portugal to get access to the Brazilian market and to Brazilian gold in return. Otherwise, such success as the British enjoyed in Latin America largely depended on their ability to meet the needs of the creole communities in competition with other European suppliers, notably the French.

Overseas colonies of British subjects who developed new sources of commodities for Britain and widened the market for British manufactures were seen as an integral part of the early eighteenth-century empire of the seas. Such colonies had their place in the rhetoric of dominion based on liberty. They were to enjoy the rights of their fellow citizens at home. They were, as Charles Davenant put it, 'a free people in point of government' and colonial governors must accept that their subjects 'enjoy the rights and liberties of Englishmen, though not in England'.¹⁷ Authoritarian rule and military garrisons were deemed incompatible with commercially flourishing English colonies.

Rhetoric and reality did not again entirely coincide. If overt designs of Stuart centralisation had perforce to be shelved after 1689, officials throughout the first half of the eighteenth century devised a succession of plans for tighter control over colonies. That these plans were not implemented seems to have owed much more to calculations about domestic British politics than to any ideological commitment by ministers to the liberties of colonial populations or even to any belief on their part that neglect was salutary. The practical consequences of

¹⁷ 'Discourse on the Plantation Trade', in Charles Whitworth, ed., *The Political and Commercial Works of Charles D'Avenant*, 5 vols. (1771), II, 34-5.

relative neglect were, however, that colonies enjoyed a high level of autonomy through their Assemblies. The British fiscal-military state was emphatically not exported across the Atlantic. Metropolitan authority had very limited resources in money, military manpower or official positions that were not dependent on the free grant of colonial Assemblies. Practice was elevated into principle as an American theory of an imperial constitution evolved, based on the assumption that the rights of Englishmen applied in their totality to the colonial populations and that colonial legislatures enjoyed a competence that excluded the British parliament.¹⁸ The rhetoric of an empire of freedom was enthusiastically adopted in the colonies as signifying a partnership of equals for the common objectives of commercial prosperity and the preservation of Protestantism and liberty through the containment of supposed Bourbon aggression.

II

For all its obvious distortions of reality, the rhetoric of a peaceful dominion of the seas founded on liberty helped to consolidate an Atlantic empire at least for the first fifty years of the eighteenth century. It could not, however, survive the strains of the great wars of mid-century and the consequences that were to follow from success in war. A new conceptualising of empire and a different set of imperial practices were to take its place.

The war with Spain that began in 1739 could still be invested with traditional libertarian rhetoric, as vindicating British freedom against Spanish oppression abroad and Walpolean oligarchy at home.¹⁹ Projects for plundering the Spanish Main and seizing new colonies invoked the spirit of the great Elizabethan raids or of Cromwell's Western Design. War with Spain merged, however, into war with France in 1744. Twenty years of war or hostile confrontation followed, which were irrevocably to change the nature of the British empire.

Spanish possessions were presented in British propaganda as objects ripe for plunder: in British demonology France was portrayed as a standing threat to 'the Liberties of Europe' and above all to Britain herself, through a French invasion or the incitement of disaffection in Scotland or Ireland. Moreover, after the formal establishment of peace

¹⁸This is the theme of Jack P. Greene, *Peripheries and Center: Constitutional Development in the Extended Politics of the British Empire and the United States 1607-1788* (Athens, Ga., 1986), Book One.

¹⁹Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge, 1995), 140-65.

in 1748 France still seemed to be menacing British interests throughout the world. Admiral Vernon, hero of the war against Spain, warned in 1749 that the French would be masters of the British sugar colonies within two years and that they would then be able to force the North American colonies to put themselves under French protection.²⁰ Ministers believed that French incursions into Nova Scotia and the Ohio valley were a dire threat to British North America. The East India Company warned that the French were trying to close down their trade in southern India.

The Walpole ministry had yielded to some extent to outside pressure in going to war with Spain in 1739.²¹ Ministers were also subjected to pressure in the 1750s, but they had no inclination whatsoever to make concessions to the French overseas. The crucial importance to Britain of colonies and long-distance trades had become an article of faith for them. They did not need to be taught this by Pitt or by any other opposition patriot. In 1750 Newcastle called the 'Northern Colonies ... inestimable to us ... [I]f we lose our American Possessions; or the Influence and Weight of them in Time of Peace' he added, 'France will, with great Ease, make War with us whenever they please hereafter.'²² By 1754 he was convinced that the French were determined to pen the British colonies into a narrow strip along the sea. 'No War can be worse for this Country, than the Suffering such Insults ... That is what We must not, We will not suffer.'²³ The stake in North America was spelt out in 1755 by Thomas Robinson, then Secretary of State, in papers justifying hostilities: one-third of British exports, naval stores, 'vast Fleets of Merchant Ships, and consequently an Increase in Seamen', a 'vast excess' of American commodities to re-export to foreigners, an influx of silver and gold from the colonial trade with Spanish and Portuguese America. Ultimately 'the whole System of public Credit in this Country' was linked to 'American Revenues and Remittances'.²⁴ Lord Holderness, the minister who chiefly concerned himself with efforts to counter the French in Asia, confessed that, although he had difficulty in persuading his colleagues to give their full attention to India, he was 'too sensible of the consequences of our Trade in India to suffer it to be diminished, much less lost'.²⁵ The fear

²⁰ Leo F. Stock ed., *Proceedings and Debates in the British Parliaments respecting North America*, 5 vols. (Washington, 1924-41), V, 369.

²¹ See discussion in Philip Woodfine, 'The Anglo-Spanish War of 1739', in Jeremy Black, ed., *The Origins of War in Early Modern Europe* (Edinburgh, 1987), 185-207.

²² Cited in T.R. Clayton, 'The Duke of Newcastle, the Earl of Halifax and the American Origins of the Seven Years War', *Historical Journal*, XXIV (1981), 576.

²³ Letter to Albermarle, 5 Sept. 1754, B[ritish] L[ibrary], Add MS 32850, ff. 218-19.

²⁴ Letter to Holderness with enclosures, 29 Aug. 1755, BL, Egerton MS 3432, ff. 292-8.

²⁵ Letter to R. Orme, 14 Oct. 1755, BL, Egerton MS 3488, f. 95.

was that the interruption of colonial trades would lead to a national bankruptcy and therefore to the collapse of the government's capacity to raise loans to finance Britain's defence. This spectre was frequently to be invoked in the future. It was used to justify coercing America in the 1770s and the huge deployment of force in the West Indies in the 1790s.

Failure in the early years of the war stimulated a vigorous anti-aristocratic critique of those entrusted with power, but success rallied opinion behind the government.²⁶ By 1758 an American observer believed that 'the Court has of late shown great regard to the Voice of the People'. He thought that 'the national Resentment was never carried so high since the days of our Edwards and Henrys ... [B]e the issue what it will our nation seems ready to embrace it, for a sort of Enthusiasm seems to possess all ranks, either to conquer or die.'²⁷ Many died but great conquests were of course made and a good proportion of them were kept at the peace of 1763.

III

The long confrontation with France transformed the empire that emerged from the Seven Years War. The rationale of resorting to arms in the 1750s had been a defensive one: vital overseas assets had to be protected against French aggression. Success inevitably turned the Seven Years War from a defensive war into one of conquest, even if conquest was almost invariably justified in terms of the need to guarantee security against any future French aggression rather than the seizure of territory for its own sake. British gains at the peace, however, far exceeded even the most generous interpretation of what was needed to guarantee the security of existing interests. In North America Britain now had 'a tract of continent of immense extent' reaching nearly to 'the Russian and Chinese dominions', whose wealth and power this new dominion was likely one day to match.²⁸ Gains had been made in the West Indies and on the West African coast. The East India Company had taken territory around Madras and Calcutta as the reward for its interventions in Indian politics and it was becoming clear that the peace in 1763 had not produced stability in India. The Company's grip on Bengal was tightening and in 1765 responsibility for the whole province and its millions of people was transferred to it.

²⁶ Wilson, *Sense of the People*, 178–205.

²⁷ *Letters and Papers of Cadwallader Colden*, vol. V, *Collections of the New York Historical Society for the Year 1921* (1923), 256–7.

²⁸ *Annual Register for the Year 1763*, 15.

New territorial acquisitions fundamentally changed the ethnic composition of the British empire that was in any case ceasing to be an exclusively English one, as Scots and Irish came to dominate emigration from the British Isles at every level from indentured servant to colonial governor.²⁹ After 1763 the British ruled French communities in Canada and Grenada, French creole Africans in Senegal and Caribs in St Vincent and Dominica. They had acquired direct responsibility for an unknown number of Native Americans living outside the boundaries of the existing colonies. Above all, Indians were coming under British rule in vast numbers in Bengal and the adjacent provinces.

Ethnic diversity produced religious diversity and diversity of law and of systems of governance. In the old empire, with limited exceptions, such as Minorca, authority had been devolved to representative bodies of Protestants, mainly of British descent, using variants on English common law. After 1763 the British had to cope with colonial populations in which there was a large Catholic majority, accustomed to French law and for whom representative government was deemed inappropriate. This was some kind of preparation for the challenge to imperial statecraft offered by dominion in India, which was the total antithesis of all the principles of the old empire: despotic rule over a huge non-Christian population, of whose religious festivals and temples the British would become patrons and whose systems of law and land tenure they would endeavour to comprehend and to apply.

The response of British governments and of a wider public to a changed empire was slow and uneven. There was no coherent review of imperial policy, a concept that was hardly recognised. New policies were adapted piecemeal, as specific needs seemed to dictate. Public debate was fitful and unfocused, although there was at least a bemused recognition of unprecedented problems on which the conventional wisdom of the classical past offered little guidance.³⁰ If new concepts of empire were slow to emerge, language and terminology began to change, as those associated with a dominion of the seas based on liberty no longer seemed appropriate.

By 1763 the term 'British empire in America' was well established usage. Distinctions seem, however, generally to have been made between 'empire' in America and British 'establishments' or 'settlements' in Africa or Asia.³¹ The expression generally applied to the terms relating to India in the 1763 Peace was that they had given the British a

²⁹ H. V. Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise and the Making of the British Overseas Empire 1688–1775* (Basingstoke, 1996), ch. 7.

³⁰ Peter N. Miller, *Defining the Common Good: Empire, Religion and Philosophy in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 1994), 179–94.

³¹ Edinburgh address to King, *London Gazette*, 17–21 May 1763.

'superiority' over the French, but there was as yet no talk of an eastern empire. The Bengal *diwani* was clearly much more than a superiority. Whether Bengal after 1765 had become an integral part of the British empire was, however, a difficult question. In theory it remained a province of the Mughal empire, aspects of whose administration had been entrusted to a private British corporation, not to the British state. But in spite of the difficulties of the lawyers and of the failure of administrations to obtain a clear definition of right from parliament, there seemed to be no escaping the fact that, as far as the Mughal emperor was concerned, as one commentator put it, 'the government of the country is dissolved, the sovereignty annihilated'. While it might be expedient for Bengal to be administered by a private body, 'sovereignty and dominion' could only now be vested in the crown.³² In 1769 a pamphleteer wrote of 'the Company's dominions in the East' as being 'part of the British Empire'.³³ Edmund Burke was one of those who was quick to recognise this. In 1777 he wrote of 'the natives of *Hindustan* and those of *Virginia*' as equally part of that 'comprehensive dominion which the divine Providence has put into our hands'.³⁴

Recognition that Britain was now at the centre of a single world-wide territorial empire was not matched by any systematic design to subject it to an effective central authority. Nevertheless, what were seen as practical imperatives, reinforced by the ideological inclinations of British politicians, meant that things would not be left as they had been. Initiatives to strengthen metropolitan authority were launched, if in a haphazard and uncoordinated way. Enough was, however, done to signal what seemed to be a change in the character of the empire and to plunge the North American colonies into crisis.

The principles enunciated in the run-up to war in the 1750s remained sacrosanct for the rest of the century. The established colonial trades were of fundamental importance for the British economy and therefore for Britain's standing as a European power and ultimately for her national security. Commercial regulations to maximise the advantages of empire must therefore be maintained and colonies must be defended. Britain had gone to war to protect the North American and the West Indian colonies and the East India trade. Although the economic benefits of the new acquisitions being made in India for long seemed

³² Thomas Pownall, *The Right, Interest and Duty of Government as Concerned in the Affairs of the East India Company* [1773], pp. 25–6.

³³ Cited in H. V. Bowen, *Revenue and Reform: The Indian Problem in British Politics 1757–73* (Cambridge, 1991), 25.

³⁴ Warren M. Elofson and John A. Woods, eds., *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. III, *Party, Parliament, and the American War 1774–1780* (Oxford, 1996), 316.

equivocal and the process of subordinating parts of India's economy to Britain's needs was a slow one, the defence of India now also became a major national concern. India was added to North America and the West Indies as a place where a British defeat would produce a national bankruptcy.³⁵ There could be no relaxing of vigilance on any front after 1763. In the first place, a Bourbon *revanche* was anticipated and then the threat seemed to come from internal disaffection in the American colonies. The loss of the thirteen colonies in no way diminished the importance attached to the West Indies. Saving them became the highest priority of the American War once the French became involved and they were still regarded as essential for sustaining Britain's European war effort in the 1790s.³⁶

Effective commercial regulation and defence of Britain's overseas interests required not only obedience but contributions from the North American and West Indian colonial populations and from the East India Company. If these were not freely given, what was at stake was deemed to be so important that metropolitan authority would have to be exerted to enforce them. The means to make metropolitan authority effective where this was lacking had therefore to be ensured. This was the main impulse behind such attempts as were made to reform the working of the empire.

Reforms were not only deemed a matter of state necessity; they were also congenial to the way of thinking of most of the politicians, civil servants or military men who took an interest in colonies. There is much evidence of impatience with autonomies and privileges that obstructed the uniform working of government. There was an increasing stress on the need for obedience to properly constituted authority, that is to an executive bound by law and responsible to a sovereign parliament whose powers extended to regulating the whole empire if necessary. An older language which stressed the corruption of power and the need to guard against it through the strict observance of customary rights and the sanctity of charters was regarded as being theoretically impeccable but of little practical relevance. Rights could not be in danger from a parliament whose members were confident that they could discern the 'common good' and apply it the whole empire.³⁷ Danger now lay not in the abuse of state power, but in its weakness and the threats to it from local autonomies and popular claims that undermined the balance of the constitution. There could be no rational fear that Britain might slide towards a French style of absolutism; what must be avoided was a quite different

³⁵ Bowen, *Revenue and Reform*, 22–3.

³⁶ Michael Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar and Seapower. The British Expeditions to the West Indies in the War against Revolutionary France* (Oxford, 1987).

³⁷ Miller, *Defining the Common Good*, 159–69.

fate, that of the Dutch, whose 'sub-divisions of power' had brought 'Holland to its destruction'.³⁸

The arguments used in 1760 when legislation from Pennsylvania was being considered by the Board of Trade are typical of many examples of new thinking about colonial government. Pennsylvania was accused by the crown law officers, acting for the Penn family, of trying to 'establish in place of his Majesty's government a democracy, if not an oligarchy'. The fault went back to its origins. William Penn should not have been permitted to 'grant so great powers to the Assembly'. The situation in Pennsylvania ought to be referred to parliament. The Board of Trade agreed that maintaining 'the just Prerogatives of the Crown' was essential for the 'Tranquillity of the Province itself' and for its continuing 'Dependence upon the Mother country'.³⁹

Neither Pennsylvania nor other chartered colonies, such as Rhode Island and Connecticut, regarded as particularly flagrant offenders, were ever brought before parliament. Only one attack was made on colonial chartered rights, the attempt to impose modifications on Massachusetts in 1774. Only in the new colony of Quebec was a serious attempt made to create an executive that was not dependent on an elected legislature. Elsewhere, the Townshend Duties of 1767 succeeded in endowing no more than a handful of offices with salaries from parliamentary taxes.

If very little was achieved in reforming imperial structures, British governments still did enough to give what were taken to be unmistakable indications of the kind of empire that they now envisaged. This seemed to be a very different one from the partnership of equals in a dominion over the seas of early eighteenth-century rhetoric.

It was clearly to be an empire over which parliament's authority could not be questioned. Parliament had proclaimed its sovereignty in the Declaratory Act of 1766. It had voted taxes to be paid by the colonies. The Jamaica Assembly was threatened in 1765 that if it withheld supply, the House of Commons vote them in its place.⁴⁰ New York's legislature faced suspension by an act of 1767. Attempts by the colonies to explain their objections to measures like the Stamp Act

³⁸ Speech of Charles Yorke, 3 Feb. 1766, in R. C. Simmons and P. D. G. Thomas, eds., *Proceedings and Debates of the British Parliaments Respecting North America*, 6 vols. (Milwood, NY, 1982–89), II, 137.

³⁹ See the report of the Board of Trade of 24 June 1760 in Leonard W. Labaree *et al.* eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 27 vols. to date (New Haven, 1959–), IX, 171–2 and the accounts of the hearings in T. Penn's letters to J. Hamilton, 24 May, 6 June 1760, American Philosophical Society, MS 974.8 P 36c.

⁴⁰ Jack P. Greene, 'The Jamaica Privilege Controversy, 1764–66: An Episode in the Process of Constitutional Definition in the Early Modern British Empire', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, XXII (1994), 30.

were in the view of many Americans rejected by the Commons with 'an air both of severity and contempt'.⁴¹

The new empire was to have a centralised system of defence. In the capture of Louisbourg in 1745 the New England provincials had acted in partnership with the Royal Navy and had been generously reimbursed by parliament and honoured for their pains. Great numbers of provincials had been raised during the Seven Years War. Pitt again had ensured that reimbursement was paid, but the sense of partnership had worn somewhat thin as the role of the British regulars became increasingly dominant and American officers lost their independent commands. After the war America lost its autonomy altogether in matters of defence. It was granted a British commander-in-chief with a garrison of regulars for which it was intended that Americans should pay part of the cost.

The empire had always been held together by commercial regulations. After 1763 these were revised and their enforcement was strengthened with new regulations and new Admiralty courts and Boards of Customs. While extolling the empire as a commercial partnership, Americans complained about changes that they regarded as damaging to them and made without adequate consultation. 'Our Opinions or Inclinations, if they had been known, would perhaps have weigh'd but little among you', Franklin wrote bitterly. 'We are in your Hands as clay in the Hands of the Potter.'⁴²

British ministers conscientiously saw themselves as custodians in a dangerous world of the common good for an empire which required co-ordination of its defence and commerce and an undisputed source of authority to enforce that co-ordination where necessary. Without an effective state apparatus in the colonies they had, however, no alternative but to rely on the support of local elites to give effect to their decisions. The need for such allies was the more urgent in a time of social upheaval caused by massive population increase and an economy undergoing rapid if uneven growth. Unfortunately for them, allies willing to support such policies, however reasonable they might seem in Britain, could not be found. Men who were as used to exercising power over their communities as the British political leaders were over theirs were deeply suspicious of what seemed to be an intrusive metropolitan government and parliament.

The Stamp Act riots of 1765 starkly revealed the total incapacity of British authority to enforce any measure that went against the grain of American opinion. 'The present weakness of the American government is amazing', wrote Governor Bernard of Massachusetts. 'In the case of

⁴¹ J. Watts to R. Monckton, 1 June 1765, Houghton Library, Harvard, Sparks MS 38, f. 30.

⁴² Letter to P. Collinson, 30 April 1764, *Franklin Papers*, XI, 181.

a popular tumult I can't command ten men that can be depended upon.⁴³ The duties could not be collected in any of the colonies from Georgia to New Hampshire. Some Governors suggested the deployment of troops. Ministers were, however, apparently aware that troops could not enforce the payment of a tax by people unwilling to pay it; anyway the garrisons were too dispersed over the continent to act effectively, while troops from Britain could not be sent in winter.⁴⁴ The limitation on military force as the means for maintaining an empire was to become clear at every stage in the American crisis up to and beyond the outbreak of war. Britain's fiscal-military state enabled her to inflict heavy damage on the empires of her rivals, but it could not guarantee the survival of her own. Empire in North America had to be on American terms or not at all.

IV

If an empire obedient to metropolitan supervision and with a strong local executive able to maintain powerful armed forces proved to be unattainable in most of North America, it was to come about in India.

In part this was because of the nature of the East India Company, which, in stark contrast to American colonies, could be turned into a 'fledgling version of John Brewer's domestic state'.⁴⁵ Although it was a chartered body, with a sometimes truculent General Court of shareholders who could win wider political support in asserting the Company's autonomy, it ultimately had to yield to coercion. Parliamentary fulminations across the Atlantic could do little harm to American colonies, but parliament could consign the East India Company to oblivion, as it nearly did in 1783. The Company therefore in the last resort had to accept regulation of its affairs at home and, in as far as this was practical, in India, where a strong executive was constructed. Authority was vested in a Supreme Council and later in a Governor-General acting on his own as the agent of the British state as well as of the Company. He was backed by a salaried bureaucracy drawn from the Company's civil service and by standing armies of Indian and European soldiers. When the Company required the support of regular troops, it paid for them, an arrangement formalised by an act of parliament of 1781.⁴⁶ Another act in 1788 laid down that ministers could

⁴³ Letter to R. Jackson, 24 Aug. 1765, Houghton Library, Sparks MS 4/4, p. 19.

⁴⁴ John L. Bullion, 'British Ministers and American Resistance to the Stamp Act, October–December 1765', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., XLIX (1992), 89–107.

⁴⁵ C. A. Bayly, 'The British Military-Fiscal State and Indigenous Resistance: India 1750–1820' in Stone, ed., *An Imperial State at War*, p. 206.

⁴⁶ 21 Geo. III, c. 65, s. 17.

determine the size of the regular garrison in India for which the Company was obliged to pay.⁴⁷

The malleability of the Company in becoming an agent of empire contributed much to the new imperial venture, but its success ultimately depended on conditions in India. To historians of the past the Indian role in the establishment of empire was essentially a passive one. Liberated by the British from despotic misrule, Indians were presumed to have wanted nothing more than security for their lives and property and toleration for their religious observances. They were believed to have no capacity for public life and not to aspire to it. Recent historiography, however, tells a story of active participation by military men, professional administrators, holders of large blocks of revenue rights, bankers and merchants, and of their often successful efforts to manipulate the new regime for their own purposes in return for their indispensable service to it.⁴⁸

Neither the degree of coercion and deprivation involved in the establishment of British rule nor the extent of indigenous resistance to it should be underestimated. Some rulers, like Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan of Mysore, never compromised with the British. Others formed a concerted if transitory alliance against them in the late 1770s. Within the Company's provinces, the Mughal nobility were the most obvious losers and the war of 1763–4 waged by Mir Kasim of Bengal and Shuja-ud-Daula of Awadh has been seen as their last stand.⁴⁹ There were serious uprisings in Benaras and eastern Awadh in 1781 and resistance to revenue extraction in parts of Bengal. Yet with due allowance for all this, co-operation or acquiescence at every level from the sepoy who enlisted in the Company's regiments to the Muslim grandee who tried to instruct British Governors in Mughal statecraft or the ruler who hoped to use the Company as an ally against rival Indian states, is still much more marked than resistance.

Changes in eighteenth-century India had created the conditions in which the British could play a political role. Successor states to the

⁴⁷ 28 Geo. III, c. 8.

⁴⁸ See, for instance, C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1983); *The New Cambridge History of India*, II, 1, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1988); *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1996); Abdul Majed Khan, *The Transition in Bengal, 1756–1775. A Study of Saiyid Muhammad Reza Khan* (Cambridge, 1969); P. J. Marshall, 'Indian Officials under the East India Company' in *Trade and Conquest: Studies in the Rise of British Dominance in India* (Aldershot, 1993); Lakshmi Subramanian, *Indigenous Capital and Imperial Expansion: Bombay, Surat and the West Coast* (New Delhi, 1995).

⁴⁹ Rajat Kanta Ray, 'Colonial Penetration and the Initial Resistance: The Mughal Ruling Class, the English East India Company and the Struggle for Bengal 1756–1800', *Indian Historical Review*, XII (1985–6), 1–105.

Mughal empire had emerged which could first be infiltrated by the British and then taken over and turned to their own purposes. These states were already employing standing armies of professional soldiers, collecting a high level of taxation in cash, subjecting trades in commodities like opium and salt to government regulation, and using bankers to advance money to the state on the security of future taxation or to remit funds. By comparison with what was possible in America, the machinery which could be adapted to construct a formidable colonial state was already in existence in some parts of India. Early British rule was built on Indian soldiers, on Indian taxes (Bengal in 1765 immediately yielded a public revenue one-quarter of that of metropolitan Britain), on Indian financiers and on a strengthened system of Indian commercial regulation.

V

This brief account of developments in America in India has had at least one linking theme: the strength of British imperial ambitions from the mid-eighteenth century and the fragility of the means of realising them without local collaboration. Is it, however, possible to find links between America and India at a deeper level? Is any kind of explanation feasible for the failure of empire in one and its success in the other in terms of trends affecting the eighteenth-century world as a whole?

Some historians seem tentatively to be reaching for an explanation in their emphasis on the effects of world-wide 'commercialisation'. The dynamic growth of an Atlantic economy in the eighteenth century has long been recognised. It is clear that the mass of colonial Americans were being drawn into the workings of this economy by the middle of the century. The political consequences that followed from this are now attracting attention. 'Sudden commercialisation' is one of the main forces that Gordon Wood sees as 'loosening the bonds of society' and disrupting hierarchies.⁵⁰ For Timothy Breen 'a rapidly expanding consumer marketplace' was creating new challenges for Americans and forcing them to reassess many things, including the nature of their connection with Britain.⁵¹

Historians of Asia are in little doubt that commerce was also expanding on a continental scale during at least a part of the eighteenth century and that this had political consequences too. The picture remains very uncertain in many respects, including the chronology of

⁵⁰ *Radicalism of the Revolution*, p. 134.

⁵¹ 'Narrative of Commercial Life: Consumption, Ideology, and the Community on the Eve of the American Revolution', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., L (1993), 483.

the phases of expansion. Some features seem, however, to be agreed. Intercontinental trade with Europe conducted by the European companies was likely to have been an important element in commercial expansion, but it was a subordinate one by comparison with inter-Asian maritime trade, such as that between China and Southeast Asia, or trade within the great land masses of India, China or Japan. It has been suggested that the wealth generated by increasing commercialisation of agriculture and the growth of trade was more accessible to smaller, more compact political entities than it was to the great empires. Hence the rise of the Indian successor states, with their effective administrations and their close alliances with bankers and merchants, at the expense of the Mughal empire, which was increasingly starved of resources. British trade in India had grown with the overall expansion of Asian commercial activity in the seventeenth century. This expansion was the impetus for the emergence of the new political order in the first half of the eighteenth century that gave the British their opportunity to become rulers as well as traders.⁵²

If there is any substance to the tentative hypothesis that the effects of global commercial expansion in the eighteenth century were undermining empire in the Atlantic, while creating opportunities for an imperial take-over in India, two final reflections suggest themselves. In the first place, the history of the British empire may have to be seen in a global context, as well as in terms of rising British power. Secondly, it might well be asked why, in a world of expanding commerce, Britain, so obviously well endowed to take advantage of such developments through her shipping, her manufacturing and her capacity to extend credit, should have committed herself so tenaciously to the uncertainties of empire, including the desperate attempt to subjugate the thirteen colonies by war. Empire certainly had a strong commercial rationale as the necessary security for the indispensable North American, West Indian and Indian trades. Yet, especially from the mid-eighteenth century, other calculations intruded. Empire was also about international rivalry, fear of others, above all of France, and increasingly about ambition and regard for Britain's status as a great power. That heady mixture was to spread the British across the globe for a long time to come.

⁵² On commercialisation in Asia in general, see Bayly, *Imperial Meridian*; Victor Lieberman, 'Local Integration and Eurasian Analogies: Structuring Southeast Asian History, c.1350-c.1830', *Modern Asian Studies*, XXVII (1993), 475-572. For the Indian situation, see Bayly, *Indian Society and the British Empire*; Frank Perlin, 'Proto-Industrialisation and Pre-Colonial South Asia' *Past and Present*, XCVIII (1983), 30-95; David Washbrook, 'Progress and Problems: South Asian Economic and Social History, c.1720-1860', *Modern Asian Studies*, XXII (1988), 57-96.