1
Introduction

Historical explorations of the effects of war upon Britain's society and economy have focused, for the most part, on the twentieth century. This is not surprising in view of the profound effect that two world wars have had upon patterns of economic and social change, and considerable attention has been paid by historians to the ways in which those wars and their legacy helped to shape or reshape the contours of modern British society. As a result, a rich and detailed literature sheds light upon almost every conceivable aspect of the British domestic experience during the age of 'total' warfare. Although important, a concentration on the twentieth century can be misplaced, however, because war also exerted considerable influence over the earlier development of Britain's society and economy. This was especially so during the 'long eighteenth century' – from 1688 to 1815 – when Britain was at war for much of the time and contemporaries still adhered to the fatalistic belief that war, if not ever present in their lives, was always to be expected (Ceadel, 1996: 4–5).

The importance of war during the eighteenth century has, of course, long been recognised by historians. Over a hundred years ago, Sir John Seeley was moved to comment that war was the 'characteristic feature' of the period, while more recently the eighteenth century has been described as an 'age of war' (Seeley, 1883: 25; Langford, 1976: 23). Yet, although warfare provides, as Seeley noted, some of the most important basic punctuation marks in eighteenth-century British history, the study of war itself long remained primarily the preserve of military and diplomatic historians. They confined their attention to the battlefield or naval engagement and only over the last few decades have the wider economic and social influences of warfare been fully acknowledged

and examined. As historians working in quite different areas of endeavour have explored the domestic dimension of eighteenth-century great-power conflicts, so the centrality of war in the development of Britain's economy and society has become increasingly more apparent. Even so, although much recent progress has been made, a great deal of scholarly work remains to be undertaken in this field of study, and many of the domestic economic and social effects of the major wars of the period remain unexplored. In particular, with the notable exception of the War of Spanish Succession (Jones, 1989), none of the international conflicts of the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century has been studied in anything like the same depth as Britain's struggle against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France. This means that the wars of 1793 to 1815 tend to provide most of the detailed case studies for those seeking to explore the nature of the relationship between war and economic and social change. As a result of this marked imbalance in the historiography of the subject, general conclusions about the domestic effects of war across the whole of the long eighteenth century must remain, at best, tentative and provisional.

In spite of these words of caution, it cannot be denied that all aspects of life in Britain were touched by war during a century and a quarter when a wide range of economic and social institutions, processes, and structures were transformed. Yet the part played by international conflict in facilitating these domestic transformations was not always apparent to contemporaries who, for the most part, viewed the consequences of war as disastrous. Quite understandably, they formed this view on the basis of their assessment of the short-term destructive impact of war, which manifested itself to them most obviously in heavy financial, human and material losses. Historians, on the other hand, have been able to adopt a long-term perspective on the wars of the eighteenth century, and this has enabled them to identify several creative war-related influences at work within Britain's economy and society. Gradually, for example, four distinct nations – England, Scotland, Wales and, after 1800, Ireland – were unified under one crown and parliament, and the authority of this new polity was reinforced by a sense of common identity which transcended long-standing regional and local loyalties, and was sharpened by the experience of war. The strength of this emergent 'British' nation was bolstered

in an institutional sense by the development of reasonably effective state and government machinery, designed with the primary aim of mobilising unprecedented levels of manpower and financial resources for war. Finally, of course, the economy and society that supported and sustained Britain's war efforts against rival powers was slowly and fitfully transformed by the various processes associated with industrialisation. Indeed, the early years of the classically formulated 'Industrial Revolution' are to be found in the second half of this period, when Britain was at war for much of the time.

In each of these major areas of development – nation, state, society and economy – war has been identified as a powerful agent of change; but it is important that war is not simply seen as having had a catalytic effect upon Britain's economy and society, remorselessly facilitating improvement, innovation and modernisation. First and foremost, as contemporaries recognised, war was extremely disruptive, and this ensured that lines of development were never straight and unbroken. It is necessary, therefore, to acknowledge the importance of deviations from long-run economic and social trends caused, directly and indirectly, by the great-power struggle. Yet the number of transitions from peace to war, and war to peace, was such that it has not been easy for historians firmly to establish what 'normal' economic and social conditions were during the eighteenth century. Indeed, from 1739 the frequency of war was such that periods of peace could almost be regarded as exceptions to the wartime norm. This immediately calls into question any analytical approach to the period which, as with historians of the twentieth century, regards major wars as abnormal events quickening the long-term socio-economic trends evident in peacetime or, alternatively, causing the development of entirely new forms of economic and social organisation. Circumstances were so very different during the eighteenth century, with war being a semi-permanent feature on the historical landscape, that another set of general questions offer themselves for consideration. How, for example, did the British state manage to sustain its military performance for a century and a quarter? To what extent was Britain's economy and society geared to war throughout the period? Did Britain become a military state? And was Britain's development as an industrial nation assisted or damaged by war?

Finally, these introductory remarks must conclude with the reminder that, in addition to war, other powerful influences helped to effect the transformation of Britain into the world's leading commercial, imperial, industrial and military power by 1815. To ignore population growth, changing patterns of demand, improvements in agriculture, trade and transport, and the advance of science and technology is to ignore circumstances in which economic and social changes often manifest themselves in outcomes that are dependent upon the interaction of many different factors. The isolation of war from those other factors does scant justice to the complexities of the historical process. Nevertheless, in spite of this important *caveat*, it is the direct and indirect influences of war, and the relationship between short- and long-term war-induced economic and social changes, that lie at the heart of this book. Consequently, the chapters that follow might each be taken to represent a test of Heraclitus' famous maxim that 'war is the father of all things'. Chapter 1 establishes the broad context for subsequent discussion by examining the assumptions behind, and consequences of, Britain's approach to war. Chapter 2 looks at how the state coped with the demands of war. Chapter 3 examines the effects of war upon British society, and chapter 4 considers the economic impact of war.

2

Eighteenth-century warfare: the British experience

Between 1688 and 1815 England, or (after 1707) Britain, partici-
pated in seven major international wars in Europe and the wider
world. Such was the recurrent and sustained nature of conflict
with France and Spain that some modern historians have used the
term the 'Second Hundred Years War' to describe the period
(Meyer and Bromley, 1980), even if this is inaccurate in view of a
lengthy period of Anglo-French co-operation between 1716 and
1730 (Black, 1985: 1–12). Nevertheless, as D. B. Horn, the diplo-
matic historian, once observed, the peace treaties of the eighteenth
century represented little more than 'mere truces' in the on-going
struggle for supremacy being waged between Britain and France
(quoted in Emsley, 1979: 4). This comment echoes the prediction
made by Pitt the Elder in 1763 that the Peace of Paris would be an
'armed truce only' (Simmons and Thomas, 1982, I: 441). Pitt was
grinding a political axe when he made this remark, but he was
acknowledging that all periods of eighteenth-century peace were
uneasy times, when finances were repaired and military losses
made good in readiness for the next, inevitable conflict.

During these years of war and peace Britain's status and stand-
ing among the European powers was not only transformed, but its
overseas empire, trade, and commerce expanded. Much to the sur-
prise of many contemporaries, and in spite of serious setbacks such
as the loss of the North American colonies in 1783, British forces
secured victories on land and sea that enhanced Britain's reputa-
tion in Europe and led to its steady ascendancy through the ranks
of the great powers. The rather undistinguished military record of
the seventeenth century faded from memory as Britain traded

5

blow for blow against its European enemies throughout the eight-
eenth century. In the ultimate, titanic, struggle against Napoleonic
France, the British state, with assistance from its allies, demon-
strated that it had developed the capacity, stamina, resources and
will to overcome all challengers.

A century and a quarter of conflict opened with the Nine Years'
War (1689–97), soon followed by the War of Spanish Succession
(1702–13). Then, in turn, came the Wars of Jenkins's Ear and Aus-
trian Succession (1739–48), the Seven Years' War (1756–63), and
the War of American Independence (1775–83), before British
hegemony was finally established during wars with Revolutionary
and Napoleonic France (1793–1801 and 1803–15). These con-
flicts, which were manifestations of a developing long-term
struggle among the European powers for security, commercial
advantage and imperial ascendancy, lasted for sixty-five years and
thus meant that Britain was engaged in major hostilities for almost
exactly half of the period under review. But such a simple calcula-
tion does not reveal the full extent to which Britain was involved in
war during the course of the long eighteenth century. Many of the
years commonly placed by modern historians within periods of
'peace' were characterised by considerable military and naval
activity both within Europe and further afield. For example, the
longest period of sustained peace for Britain is usually held to be
from the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 to the outbreak
of the War of Jenkins's Ear in 1739. Yet during this quarter century
Britain took a leading part in the War of the Quadruple Alliance
against Spain (1718–20), fought a minor undeclared war of its own
against the same enemy in 1727, and conducted extensive naval
operations against Sweden between 1715 and 1717. Closer to
home, the authorities had to put down the Jacobite rising in Scot-
land in 1715 and had to fend off an attempted Spanish–Jacobite
invasion in 1719. Later, responding to the threat posed by Span-
ish-backed former slaves on the island of Jamaica, a small number
of troops were sent to assist the planter community during the first
Maroon War (1730–9). This pattern was subsequently repeated
several times during the course of the century, and all periods of
formal peace between the great powers were punctuated by colo-
nial wars, diplomatic crises, naval skirmishes, mobilisations and
war scares. Accordingly, there were very few years when British

forces were not engaged in military or naval action of one sort or another somewhere in the world. The combined weight of these different types of formal and informal warfare meant that, at any given time, Britain was either actively engaged in war, making preparations for war, or seeking to recover from extended military conflict.

Strategic policy and the British way in war

If the frequency of armed conflict represented one of the main features of the eighteenth century, then the changing nature of war and the conduct of warfare marked another. Indeed, historians have argued that the unprecedented geographical range of the Seven Years' War was such that, as Winston Churchill once remarked, it should properly be regarded as the 'first world war' (Kennedy, 1976: 98–107). At the same time, attempts have been made to discern the defining characteristics of 'modern war' in the military struggles of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Recent discussion has been characterised by debate about the long-run nature of the changes that were taking place in military organisation, strategy and weaponry. It used to be held that such changes led to a 'Military Revolution' in Europe between 1560 and 1660 (Roberts, 1956). In recent years, however, historians have questioned this concept of a revolution by drawing attention to the way in which a series of important developments occurred from the middle of the fifteenth century right through to the end of the eighteenth century (Parker, 1988; Black, 1991, 1994a and 1994b). As part of this broad-ranging discussion of the transformation of the way in which warfare was conducted, it has often been argued that by the second half of the eighteenth century a new all-embracing type of warfare was evolving which drew whole societies and economies, as well as armies and navies, into the conflict between the great powers. The French Wars (1793–1815) are usually held to have marked the emergence of this recognisably modern form of war by incorporating central features such as the mass mobilisation of adult males, the systematic use of 'economic' warfare and financial attrition to defeat enemies, and unprecedented levels of organisation and regulation of the civilian population.

Recently, however, renewed discussion about the timing of
some of these important developments in warfare has been
prompted by the claim that the War of American Independence
and not the French Wars of 1793 to 1815 might properly be
regarded as the first war of a modern type. This is because it is held
to have marked a significant departure from the 'limited' conflicts
staged between European states during the earlier part of the cen-
tury (Conway, 1995a; 1995b: 23–42). Far from being limited in
scope or having little economic and social impact upon life in
Britain, it has been argued that the American War 'anticipated in
many important ways the British experience in the French Revolu-
tionary War' (Conway, 1995a: 127). Indeed, as Conway puts it, the
war for America was 'the first war of the new order' (Conway,
1995b: 23). Whatever the merits of this particular case, and they
are a matter for debate, it is important that changes in the conduct
of warfare during the final quarter of the eighteenth century
should not obscure the fact that from 1688 every major war
between the European powers quickened the processes which
served to broaden and deepen the conduct of military conflict
between nations (Black, 1994b). Wars were broadened in the sense
that they became increasingly global in scope as conflict on the
Continent spilled over into colonial and other extra-European
spheres of activity. At the same time, the nature of conflict deep-
ened as wars absorbed ever-greater levels of human, financial and
material resources. Because of this, the effect that warfare had
upon societies and economies throughout Europe became pro-
gressively more marked, and there is much strength in the argu-
ment that the wars of the period between 1775 and 1815 marked a
logical extension of, rather than a radical departure from, what had
gone before (French, 1990: 62).

With regard to Britain, these general trends in the conduct of
eighteenth-century warfare were reflected in a number of different
ways. At the most basic of levels, technological developments
caused significant alterations in the ways that the army and navy
organised themselves and fought in battle. As far as the army was
concerned, for example, new weaponry in the form of the flintlock
musket and the socket bayonet rendered pikes obsolete, heralding
the emergence of the general infantryman during the early years of
the eighteenth century (Black, 1994b: 38–41). Shortly afterwards,

technological advances in gunnery led to the establishment of artillery and engineer companies, or 'Scientific Corps' as they were known. This was a development which represented an acknowledgement that some tasks were now best performed by specialised trained units. At sea, the introduction of the highly effective fast-firing carronade to some of the navy's ships during the last decades of the eighteenth century prompted a move away from tactics based upon lines of battle which had hitherto dominated naval thinking. This played an important part in enabling the Royal Navy to inflict heavy losses upon French warships during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (Kennedy, 1976: 126–7).

Change was also reflected in the way that European warfare was increasingly conducted beyond the Continent (Black, 1994b: 1–37). In part, this stemmed from the development after 1650 of a British strategy founded upon naval power. In addition to the defence of home waters and the all-important blockade of enemy ports, pressure was applied in far-flung corners of the world as a means of weakening rival powers such as France and Spain. A recent formulation has, however, described this as a 'blue water' policy embodying much more than simply the use of the navy in the wider world. In part, this was because the effective use of sea power had a considerable bearing upon the situation in Europe where Britain had several key commercial and strategic interests requiring naval protection (Baugh, 1988a; Kennedy, 1976: 86–94). Yet Britain could not afford to turn its back on land-based European theatres of war because France could never be defeated by seapower alone. Indeed, it has recently been argued that the lack of effective strategy ensured that the navy was not a 'decisive instrument of power' until the Seven Years' War (Jones, 1988: 47). Instead, as an extension of a 'continental' strategy based upon land and amphibious operations fought alongside allies in Europe, aggressive overseas actions together with the command of European waters were deliberately and consistently brought to bear upon the general military and diplomatic situation (French, 1990).

The application of this strategy in a major conflict occurred first during the 1690s when England undertook what has been described as a 'double forward commitment' involving the simultaneous mobilisation and deployment of the army and the navy (Jones, 1989: 16). This approach to war was designed primarily to

influence the outcome of hostilities between the major powers in
Europe. Over time, however, Britain was also able to use it to pro-
tect its burgeoning overseas empire and commercial interests.
Although contemporaries always eschewed conquest and the pur-
suit of expansionist policies because they were costly and danger-
ous, they nevertheless regarded military action against rival local
and European powers in the Caribbean, North America and India
as vital for the preservation and enhancement of the nation's pride,
strength and wealth. The consequences of this global approach to
strategy were realised in the peace treaties and settlements that
brought European wars to a conclusion, and, beginning with the
Treaty of Utrecht, colonial and commercial prizes regularly fell
into British hands. When the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1763,
none could doubt that Britain's position of ascendancy (although,
in the event, short lived) was based in large part upon a willingness
to deploy significant wartime resources to the periphery of its
empire and to the sea lanes that kept its overseas possessions sup-
plied and protected. British policy-makers increasingly perceived
their nation's interests and strategy in global terms and for the
most part acted accordingly. The results of this were to be seen in
an ever-lengthening list of territories, islands and overseas outposts
brought under British control. Indeed, the final conflicts of the
period, against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, helped
Britain to enter what has been described as a 'new imperial age' in
which extensive gains were made in all parts of the world (Bayly,
1989: 100–32).

By extending military and naval influence across the world,
Britain added a new strategic dimension to a long tradition of mil-
itary endeavour and campaigning in Europe. Although British
statesmen no longer had any territorial ambitions in Europe, the
prevailing state of the balance of power, and the designs of the
French in particular, always served to concentrate their minds on
Continental developments. Apart from a brief period of isolation
during the 1760s, ministers did not seek to detach themselves from
involvement in the diplomatic, political and military affairs of
Europe. Although it is possible to argue that 'On balance, decisions
[taken by statesmen and diplomats] tended against military com-
mitment on the Continent' (Baugh, 1988a: 34), there were always
treaty obligations to uphold and interests to defend in Europe dur-