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ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

By P.J. Marshall

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

READ 21 NOVEMBER 1997

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).

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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

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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.

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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.

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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 Bibliotheca; 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.

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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.

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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

¹⁸ This 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.

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

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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.

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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.

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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 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.