

*Major Problems
in the Era of the
American Revolution,
1760–1791*



DOCUMENTS AND ESSAYS

SECOND EDITION

EDITED BY
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HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
Boston New York

Britain Defined by Its Empire

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In the last years of the Seven Years War British fleets and armies ranged across the world, dismembering the colonial empires of France and Spain. Yet, as tension rose in the early 1750s and undeclared war gave way to open war, British ministers viewed the prospect of defending the British Isles and Britain's European and world-wide interests with dismay. There seemed to be far too many points of danger. . . .

On the American continent, the peoples of New England could be presumed to be willing and able to defend themselves. The Virginians might do so after a fashion. Elsewhere, however, there were glaring weaknesses. Nova Scotia was taken to be a particularly acute problem. There the so-called "neutral" French and their Indian allies would let in the French of New France. Once Halifax had fallen, so alarmist scenarios went, the northern colonies would be rolled up. Pennsylvania was seen as an open incitement to French attack. Its Quaker politicians would do nothing for their own defence and there was a large population of unassimilated Germans whose loyalty seemed questionable. South Carolina and Georgia could not effectively defend themselves against the Cherokees, let alone against a European enemy. In the Caribbean the great wealth of Jamaica was thought to lie open for the picking. The disproportion between slaves and whites was so great that the Jamaica militia was hard pressed to contain slave revolts; it could do nothing to ward off a French or a Spanish attack. The East India Company was appealing for help against French reinforcements on the coast of Coromandel [in India] at the moment when a quite different thunderbolt struck them, as the Nawab of Bengal's troops overwhelmed Calcutta.

This brief summary indicates that mid-eighteenth-century Britain felt itself threatened, not just by the Bourbon enemy from without but by many possible enemies from within: Highland Scots, Irish Catholics, the Indians of the North American continent, non-British settlers in the colonies, the successor states to the Mughal Empire, and African slaves might all turn against Britain. Yet events were soon to show that potential enemies within could be turned into loyal subjects and allies. Highlanders became the flower of the British army. The first very tentative steps were taken towards tapping the resources of Catholic Irish manpower for the forces of the Crown. Pennsylvania Germans were recruited into regiments of Royal Americans. Colonial Americans, if never as many as was hoped, were enlisted into royal regiments, while some 21,000 American Provincial troops were mobilised for the 1758 campaign in North America. By the end of the war the British had engaged on their side most of the Indian peoples in the area of the conflict in America. Within a year of the end of the war, General Amherst was even proposing that a corps of French Americans should be raised for British service. The East India Company enlisted very large numbers of Indian sepoy for the war and informed them into a permanent part of its army, paid for by resources extracted from Indian rulers who were now its docile allies. The Jamaica maroons had been invaluable in suppressing

From P. J. Marshall, "A Nation Defined by Empire, 1755-1776," in Alexander Grant and Keith J. Stringer, eds., *Uniting the Kingdom? The Making of British History*. Copyright © 1955. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. Taylor & Francis Books Ltd.

the 1760 slave revolt, and there was a project for raising a regiment of free blacks for the attack on Havana in 1762.

War had thus forced the British greatly to widen the base of their military manpower. . . . Even the king's own electoral Hanoverian troops were regarded as "foreign." The involvement of other troops in British service was, however, part of important processes of change, bringing about the closer integration both of the British Isles and of that complex network of overseas interests which contemporaries were coming to call the British Empire. These two developments were linked. Successful war overseas did much to cement the Union between England and Scotland. . . . It both provided a focus for a British triumphalism and offered great rewards to the Scots. War overseas also had significant implications for Ireland's relations with Britain. But if war helped to consolidate Britain within the British Isles, it also helped to set limits to any wider Britain. The lesson of war for Britain's rulers was that empire required the effective exercise of authority. Whatever the actual scale of their contributions, colonial Americans were judged to have questioned authority. When efforts were made to strengthen the exercise of authority over the colonies after 1763, American questioning escalated into outright resistance. By their resistance, in the eyes of the majority of British people, Americans forfeited their right to be counted as British. So my theme is both the integration of the United Kingdom and the Empire, and the contradiction of the nation.

British forces were committed outside Europe, above all in North America, on a scale that was entirely new. The size of this commitment both focused an overwhelming public attention on empire in America and exposed very many British people to service in that Empire. The extent to which the forces deployed in America were British in the widest sense was brought out by a survey ordered by Lord Loudoun of the troops assembled in 1757 at Halifax for the aborted attack on Louisbourg. Returns were required for the nationality of the men from the British Isles, which was defined as English, 'Scotch' or Irish. English—3,426—and Irish—3,138—were almost equal, with Scots markedly lower at 1,390. Irish officers actually outnumbered the English by 166 to 131, with 71 Scots. . . . Since a return for the Highland regiments in America is not included in the Halifax contingent, the Scottish element is certainly too low to represent the Scottish contribution to the army as a whole. A return for Montgomery's Highlanders in South Carolina shows that the regiment was exactly what its name would suggest. All the officers were Scottish and the rank and file were described as 1,001 Highland and 59 Lowland Scots. . . .

. . . There is much evidence suggesting that Scottish soldiers enlisted very readily for America, and there seems little doubt that they did so as a form of emigration. . . .

Although prohibitions on the recruiting of Irish Catholic soldiers were not officially lifted until 1771, it seems realistic to suppose that there were Catholics among the large number of soldiers classified as Irish. The Lord Lieutenant believed that any regiment recruited in Ireland was likely to contain Papists. . . . Loudoun tried to hunt Catholics out of his army, but the British government could not for long ignore their potential contribution as manpower. . . . With the outbreak of the American War . . . [a] full-scale programme of Catholic recruiting was initiated. Lord George Germain commented in 1775 that ministers would not listen to

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any proposals for raising new corps, 'so long as they flatter themselves with being able to recruit the regiments from Irish Roman Catholics.' Formal relaxation of parts of the penal laws [against Catholics] was to follow later in the war.

The needs of war pulled the United Kingdom closer together. The war also brought about very significant changes in relations between Britain and her overseas possessions. These changes gave definition to empire. . . . Much has been written about the strains put on relations between Britain and the Thirteen Colonies by questions of the raising of provincial regiments and the authority to be exercised over them by British commanders, the quartering of troops, British intervention in Indian affairs, the requisition of labour and transport, and many other issues. Had Lord Loudoun had his way he would have forced a showdown with some of the provinces in 1757. In recalling him Pitt publicly upbraided him for "exerting too much authority over the people of the country [and] not treating the provincial troops as well as they deserved." For the rest of the war the colonies were treated with great indulgence as more or less equal partners in war, but the reckoning was only put off. In the eyes of most British commanders, the colonies had not been partners; they had been not altogether willing subordinates. . . .

I would like to . . . illustrate strikingly the way in which the nature of the British Empire was being reassessed: the cases of the Pennsylvania Germans and of the French and the Indians of British North America. They show how metropolitan authority was responding to the 'strangers within the realm.' . . .

"Foreign Protestants" had become an almost universal panacea for any imperial problem. It was assumed that Germany and Switzerland offered a limitless supply of suitable colonists—docile, industrious people with martial qualities. To encourage their settlement in America, the British Parliament had passed acts offering them naturalisation on very easy terms. By the 1750s, however, the concentration of Germans in Pennsylvania—Franklin's estimate of 100,000 out of a provincial population of 190,000 circulated widely—was causing concern. Questions were raised as to how thoroughly they had been assimilated. They gave offence by seeming to vote regularly for Quakers. Doubts were even expressed as to whether they might not "be led away from the British interest by French emissaries." To try to turn the Germans into good British subjects, a Society of Nobility and Gentry was formed in London in 1753 with full royal and ministerial support to set up schools to teach English to young Germans in America. . . . Under the pressures of war, however, British ministers looked at the Pennsylvania Germans in a different light. "An hundred thousand Germans and Swiss, animated by the most amiable principles, zeal for religion, passion for liberty, and a spirit of industry" were described in Parliament as "a providential resource." They were to be recruited into special Royal American regiments under foreign officers sent to America from Europe. After the war . . . virtually every colony continued to encourage the unrestricted import of foreign Protestants.

At the beginning of the war Catholic French were regarded as enemies rather than subjects. In 1755, 6,000 French were expelled from Acadia. They were to be distributed throughout other British colonies where it was hoped they would be subjected to unremitting anglicisation. . . . After the capture of Louisbourg in 1758, the destruction of Canadian settlements and the deportation of their inhabitants continued around the estuary of the St Lawrence.

Two years later a marked change in attitudes became apparent. Amherst brought his army into Montreal in 1760, not as the agents of vengeance, . . . but as the bringers of a new order of justice and benevolence. . . . He was commended by British ministers and told that Britain did not wish to lose its new French subjects, "who being now equally his Majesty's subjects are consequently equally entitled to his protection." They must be allowed to "enjoy the full benefits of that indulgent and benign government which constitutes the peculiar happiness of all who are subjects of the British Empire." They should not even be subjected to "uncharitable reflections on the errors of that mistaken religion, which they unhappily profess." The line forward to the Quebec Act of 1774 and the official recognition of the Catholic Church in Canada was clear.

The war had forced a serious British reappraisal of the foreign "strangers within the realm." Anglicisation had been advocated but tacitly shelved. The British Empire needed manpower, both for war and for settlement. An even greater deployment of British manpower overseas was ruled out. . . . Continental Europeans must be accepted, Protestants for choice, but even Catholics, if need be. . . . But necessity was also being embellished by rhetoric, and pride was being taken in a cosmopolitan empire living in prosperity under a benevolent British rule.

The war also forced consideration of non-Europeans strangers. . . . During and immediately after the war . . . American Indians affairs . . . obsessed the British ministers and a wider public. The success of the French in constructing Indian alliances, together with horrifying stories of massacres along the British American frontier, led to imperial intervention in the appointing of Indian superintendents and to the laying down of rules for the treatment of Indians. . . . In his brief of 1762 for charitable collections for the new colleges in New York and Philadelphia, George III wrote of his satisfaction at the prospect of bringing "barbarous nations within the pale of religion and civil life." Much money was raised for the purpose by the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, by the Church of Scotland Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge, by the New England Company, and by Presbyterians and Moravians. By 1769 more money was said to be being raised in England and Scotland than could actually be spent on available missionaries and school-masters.

Any kind of systematic theorising about the nature of the "Empire" which Britain had acquired lagged far behind the fact of acquisition and the need to resolve practical problems in very diverse situations. . . . The simplest model for empire was an old but still extremely powerful one. Colonies were dominions of the Crown and the Empire was united by common allegiance to the king. "The [American] provinces seem to be falling off from their duty to their King in not raising the number of men his Majesty has been pleased to require of them," Amherst lamented in 1761. He attributed this to "a want of a due sense of the war being carried on to the general good of his Majesty's subjects." New peoples could easily be incorporated into the Empire on these principles. They became the king's subjects by right of conquest. This doctrine was immediately applied to the French of North America and Grenada. Indians living in the king's dominions in America were also his subjects, although this was not at first clearly spelled out for the Indians in the vast new territories acquired in 1763; they were said to be peoples "with whom we are connected and who live under our protection." Whether Indians who lived in the new provinces

of the East India Company were subjects of the Crown was a complex question. In theory they were still subjects of the Mughal emperor, who had delegated his authority to the East India Company. Legal opinion considered, however, that the sovereignty of the Crown extended over conquests made by or grants awarded to British subjects. In 1773 the House of Commons resolved that the Company's possessions belonged to the British state. By then the concept that the British Crown had "subjects in Asia, as well as those in America" was losing some of its novelty. Burke was to take pleasure in referring to "our fellow subjects" in India.

For all its apparent simplicity, the doctrine of an empire based on obedience to the Crown had much wider implications by the mid-eighteenth century. When Americans like Franklin took the doctrine literally and proclaimed that their allegiance to Britain was analogous to that of Hanover, that is that it rested solely on obedience owed to a common sovereign, they were reminded that their obedience was, in the words of the Declaratory Act of 1766, to "the imperial Crown and Parliament of Great Britain," which had full power to make laws binding on them "in all cases whatsoever."

Yet even with this most portentous elaboration that obedience to the Crown meant obedience to Parliament, the doctrine of an empire based on a common link of obedience binding together the different subjects of the Crown was an admirably flexible one that could accommodate all sorts of diversity. In return for protection subjects owed obedience, but they did not have to conform in any other way. . . .

Throughout the rest of Britain's imperial history many British people have taken pride in the concept of a diverse empire of many "races," as they usually put it, differing in religion, language, law and custom, but united in obedience to one sovereign. Yet to many others, just as the United Kingdom was more than a mere union of separate peoples under a common Crown, the Empire embodied a diffusion of Britishness, which made it a distinctly British empire. Such aspirations were very much alive in the eighteenth century, as attempts to anglicise Acadians or Pennsylvania Germans or to bring Indians within the fold of Christian civilisation clearly indicate. Arthur Young's *Political Essays Concerning the Present State of the British Empire* of 1772 began with a characteristic statement of such aspirations.

The British dominions consist of Great Britain and Ireland, divers colonies and settlements in all parts of the world and there appears not any just reason for considering these countries in any other light than as a part of a whole . . . The clearest method is to consider all as forming one nation, united under one sovereign, speaking the same language and enjoying the same liberty, but living in different parts of the world.

Contemporaries were no doubt as puzzled as historians are by the omission of religion from language and liberty as the elements that constitute a nation, but the implications are clear: Young conceived of empire as more than different peoples "united under one sovereign." It was an extension of the British nation overseas. . . .

In Young's time, as in later periods, such aspirations of course embodied a highly selective view of empire. In postulating a world-wide nation, Young took no account of ethnic and linguistic diversity in America, let alone of the East India Company's dominions. Nevertheless, his belief that the British colonies overseas constituted one nation in terms of language and liberty and, others would have added, of religion would have been very widely shared by people of British origin on both

sides of the Atlantic in 1772. Yet within three years the supposed nation began to split apart at Lexington and Concord. It became clear, at least in retrospect, that within the parameters that seemed to unite Britons there were crucial differences. If there was a Britishness that could sustain a union of England, Wales and Scotland and which might . . . have been extended to Ireland, it could not be extended indefinitely.

About language there was virtually no disagreement throughout the British world. The eighteenth century was the age of the triumphant march of English. It was propagated in the Highlands with official support. The Society for Promoting English Protestant Schools attempted to do the same thing in Ireland. Although the London Society for Schools in Pennsylvania ran out of money, the German communities in the American colonies on their own acquired the English that enabled them to participate in public and commercial life. . . .

Convention assumed that common ideals of religion and liberty united British of all sorts and conditions. Yet interpretations of what constituted these ideals were beginning to differ.

For the generation of the Seven Years War the British Empire was defined by Protestantism and the war was fought in defence of Protestantism. . . . In such an emergency Protestants needed to sink their differences. Lord Loudoun, although he thought Quakers unfit for any position of responsibility, tried to rally all shades of Protestant opinion in the colonies. At Boston he attended the Anglican King's Chapel in the morning, went to Dr Sewall's meeting house in the afternoon, and invited a Presbyterian to say Grace at dinner. . . .

Pitt was a strong upholder of the alliance of all Protestants:

The Presbyterian dissenters in general, must ever deserve to be considered in opposition to the Church of Rome, as a very valuable branch of the Reformation, and that with regard to their civil principles that respectable body have, in all times, shewed themselves, both in England and in Ireland, firm and zealous supporters of the glorious revolution under King William, and the present happy establishment.

The people of New England were said almost to "idolise" Pitt, and he continued to praise "the loyal free and Protestant Americans" when it was ceasing to be fashionable to do so.

Official British policy was generally even-handed in its dealings with all denominations of colonial Protestants. . . . A Pennsylvania Quaker was present when the British Friends delivered their address of loyalty on the accession of George III and received the king's assurance of his "protection." Moravians were given recognition by an Act of Parliament in 1749. The London Society for German Schools paid subsidies to Calvinist and Lutheran ministers in Pennsylvania. American Anglicans, especially from the northern Provinces, were increasingly assertive with the growth of their numbers, but they were generally disappointed by the attitude of British ministers. . . .

In 1761 Samuel Davies, the Virginian Presbyterian, delivered a eulogy on George II. "In his reign the state had been the guardian of Christians in general . . . the defence of the Dissenter as well as of the Conformist: of TOLERATION as well as of the ESTABLISHMENT." The British state never formally abandoned its patronage of Dissent, but the relationship was to fray somewhat in the years ahead. . . . Outright opposition to government authority appeared among the Congregationalists

of Massachusetts, some of whose ministers were reported to be abetting riot from the mid-1760s, and among the Presbyterians of Ulster in the agrarian disorders of the early 1770s. . . . From 1775 opposition in England to Lord North's government over America was identified with Dissent, with good reason. . . . "Dissenters provided the dominant ideology of opposition and the charismatic leadership for the pro-American agitation." On their side, British governments seemed to be consorting with High Anglicans but, most reprehensibly from the American point of view, to be extending their indulgence to Catholics, first of all in Grenada, then in Canada, and ultimately in Britain itself.

With the ending of the Seven Years War many Americans began to fear that the association between Britishness and Protestant ecumenism was breaking down. Their fears were exaggerated, but not without some foundation. Anglicanism was gaining a greater degree of official patronage in the Empire, as the establishment of the first colonial bishoprics after the American war was to confirm, while imperial Britain was becoming less and less fasitidious as to the faiths, not just Catholicism, but Islam and Hinduism as well, with which it would have dealings.

Arthur Young described the British Empire as a single nation, enjoying "the same liberty." By 1772 there were of course sharp disputes as to what constituted British liberty. . . . It is sufficient to note that the bulk of British opinion did indeed believe that the British Empire was unique among modern European empires in resting on liberty, but that liberty also required obedience to the duly authorised prerogatives of the executive government and to the will of a sovereign parliament. War had reinforced the need for obedience. Americans, on the other hand, had a long record of disobeying their Governors and had recently taken to disregarding Acts of Parliament as well. "Republican" and "levelling" principles seemed to be rife among them. For its part, colonial opinion was convinced that Britain was disregarding the common heritage of liberty that had kept the Empire united, and that there was a conspiracy to destroy this on both sides of the Atlantic. Again, of course, they exaggerated greatly, but . . . the mainstream of British political beliefs was becoming increasingly authoritarian. . . .

There were significant differences across the Atlantic as to what British Protestantism and British liberty implied. How seriously did these differences threaten any sense of a single "nation"? The evidence from the writings of the colonial elites leaves little doubt that they thought of themselves as part of a British nation until very late in the conflict. The concepts of "country" and "nation" constantly recur in their writings. These appear to have had meanings that were clearly distinct. For Washington, for instance, his "country" was Virginia, but his "nation" was Britain. "American" was very widely used as a descriptive term, but it seems only slowly to have been invested with significance as a reference point for identity. One of Franklin's correspondents told him of an encounter in London in 1771, when his describing himself as an "American" led his British companion to say: "I hope you don't look on yourself as an American. I told him yes I did and gloried in the name." But he still felt it necessary to add: "for that I look'd upon a good Englishman and a good American to be synonymous terms it being impossible to be one without being the other also." Many of those who called themselves "Americans" in the 1770s seem to have implied that they were doing so because they had been deprived of their Britishness.

There were innumerable links, such as kinship, religious denomination or business dealings, tying people in Britain to people in the colonies. But whether opinion in Britain itself generally thought of colonial Americans as belonging to a single nation with them is doubtful. . . . Historians of Ireland have pointed out that the eighteenth-century English were not good at distinguishing: all Irish people were simply "Irish" to them and invested with the same qualities. So it was with Americans, who were lumped together and also invested with certain qualities. This implied that they were a distinct people. Lord Halifax made this point explicitly when he commented in 1763 that: "The people of England seem to consider the inhabitants of these provinces, though H. M.'s subjects, as foreigners." In the correspondence of Americans in Britain there are many references to the ignorance of British people about the colonies but also to a certain pride of possession over a supposedly subject people. James Fothergill, the London Quaker, warned his American correspondent that, at least until the Stamp Act crisis, "not one half of this nation knew what country their American brothers sprang from, what language they spoke, whether they were black or white," but "that American talk of resistance" aroused "the mastif spirit (of John Bull)" and "pride and passion" would "carry him headlong into battle and to violence." . . .

Some colonial Americans came to view the rise of the new cosmopolitan British Empire with dismay. "They are arming every hand, Protestant and Catholic, English, Irish, Scotch, Hanoverians, Hessians, Indians, Canadians against the devoted colonies," Arthur Lee wrote in anguish in 1775. Yet for most British people the two concepts of empire that I have tried to identify overlapped, rather than competed with, one another. On the one hand, Britain conceived herself as being at the centre of a diversity of peoples tied by obligations of obedience to the British state in return for protection from it. . . . The British were coming to define themselves as a people who ruled over other peoples.

Yet the eighteenth-century Empire and the Empire in all its future incarnations amounted to more than the exercise of rule over other people. Through empire the British aspired to be a world-wide people. The experience of the eighteenth century showed how difficult such aspirations would be to fulfill. It made it clear that Britishness was not a set of immutable principles about religion, language and liberty, but was specific to time and place and had evolved on different historical trajectories in different situations. In crucial respects, the practice of Britishness in America and that in the British Isles had come to deviate from one another, as the Seven Years War and its aftermath were to make clear. The eighteenth-century experience also revealed that "imagined communities" of Britishness were parochial. English people could perhaps envisage a common community with the Welsh and, often with much difficulty, with the Scots, but they failed to incorporate the Irish or colonial Americans into their idea of nation. Under hard necessity and by what still seems a very extraordinary feat of creative imagination, citizens of individual colonial "countries" could eventually extend their loyalties to an idea of America, even while the self-images of many of them probably remained locked in an idealised English nation. . . .

The lesson, for the future of the British Empire, of the war of Britishnesses that broke out in 1775 was that aspirations for the British to be one worldwide

people would never be realised. With greater dexterity of imperial management than was shown in the 1760s and 1770s, a loose-joined Empire and later Commonwealth of more or less British peoples closely allied with one another would certainly endure from the nineteenth century into the twentieth, but "Greater Britons," merging Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders and white South Africans with Britons, would not come about, however much enthusiasts might desire them. The conventional wisdom that these aspirations were incompatible with colonial nationalism is no doubt true, but they were also incompatible with that deep-rooted plant that was British parochialism.

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