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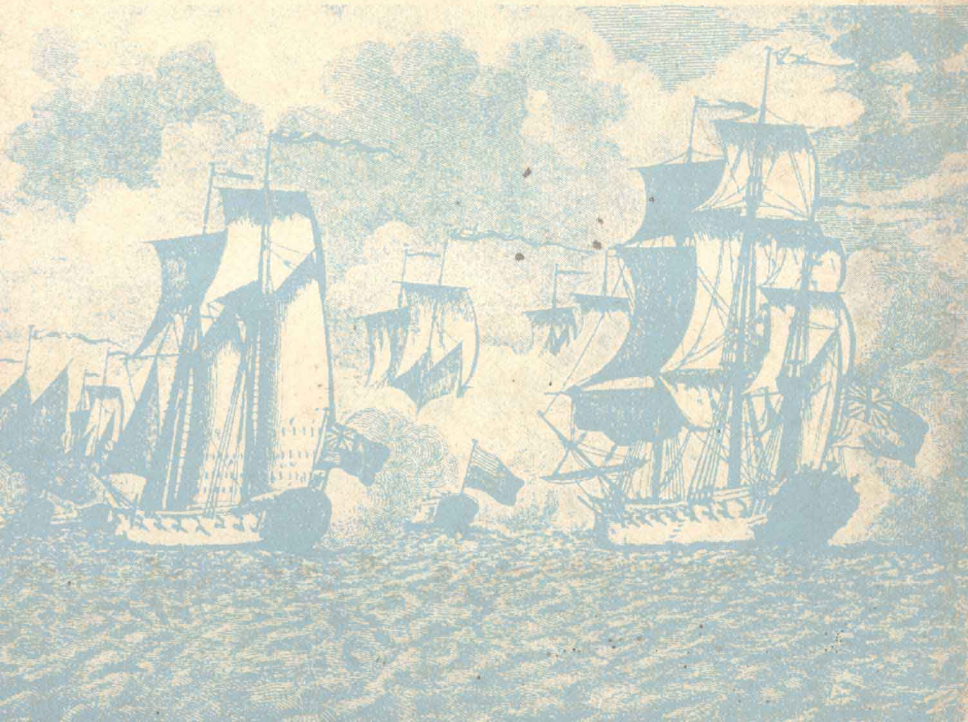
By Oliver M. Dickerson



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INTRODUCTION

THE TIME has come to reëvaluate the trade and navigation acts and their relation to the American Revolution. Lawrence A. Harper has blazed a new trail of scholarship in his *English Navigation Laws.* At last we know what they were and how they worked in the seventeenth century. There are other excellent studies of parts of the field. This volume deals with the operation of the mercantile system as a factor in disrupting the first British colonial Empire.

For a century the Navigation Acts have been prominently mentioned as one of the important causes of the Revolution. This explanation was strongly influenced by the nineteenth-century economic concepts of free trade. English statesmen had embraced Adam Smith's theories and made them a part of the national policy, much as Russia has done with the theories of Karl Marx. The apparent success of England profoundly influenced the thinking of the Western World. This thinking was reflected in the historical explanations for the separation of America from the rest of the Empire.

It has long been obvious to students who have examined contemporary opinion on the eve of the Revolution that there was a wide discrepancy between ascertainable facts and the current descriptions of the workings of the British colonial system.

Today British statesmen have completely abandoned their century-old theories of the infallible righteousness of the doctrines of free trade. Tariffs and other trade regulations are again a reality in England, and protection of home markets against foreign competition and encouragement of exports is a fixed practice. Planned

economies are the order of the day. In addition there are being created most elaborate monetary and priority systems to promote trade within the Empire and to develop colonial resources. It is an almost feverish rush to devise ways and means to set up and again secure to the mother country and the colonies the advantages of the close-knit, economically efficient commercial and industrial organization that was terminated by the American Revolution.

We also see the United States embarking upon a system of extreme regulation of trade and industry and subsidization of foreign markets without parallel in Western nations since the days of Montesquieu. With such reversals of theories and practices in progress, it seems opportune to examine anew the evidence upon which it has been assumed that the old trade and navigation laws were a material cause for the separation from England.

The object of this study is to assemble the evidence. Four main lines of investigation have been undertaken: (1) the attitude of representative Americans toward the trade and navigation acts; (2) the attitude of representative British groups; (3) the specific provisions of the acts affecting the colonies and how they were working; (4) the anti-trade policy adopted after 1764 and how it operated to destroy imperial unity.

To supply a background of information on contemporary opinion between 1765 and 1775, the author has gone over *in extenso* the chief sources from which men living at that time could have known what was going on. He undertook to find and to read what adults might have read and what could well have been the current subjects of discussion in various local areas.

The chief sources of current information were the almanacs, the printed sermons, the local newspapers, the ephemeral broadsides, and the contemporary expository and controversial pamphlets. To these should be added the solid volumes of history, government, science, and economic and political theory that were widely circulated at the time. Only the well-to-do and the professional classes could secure the latter, but the public generally had pretty free access to the other kinds of material.

The first systematic search was for the colonial newspapers. Every important file was located and read in the preliminary search. They were examined, not for information upon a single item, but for what they contained. The object was to discover what the contemporary newspaper reader could have known from that source, the nature of the news service, the type of contributed article, the kinds and sources of copied items, evidences of the expression of opinion by local editors, the influence of other newspapers, and the content and character of the advertising carried by each. The files of British newspapers in our libraries are not so extensive, but they too were searched for news from America and articles dealing with American affairs.

Examination of contemporary pamphlets involved many difficulties. Evans' list of American imprints is a good beginning; but there is no convenient location list to indicate where they can best be consulted. In the case of the British pamphlets it was necessary to assemble lists as one worked, since there was nothing comparable to Evans for British imprints. Shelf lists turned out to be more practicable than the general card catalogue, because one had to work in the absence of definite information as to authors and titles. The collections that were found especially useful were those at the William L. Clements Library at Ann Arbor, which is not only the best collection west of the Alleghenies, but is especially strong in British titles; the collections of the Widener Memorial Library, the Boston Public Library, and the Massachusetts Historical Society; the John Carter Brown Library at Providence, Rhode Island; and the Rare Book Room of the Library of Congress at Washington, D. C. The last mentioned has the most complete collection of both British and American pamphlets in this country. The American Antiquarian Society's collection is also useful and contains some items not found elsewhere. The collection at the New York Public Library is excellent, but was not used so extensively as the others. The British Museum was found to contain many items not available in American libraries.

Broadsides were found chiefly in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, which apparently were the places where they were most

used. Contemporary almanacs were consulted mainly at the Library of Congress, which has a very complete collection. They contain much besides the usual astronomical data, especially those published in Boston.

Manuscripts were consulted chiefly at the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. The unpublished Orme papers were examined at the Essex Institute at Salem, Massachusetts. Wherever printed sets of papers were available, they were used instead of the manuscript copies.

As the examination of contemporary materials progressed and the point of view of those living in 1765 to 1775 became clearer, the need of revision of many current historical statements became evident. This was especially true of the trade and navigation laws as an important cause for the separation from Great Britain.

As thousands of pages of colonial newspapers were turned and hundreds of American and British pamphlets examined, the absence of any adverse references to the long-established commercial relations between the colonies and the mother country became impressive. Writers were not discussing that subject; but they were discussing constitutional relationships, theories and incidence of taxation, and past practices along these lines. They were profoundly interested in the future development of America and the Empire as a whole. There was active and positive difference of opinion, and clear evidence of the gradual stratification of that opinion into definite political groups. The Americans had grievances; but, if the century-old navigation system was prominent among them, it is not adequately reflected in their contemporary literature.

With ample negative evidence accumulating that the traditional treatment of the Navigation Acts as a cause of the Revolution did not properly reflect the attitude of popular opinion in America, the published and unpublished papers of those who became most prominent on the American side of the controversy were examined. Was there evidence that they found the trade and navigation system especially burdensome and were secretly plotting to escape

from it, but for various reasons wished to put forward other issues for popular discussion? Again the evidence was either negative, or expressive of a surprisingly widespread general satisfaction with the system as it existed prior to 1764.

At this stage it was determined to make a detailed examination of the entire regulation of colonial trade on its way to and from England to the colonies and also in its passage to its ultimate markets. The simple assignment of the navigation laws to three or four important statutes so commonly found in standard treatises at once was revealed as a very dangerous oversimplification. The trade of the Empire was discovered to be an economic whole with a complicated mass of legal regulation. Hundreds of laws with no reference to America profoundly affected colonial trade. The descriptions of the mercantile system as found in certain well-known philosophical treatises were also quickly revealed as the crudest caricatures of what was actually going on.

Finally the search led to the vast collection of Treasury and Customs papers in the Public Record Office in London. These were examined for details of the trade of the Empire—imports, exports, duties, bounties, rebates, discriminating and differential tariffs, seizures, important ports, destination of exports, etc. It was an almost unworked field. Among these papers were found extensive portions of the presumably lost papers of the American Customs Commissioners. Examination of records of this type is a slow and laborious task. The meaning of hundreds of pages of closely written statistical records cannot be determined by a single survey. Thousands of pages were microfilmed so they could be examined, studied, and compared as needed. The study has taken many years.

It is anticipated that this volume may provoke considerable discussion and sharp differences of opinion. It is realized that many of its conclusions are not in accord with those commonly held, and with some that have been accepted and supported by names of great respectability. However, they are based upon evidence drawn from sources that have been largely unused.

This study reveals the serious need for additional research on all phases of the enumeration policy. Every enumerated product

thrived under enumeration and became a sick or dying industry after the advantages of enumeration were lost. We need to know why.

In the case of all the important enumerated products we need to know where the distribution trade centered in Great Britain; who the chief merchants were and how they were financed; where the ultimate markets were and the means of supplying them; the extent to which the colonial producers were furnished with working capital by the distribution machinery in the home country; and the services necessary to prepare the raw colonial products to satisfy the ultimate consumers. A part of this has been done in the case of tobacco, but the study is far from complete. Similar studies on a far more extensive scale need to be made of the other enumerated products. Exploitation of colonial producers of enumerated products by the home country is an economic myth. We need to know who gained or lost by the arrangement—British merchants or colonial producers. Possibly the major profits went to neither, but to society at large.

This volume is divided into two main sections. The first describes conditions of trade that were in fact the cement of empire. This condition had existed for a hundred years and had enabled the British Empire to outstrip all other colonial empires. This was the century of the trade and navigation systems where the chief motive was to encourage British trade and commerce. It worked.

The second section deals with the change of policy beginning in 1764, where the dominant motive was not regulation and development, but regulation for the sake of revenue and political exploitation. In ten short years the cement of loyalty had been eroded and dissolved. It is a story based upon evidence and attested by practically every customs officer on duty in America. The hostility was not to the old navigation and trade system, but to a new policy contrary to that system. This is not a new theory. It was the situation as understood by the men who made and won the Revolution, and admitted by those who opposed it.

The prediction is freely made here that if modern empires are to survive they must be tied together by such mutually advantageous economic arrangements as so successfully integrated the

British colonial Empire under the complicated trade and navigation laws. Mutual prosperity and protection for all sections of a far-flung empire is a cohesive element of enormous adhesive power. It generates loyalty to the whole empire. It has to be modified to meet new conditions. What worked in the eighteenth century could not be expected to work in the twentieth century.

OLIVER M. DICKERSON

Greeley, Colorado, January, 1951.

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Part I

THE CEMENT OF EMPIRE

I

THE BRITISH MERCANTILE SYSTEM IN OPERATION

A CENTURY AGO England, with the first tools of the industrial revolution in her possession, was shifting from a complicated system of protected and managed economy to a system of free trade. Manufacturing and shipping interests displaced the landed interests in Parliament. It was to their advantage to have ample labor, cheap raw materials, and low wages. Their success depended upon underselling their competitors in the markets of the world. For the time free trade seemed the road to national prosperity. British agriculture was sacrificed—it could not compete with the virgin lands of America. Her example profoundly affected economic theories in the United States, and the devotees of the new theories of economic orthodoxy rewrote our colonial history in terms of the accepted ideas of their group.

Today the hands of the clock of time have completed their circuit and we see the British rebuilding a system of tariffs, trade preferences, and controls as the only way of preserving the Empire. Free-trade ideas of a century ago are obsolete. England must export or die. Food must be produced on English soil or her people will go hungry. Regulated and controlled economics are again the order of the day. Discriminations in favor of British trade are now the cement of empire. It is possible that the commercial regulations of the eighteenth century were also an integrating force tending to bind the Empire together instead of disrupting it.