Patriotism and Poetry in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Dustin Griffin

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Abbreviations

BL	British Library
BM	British Museum
DNB	*Dictionary of National Biography*
ECS	*Eighteenth Century Studies*
ELH	*English Literary History*
Foxon	David Foxon, *English Verse, 1701–1750: a catalogue of separately printed poems with notes on collected editions* (London, 1975)
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association*
SEL	*Studies in English Literature*

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Introduction

Introduce the topic of *patriotism* to a literary audience, and the chances are the first response will be to recall Johnson's famous apothegm: "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel."[1] Bring up patriotic *poetry*, and the response is likely to be similarly skeptical: what respectable poet since Wilfred Owen – if not blinded by sentiment or hired for the purpose – would be so naive or so uncritical as to write in honor and unqualified praise of his native land? Narrow the focus to English patriotic poetry of the eighteenth century, and skepticism about its interest or its merit is likely to persist. Eighteenth-century poems celebrating contemporary Britain as the land of liberty and commercial prosperity, secure and confident, under the leadership of wise ministers and kings, of its superior place in Europe and the world – these effusions would be peremptorily dismissed as "Whig panegyric." The last time – until quite recently – that such poems were given serious and sympathetic attention by literary scholars was more than fifty years ago, in Bonamy Dobrée's British Academy lecture on "The Theme of Patriotism in the Poetry of the Early Eighteenth Century."[2]

As Dobrée shows, a common feature of these poems was an apostrophe to Britannia, or a "panegyric on Great Britain" as the home of liberty, happiness, and prosperity, a nation generously prepared to offer its services abroad as defender of freedom or as global merchant. He finds them in verses by Lewis Theobald, James Thomson, Matthew

[1] It is sometimes forgotten that Johnson's remark was uttered in the heat of conversation, and that, in Boswell's view, "he did not mean a real and generous love of our country, but that pretended patriotism which so many, in all ages and countries, have made a cloak for self-interest" (*Life of Johnson*, ed. G. B. Hill, rev. L. F. Powell [Oxford: Clarendon, 1934–50], II, 348). A true patriot, Johnson observes in *The Patriot*, "is he whose public conduct is regulated by one single motive, the love of his country" (*Political Writings*, ed. Donald Greene [New Haven, 1977], 390).

[2] *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 35 (1949), 49–65. Earlier treatments of the topic include W. J. Courthope's discussion in volume V of his *History of English Poetry*, 6 vols. (1895–1909), and Cecil Moore's essay on "Whig Panegyric Verse, 1700–1760: A Phase of Sentimentalism," *PMLA*, 41 (1926), and reprinted in his *Backgrounds of English Literature, 1700–1760* (Minneapolis, 1953), 104–44.

Prior, Gilbert West, Thomas Tickell, Elijah Fenton, Samuel Croxall, and Edward Young. The fact that none of these writers (with the exception of Thomson) were then – or are now – regarded as poets of the first rank is significant. Eighteenth-century patriotic effusion has long been associated with minor or merely ceremonial poetry. Even Dobrée regarded his subject with amused condescension, but he could still be touched by the "emotion of patriotism," its "humane" and "noble" vision of an idealized British empire, "a vision of the future, of tranquillity, of plenty, and of universal brotherhood" (62). His essay was written in the aftermath of World War II, in which Britain, undefeated and rebuilding, was celebrating its heritage and, in some quarters, trying to reassume the mantle of benevolent empire. It is easy to smile at Dobrée now, especially with acute hindsight, and to dismiss the idea of patriotism as an anachronism. The British empire, Britons know now, was already fading by 1949 – India having become independent in 1947 – and Britain was rapidly sinking into the status of second-rank power.

Among literary historians and critics, the patriotic poetry of the eighteenth century was largely dismissed even at the time that Dobrée wrote.[3] Whatever claims he made for the interest of patriotic verse were not accepted by the rising New Critics. At the time his essay appeared such verse was regarded as far inferior to the poems of Pope and Swift, who looked on the spectacle of contemporary life not with patriotic ardor but with the bemusement or the contempt of a satirist firmly located in the political opposition to Walpole and his hired panegyrists.

About one matter the traditional literary historians and the New Critics agreed: eighteenth-century patriotic verse was regarded as a relatively short-lived phenomenon, overshadowed by the satiric Augustans in the first part of the century, and superseded by a new group of poets at mid century – Collins, Gray, Smart, Cowper – who, it was said, showed little poetic interest in affairs of state or national topics such as liberty and commerce, and devoted themselves instead to the state of poetry or the state of their own sensibilities.

Why take up the topic of eighteenth-century poetry and patriotism again *now*? In part because Dobrée and his predecessors did little more than scratch the surface. They largely limited themselves to the *theme* of patriotism, and regarded it in unproblematic terms, as a "universal" emotion or an aspect of a much broader but underdefined "sentimentalism," rather than as highly self-conscious and calculated deployments of what

[3] Moore in 1926 regarded "Whig panegyric" as "of slight intrinsic value" (*Backgrounds of English Literature*, 104).

might be called an eighteenth-century *discourse of patriotism*. In their brief discussions they did not attempt to reconstruct the dense political and literary contexts of the middle decades of the century, in which those on all sides claimed to be true patriots (and regarded their opponents as false patriots – malcontents or office-seekers). They made little effort to determine whether patriotism meant love of one's country as it is, as it once was, or as it might be.[4] They did not ask what "country" it was that the patriot claimed to love – at a time when Britain was a union of three separate nations (England, Wales, Scotland – and four if we count Ireland), and when the empire was rapidly expanding overseas. And they left unexplored what it might mean for a *poet* – as opposed to a politician or a pamphleteer – to claim to provide patriotic service to the country. Do they also serve who only stand and write verses?[5]

There is a second reason for taking up the topic of patriotism and poetry now. It is a way of correcting a still influential misreading of mid- and late-eighteenth-century poetry. For several decades, and perhaps for most of the twentieth century, that poetry has seemed to many readers to be preoccupied with meditations in lonely country churchyards, gentle twilight reveries, withdrawal to quiet rural retreats, to religious ecstasy, or imaginative flights to a medieval past. The poets after Pope are said to have turned inward and become self-conscious because of their sense of personal or cultural inadequacy in the face of the extraordinary accomplishments of their mighty predecessors, a sense that there was little left for them to do, that an age of enlightenment was somehow inimical to the production of poetry, or a kind of "ontological insecurity" that made the external world itself seem impoverished. In the early 1980s these themes were brought together in two influential books, John Sitter's *Literary Loneliness in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England* (1982) and Fredric Bogel's *Literature and Insubstantiality in Later Eighteenth-Century England* (1984). Both books argued that, by contrast to the earlier eighteenth century, when the poet was a trenchant and engaged observer of the socio-political scene or even a participant in the world of affairs, poets by about 1750 had begun to turn away from that world, became increasingly pre-occupied with private experience and with the experience of the poet, now conceived

[4] Dobrée notes only that patriotism can take many different forms – "an intense attachment to . . . the countryside you inhabit," "the triumph of your tribe," or "the love of people and their ways," and that the "emotion" of patriotism can be "nourished by a sense of the past, or again by a vision of the future" ("Theme of Patriotism," 50).

[5] Dobrée's essay became the basis for a brief discussion in his 1959 volume in the Oxford History of English Literature, where patriotic poetry figures as one of "various trends" in verse (*English Literature in the Early Eighteenth Century, 1700–1740* [Oxford, 1959], 516–20).

of as a solitary, isolated, and even alienated figure. The poet retired from society not, like Pope, *pour mieux sauter*, but to search for meditative or religious peace, and meditative or religious vision.[6] Such a retreat might be seen as a confession of failure, or as an acute awareness that literature itself had become marginalized. Writers of course did not forsake the world of public experience altogether, but a kind of division of labor is thought to have taken place: the poets (and perhaps the Gothic novelists) take up private experience, while to engage the public world writers turn to "intellectual prose" and produce great works of history (Gibbon), biography (Boswell), philosophy (Hume), critical theory (Reynolds), economics (Smith), politics (Burke), and law (Blackstone).

This view of mid- and later-eighteenth-century poetry, buttressed by the influential arguments of Walter Jackson Bate on "the burden of the past" and Harold Bloom on "the anxiety of influence," has remained largely in place, even as political and social historians of the period are re-examining the writers who took part in the development of a new "British" national identity following the 1707 Union between England and Scotland, the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 and its aftermath, and the rise of nonpartisan loyal attachment to the Hanoverians and to empire as a consequence of the century-long struggle against France.[7] My reading of eighteenth-century poetry has been colored by the work of these historians, who help direct literary scholars to the dense and tangled political issues of mid century, that, so I argue, deeply affected the poets writing at the time. It is the essentially apolitical reading of eighteenth-century poetry after Pope that I, along with other scholars, want to challenge. As I would argue, poets such as Thomson, Collins, Gray, Smart, and Cowper, along with Goldsmith, Mark Akenside, John Dyer, Ann Yearsley, and others, are acutely aware of the risks and rewards of foreign war, the attractions and the dangers of foreign trade, the loss (or the triumph) of traditional English liberties, outcries against political division, the invasion of French "effeminacy," and the consequent fears of depleted national vigor. Not only are they politically conscious; they implicitly

[6] See William Dowling, "Ideology and the Flight from History in Eighteenth-Century Poetry," in Leopold Damrosch, ed., *The Profession of Eighteenth-Century Literature* (Madison, 1992), 135–53.

[7] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, 1992); Robert Harris, *A Patriot Press: National Politics and the London Press in the 1740s* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995). On the debate about the creation of a common "British" identity vs. the persistence of older identities continues, see Murray Pittock, *Inventing and Resisting Britain: Cultural Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1685–1789* (Basingstoke, 1997), Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity* (Cambridge, 1993), and *British Identities Before Nationalism: Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World, 1600–1800* (Cambridge, 1999).

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conceive a political or social function for the poet, and try to imagine what it means for a poet to play that public role. Literary historians are beginning to examine the ways in which poets of the period took up the topics of political opposition to Walpole, dynastic struggle between Stuarts and Hanoverians, commercial empire, or national identity.[8] Other books might be written on the literary engagement with the topic of moral decline, or British ambivalence about French culture. My approach here is to focus on the complex idea of "patriotism" and to consider the ways in which the poets of the middle and later decades of the century – from the 1740s through the French Revolution – set themselves up not just as Opposition "Patriots" but as "patriots" (small *p*), writers who both professed their love and admiration for their native land, and offered, at least implicitly, to provide some public *service* to the nation.

A study of patriotism and poetry in the eighteenth century does not, however, take place in a cultural vacuum, and before proceeding I wish to situate it in a larger and not purely literary or academic context at the opening of the twenty-first century. For students of literature, whether they realize it or not, are in some sense responding to the pressures of their own culture. And there may be some reasons why literary scholars find themselves thinking about eighteenth-century patriotism at the present moment. Despite the increasing globalization of economies and cultures in the 1990s, one sees everywhere a countervailing interest in ethnic and national *identity*, in *loyalty* directed toward the group, the tribe, or the nation – whether Palestine, Armenia, Kosovo, or Chechnya – that would be a sovereign state, in short, in a self-proclaimed *patriotism.* Resurgent nationalism is not restricted to sites of collapsing federations such as the USSR and Yugoslavia. It is found today in Great Britain, where a sense of Welsh and Scottish cultural distinctiveness, never absent, has reasserted itself in the form of separatist political aspirations and a governmental policy of "devolution," perhaps, as Linda Colley has suggested, because Britain is not only more culturally diverse but because it has lost its sense of national – that is, British – identity. An increasing awareness of cultural

[8] On the "Patriot" Opposition to Walpole, see Christine Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole: Politics, Poetry, and National Myth, 1725–1742* (Oxford, 1994). For poetry and the dynastic struggle, see Murray Pittock, *Poetry and Jacobite Politics in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 1994), and Howard Erskine-Hill, *The Poetry of Opposition and Revolution: Dryden to Wordsworth* (Oxford, 1996). On poetic response to overseas empire, see Suvir Kaul, *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire: English Verse in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville, VA, 2000). On national identity, see Howard Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge, 1993), and Leigh Davis, *Acts of Union: Scotland and the Literary Negotiation of the British Nation, 1707–1830* (Stanford, 1998).

diversity in the US makes some observers wonder whether America can still be *one* country, toward which all patriotic citizens can feel loyalty. Is it possible or desirable in a world both global and multicultural to feel some sentiments of patriotism, of attachment to one's native country, one's Burkean "little platoon"? For many Americans, scarred or appalled by McCarthyism in the 1950s and by an unpopular war in the 1960s and 1970s, patriotism has been reduced to a crude flag-waving and a mean-spirited "Love it or leave it" taunt. At a time when "Patriot" is the name of a guided missile, a professional sports team, and a summer movie, patriotism can only with great difficulty be discussed without severe skepticism, or imagined as a proper subject for poetry.

In such a context it may help to return to the patriotism of an earlier and what seems to us – though not to those who lived through it – a less problematic era, not to the belligerent patriotic huffing of an aggressive or triumphalist British empire but to the ambivalent engagements by poets who declared an attachment to their country, worried about its fate and about the excesses of the national "spirit" or character, and wondered if there was an appropriate public role for a poet to play.

Is there a place for a public poetry today, for a poetry which engages the aspirations of an entire country, which tries somehow to speak for the nation, and can rightfully be called *patriotic*, in the best sense of the term? It is worth remembering that some great poems – like the *Aeneid* – once concerned themselves with the founding and destiny of the nation – or with a critical moment in its history – Marvell's "Horatian Ode," Milton's heroic sonnets, Dryden's witty political narratives. In later eras Shelley, Whitman, and Yeats in their various ways all sought to speak to and for the nation at times of crisis. Who speaks for it now?

CHAPTER I

The eighteenth-century debate about patriotism

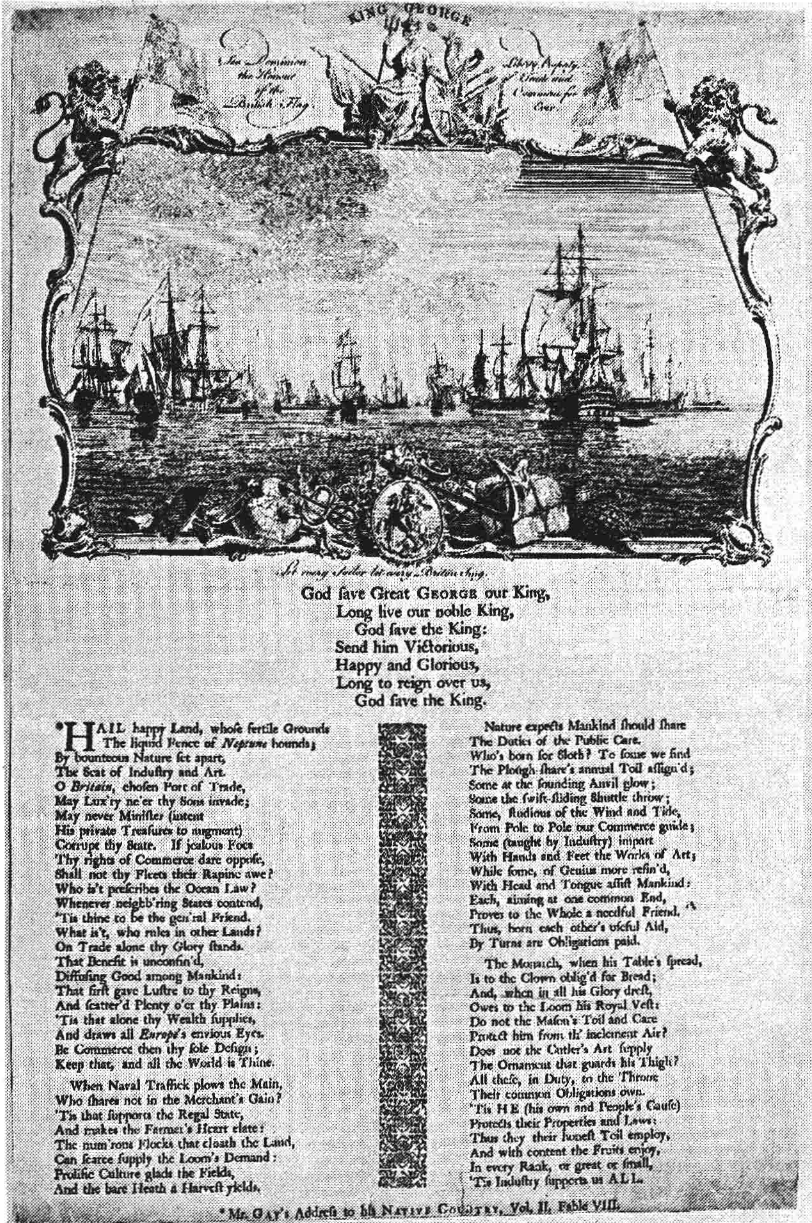
It is remarkable and a little surprising to rediscover that not only minor eighteenth-century poets but many of the poets whom we regard as major figures quite explicitly put themselves forward in their poems as *patriots*, from Pope, who in an introductory fragment from his projected epic *Brutus* (1743) aspired to be "My Countrys Poet," to Cowper, who in *The Task* (1785) exclaimed "England, with all thy faults, I love thee still – / My Country!" (II, lines 206–7), and asserted that the poet "serves his country; recompenses well / The state" (VI, lines 968–69.) Between Pope and Cowper, not just the small fry quoted by Dobrée but virtually every poet whose works we consider canonical made a similar claim. Thomson aspires to "mix the Patriot's with the Poet's Flame" (*The Seasons, Autumn*, line 22), and salutes his native land: "Britannia, hail! . . . island of bliss amid the subject sea" (*Summer*, lines 1581–85). "Transported by my Country's Love," he says, "I've aimed / To sing her praises in ambitious verse" (*Summer*, lines 671–73). Even John Gay begins one of his Fables with an address "To My Native Country."

> Hail happy land, whose fertile grounds
> The liquid fence of Neptune bounds;
> By bounteous nature set apart,
> The seat of industry and art.[1]

The "design" of *Ocean. An Ode* (1730), says Edward Young, is to promote "the glory of my country and my King."[2] Akenside, in a poem written "On Leaving Holland," addresses his homeland, "where liberty to all is known" (line 26). It is there that "freedom's ample fabric" has

[1] Fable VIII in the second volume of his *Fables*, published posthumously in 1738 (*Poetry and Prose*, ed. Vinton Dearing, 2 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1974], II, 406). The advertisement to the collection claims that the fables show Gay to have been "a man of a truly honest Heart, and a sincere Lover of his Country" (II, 380). Gay's lines were included in a 1760 print celebrating the accession of George III (see figure 1).

[2] *Poetical Works*, 2 vols. (London, 1866), II, 153.



God ſave Great GEORGE our King,
Long live our noble King,
God ſave the King:
Send him Victorious,
Happy and Glorious,
Long to reign over us,
God ſave the King.

*HAIL happy Land, whoſe fertile Grounds
The liquid Fence of *Neptune* bounds;
By bounteous Nature ſet apart,
The Seat of Induſtry and Art.
O *Britain*, choſen Port of Trade,
May Lux'ry ne'er thy Sons invade;
May never Miniſter (intent
His private Treaſures to augment)
Corrupt thy State. If jealous Foes
Thy rights of Commerce dare oppoſe,
Shall not thy Fleets their Rapine awe?
Who is't preſcribes the Ocean Law?
Whenever neighb'ring States contend,
'Tis thine to be the gen'ral Friend.
What is't, who rules in other Lands?
On Trade alone thy Glory ſtands.
That Benefit is unconfin'd,
Diffuſing Good among Mankind:
That firſt gave Luſtre to thy Reigns,
And ſcatter'd Plenty o'er thy Plains:
'Tis that alone thy Wealth ſupplies,
And draws all *Europe*'s envious Eyes.
Be Commerce then thy ſole Deſign;
Keep that, and all the World is Thine.

When Naval Traffick plows the Main,
Who ſhares not in the Merchant's Gain?
'Tis that ſupports the Regal State,
And makes the Farmer's Heart elate:
The num'rous Flocks that cloath the Land,
Can ſcarce ſupply the Loom's Demand:
Prolific Culture glads the Fields,
And the bare Heath a Harveſt yields.

Nature expects Mankind ſhould ſhare
The Duties of the Public Care.
Who's born for Sloth? To ſome we find
The Plough-ſhare's annual Toil aſſign'd;
Some at the ſounding Anvil glow;
Some the ſwift-ſliding Shuttle throw;
Some, ſtudious of the Wind and Tide,
From Pole to Pole our Commerce guide;
Some (taught by Induſtry) impart
With Hands and Feet the Works of Art;
While ſome, of Genius more refin'd,
With Head and Tongue aſſiſt Mankind:
Each, aiming at one common End,
Proves to the Whole a needful Friend.
Thus, born each other's uſeful Aid,
By Turns are Obligations paid.

The Monarch, when his Table's ſpread,
Is to the Clown oblig'd for Bread;
And, when in all his Glory dreſt,
Owes to the Loom his Royal Veſt:
Do not the Maſon's Toil and Care
Protect him from th' inclement Air?
Does not the Cutler's Art ſupply
The Ornament that guards his Thigh?
All theſe, in Duty, to the Throne
Their common Obligations own.
'Tis HE (his own and People's Cauſe)
Protects their Properties and Laws:
Thus they their honeſt Toil employ,
And with content the Fruits enjoy,
In every Rank, or great or ſmall,
'Tis Induſtry ſupports us ALL.

*Mr. GAY's Addreſs to his NATIVE COUNTRY, Vol. II. Fable VIII.

Figure 1. "God Save King George" (1760). Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. Peel Col. III, fol. 50, no. 174

long been "fix'd . . . / On Albion's happy shore" (*The Pleasures of Imagination* [1744], II, lines 43–44). For Akenside, the poet has a public and patriotic role to play: "Not far beneath the hero's feet / Nor from the legislator's seat / Stands far remote the bard" ("To Townshend in the Country," lines 19–21). Included in William Collins' 1746 collection of *Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegorical Subjects* is a set of poems critics have long thought of as "patriotic odes." In the century's most famous Pindaric ode, Thomas Gray's bard confronts an invading monarch, and in a prophetic and patriotic vision unveils the future triumphs of "Britannia's issue." As he muses on Roman ruins, "High ambitious thoughts" inflame John Dyer "greatly to serve my country" (*The Ruins of Rome*, lines 128–29). Charles Churchill, though self-consciously a satirist and an adversary to the ministry, exclaims: "be England what she will, / With all her faults, she is my country still" ("The Farewell," lines 27–28).[3] Goldsmith, mentally traveling through Europe, longs to return and settle in his native land. Even Christopher Smart, though locked up in Bedlam, celebrated Britain's military heroes, and declared with patriotic fervor that he himself was "the Reviver of *Adoration* amongst *English-Men*" (*Jubilate Agno*, B332).

Why should poets from Pope to Cowper have put themselves forward at key moments in their poems as *patriots*? The answer is not simply to be found by examining the circumstances of each poet's life or career but in locating causal factors in their shared culture. Proceeding on the double assumption that poetry has its own internal history, and that it is written and read within a particular public world, one would expect to find that patriotic poets in eighteenth-century Britain were at once responding to the poets who came before them, and to the pressures exerted by the larger political world in which they moved. I will look first at that larger political world.

In the middle decades of the eighteenth century it would probably have been difficult for a poet *not* to have a sense that he – or she – was a patriotic "Briton," or at least that he was expected to be one. To begin with, the nation was more or less continuously at war from the late seventeenth century until the Congress of Vienna in 1815. The distinctive names assigned to particular "wars" – the Nine Years' War under

[3] Churchill's admirers thought of him as a patriot-poet. See Percival Stockdale: "Thine is the Poet's; thine the Patriot's Crown" (*Churchill Defended, a Poem Addressed to the Minority* [London, 1765]).

William III (1689–97), the War of the Spanish Succession under Queen Anne (1702–13), the War of the Austrian Succession (1743–48), the Seven Years' War (1756–63), the American Revolutionary War (1776–83), the wars against Revolutionary France (1793–1802) and against Napoleon (1803–15) – obscure the fact that Britain's chief adversary in each of these wars was France. Britain and France had become rivals for European – and worldwide – hegemony.

It was not simply the presence of a threatening "other" across the Channel that aroused British national feeling. As Linda Colley has argued, patriotic self-consciousness can be traced to domestic causes as well. The 1707 Union of the parliaments of England and Scotland[4] brought into being the new nation of Great Britain, comprised in fact of three once distinct nations, England, Scotland, and Wales. Cultural differences between the English core and the Celtic periphery did not simply disappear after 1707. They persisted, and made it necessary, so Colley has shown, to invent a new national identity which could enable regional differences and loyalties to be submerged even if not forgotten. That new "Britishness," she argues, was based on the twin pillars of Protestantism and "liberty," squarely opposed to French papistry and absolutism.[5] If, as Benedict Anderson has written, a nation is not so much a geographical or demographic fact as it is an "imagined community," there is all the more reason to assume that the work of imagining Great Britain would be carried on – explicitly or implicitly – in significant part by the country's poets.[6]

Other large-scale political factors contributed to a heightened national self-awareness. Over the course of the eighteenth century Britain was being increasingly transformed – in fact, and in imagination – from an agricultural country to a commercial country, from a nation of yeomen to a nation of shopkeepers, from a self-dependent island set in a silver sea to a world-trading empire. These transformations could not but provoke a reexamination of the nation's identity. What, for the patriotic Briton, is "my country"? Is it a green and pleasant rural land? Or is it a stoutly defended island? If I am one of the many Scots living in

[4] The crowns had been united in 1603. [5] *Britons*, 11–54.

[6] *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (rev. edn., London, 1991). Anderson's work has prompted a vigorous literature on nationalism and national identity. Despite a developing consensus that "nations" have no objective existence but are "imagined communities," historians still debate whether Britain in the eighteenth century was commonly regarded as one nation – or as three or four.

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