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WAR AND EMPIRE

Goldsmith's contemporary, the judge and legal theorist William Blackstone thought that eighteenth-century Britons were 'a nation of freeman, polite and commercial people'.[1] His point was perhaps a more complex one than is now remembered, implying that laws were mutable rather than fixed in their appropriateness, but it remains a gesture of tremendous national and colonial confidence. Britain, self-consciously defined as a maritime nation had, it was claimed frequently by the mid-eighteenth century, remade itself through its commerce. Earlier isolation, restriction and rudeness had ceased: even the food was better. Addison had said so.[2] Displays of confidence abounded: poems, pamphlets and speeches extolling Britain as a free, trading nation cannoned from the press – grape-shot in a paper war proclaiming Britain's new commercial strength.[3] Trade was represented as a matter of navigation and amicable distribution:

> By Navigation the whole World is connected, and the most distant Parts of it correspond with each other. And it is this Correspondence which introduces new Commodities, and propagates the most advantageous Manufactures. It not only enables the Inhabitants of those Countries were it flourishes, to export what they have in Abundance…but it enables them to procure foreign Commodities, and, after Manufacturing them at Home, to export them again with great Profit [….] Nature has invested us…by our Situation in the Midst of the Ocean. By this Art [of Navigation] every little Port, Inlet and Creek opens a Passage for what we want to send abroad, and an Entrance for what we would bring home. To this we owe the happy Distribution of our Trade; so that every Branch of it is, or may be managed to the utmost Advantage; as it is scarce possible for any Wind to blow, that does not carry Vessels from one Port and bring them to another.[4]

[1] William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1765-9), 3: 326.

[2] Joseph Addison, *Spectator*, no. 69 (19 May 1711), Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols (Oxford University Press, 1965), 1: 292-6.

[3] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation*, 1707-1837 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 68-75.

[4] John Entick, *A New Naval History: or, a Compleat View of the British Marine* (London: R Manby, 1757), i.

It is hard reading this triumphant appraisal, not to reflect that had 'Sweet Auburn' been "Salty Auburn safest harbour on the main", then much subsequent heartache might have been spared. But such a response would miss what extollers of British maritime success would most have us overlook: the violence of the enterprise, its reliance on force of arms, as Entick's dedication to Admiral Edward Vernon, victor of Porto Bello advertises. Britain seems to have been at war or the brink of it for much of the eighteenth century. Funded by its great trade and enabled by its considerable armed forces, Britain gained an increasingly large empire, exploiting and curtailing the lives of its own servicemen and many thousands more Native Americans, Indians, and enslaved Africans in the process. Trade was rarely innocent of this repeated bloodshed, a fact well-understood at the time. Adam Smith believed commerce, rather than allowing abundance merely to circulate for 'great profit' actively promoted war and the creation of empire, a view which many historians have since accepted.[5]

Goldsmith could take a still more jaundiced view of all wars and empire building, pointedly refusing to lure readers to *The Bee* with news of 'battles' despite writing in the midst of a successful war (1: 357n). Nor did he find the motives or spoils of trade-driven conflict terribly edifying; the British 'are almost continually at war', he reflects in *Citizen of the World*, and for little more than raw silk or tobacco (2: 72, 75). Goldsmith's fears of national collapse and his jeremiads against luxury will be discussed elsewhere in this volume. This essay examines Goldsmith's awareness of colonial and national conflicts, wars of zealous expansion and disasters in foreign fields, exploring two of Goldsmith's most anxiously repeated complaints: the diminishing nature of the "event" in the historiographical and political imagination; and the place (he saw decline) of "great men". Goldsmith certainly felt that the shifts and expansions of British culture, the flood tides of war and trade, measuring them against the caprices of fashion, trends which he thought curtailed the possibility for any real distinction or lasting achievement. The terrible effects of war and empire on his fellow citizens, upon their shared culture and community were keenly felt. Poignant instances abound. The 'broken soldier, kindly bade to stay' in *The Deserted Village* (4: 293) is but one example. Equally keen to show 'how fields were

[5] See John Brewer, *Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State 1688-1783* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1989), 168. See also Linda Colley, *The Gun, The Ship and the Pen: Warfare, Constitutions and the Making of the Modern World* (London: Profile Books, 2021); and Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism, 1715-85* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

won', though less pitiable is Mr Hardcastle in *She Stoops to Conquer*, who discourses bountifully on his old campaigns (5: 107, 132). A more compassionate account of loss through service occurs late in *Citizen of the World*, when the tale is told of a sometime soldier and sailor propelled from parlour comforts to battlefield amputation and destitution by an unthinking state (2: 460-65). Tales of broken soldiers reappear in Goldsmith's work, because their resolution, their suffering and their stoicism, embodied the loss of something of great value, though idly thrown away.[6]

Given the recurrence of war during the eighteenth century, it is worth being clear about what, where, and when they were. The greatest conflict during Goldsmith's career was undoubtedly the Seven Years' War (1756-1763). Almost all Goldsmith's periodical writing was first published during these war-torn years. But other wars shaped how Goldsmith and his contemporaries responded to what has been acknowledged as the first truly world war.[7] Foremost amongst these are the War of Austrian Succession (1740-48) into which the War of Jenkins's Ear (1739-42) became subsumed. Despite its eccentric name, the War of Jenkins's Ear conforms to the wider pattern of British maritime assertiveness. Confrontations between Britain, France and especially Spain had grown in the Americas since the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1714). Under the terms of the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), the British South Sea Company gained trade monopolies in South America. This settlement included profitable rights to supply slaves to Spanish colonies, further expanding Britain's involvement in trans-Atlantic slavery which had grown rapidly since the 1690s. These brutal and remunerative arrangements exacerbated longer-standing tensions. An incident in 1731 proved catalytic. Captain Robert Jenkins's ship was boarded by Spanish coastguards who sliced his ear away. Years later, his pickled ear brandished in a jar, Jenkins told the House of Commons of his sufferings. Although the British ministry favoured peace, popular outrage was stirred and war declared in late 1739. The war, though only initially successful for British interests, notably Vernon's triumph at Porto Bello, boosted the popularity of the navy immensely, creating an appetite

[6] Michael J. Griffin, "'What d'ye call him, Tierconneldrago…": Oliver Goldsmith and the Seven Years' War' in Frans de Bruyn and Shaun Regan eds., *The Culture of the Seven Years' War: Empire, Identity, and the Arts in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Toronto University Press, 2014), 169-187.

[7] de Bruyn and Shaun Regan, 'Introduction', *Culture of the Seven Years' War*, 3-5.

for conflict. Admirals were suddenly and wonderfully famous, regarded as the defenders of Britain's great freedoms and greater trading interests, including her slave transports.[8]

The War of Austrian Succession was a grander undertaking, though its impetus was more familial. Emperor Charles VI died in 1740 designating his daughter Maria Theresa heir to the Holy Roman Empire, the Archduchy of Austria, and the Hungarian crown. Doubts as to her claims provided pretext for a war in which Britain with Dutch and Hanoverian allies supported Maria Theresa against France, Bavaria and Prussia – Spain and Russia were later drawn into the conflict. At issue was the balance of power in Europe and, for some powers, advantages in America and India. France, Austria and Prussia sought security and control, while George II's loyalty to Hanover gave Britain a stake in these manoeuvres, to the great disquiet of the press. Popular interest focussed on fighting France, and victories at sea, though George II commanded land forces successfully at Dettingen in June 1743, the last British monarch so to do. Treaties and battles came thick and fast during the conflict, with advantages and acquisitions slipping bloodily from one side to another. It ended at the Treaty of Aix-le-Chappelle in 1748, disliked by almost all the protagonists, few of whom felt they had gained much by their efforts, though Maria Theresa's claims were upheld. The only nation to gain unquestionable advantage in Europe was Prussia, which became a great power. The subsequent 'Diplomatic Revolution' of the 1750s saw Prussia and Britain newly allied against France and Austria. Goldsmith's comments in several essays, published in different periodicals, suggest that he doubted that much of moment happened as a result of so much bloody campaigning. There was no merit truly in 'battles gained, dominion extended, or enemies brought to submission' (2: 162; 233-6). There was little meaning in any of them. Despite such plausible doubts, and largely due to the impressive performance of her naval squadrons (commanded by Vernon, Anson and Boscawen), Britain had strengthened her position in India, regaining Madras while confirming her commercial claims in the Americas, though France maintained her territories still.

The stage was set for Seven Year's War. Though it began in North America, Britain and Hanover newly allied with Prussia fought France and Austria on the continent, who were later joined by Spain, Sweden and Russia. Each power had its own ambitions. Prussia sought to enshrine her new status and retain territories captured in the last war.

[8] Kathleen Wilson, "Empire, Trade, and Popular Politics in Mid-Hanoverian Britain: The Case of Admiral Vernon," *Past and Present*, 121 (1988), 74-109.

British soldiers were deployed on the European mainland, notably combining with German forces at Minden in 1759. Ostensibly a victory, the battle was noted more for the misbehaviour at the British cavalry, whose commander was later court-martialled.[9] Even so, Minden formed part of the glorious 'year of victories' that would be crowned with British victory at Quebec in September 1759.[10] Though it cost him his life, the triumph achieved by General James Wolfe, gave Britain great tracts of Canada, ending French possession there. But the war had not started nearly so well. On the American borders, where tensions with France, and between settlers and the Iroquois, had been building for some time, Britain endured brutal, ignoble defeats. General Braddock and his men were killed at Fort Duquesne in 1755; and a massacre followed the British surrender at Fort William Henry only months later. Worse came when Admiral Byng could not (or would not) prevent a French fleet from taking Minorca. He was court-martialled and executed. News from India was better and would have longer lasting implications. East India Company forces under Robert Clive defeated the Nawab of Bengal and his French allies at Plassy in June 1757, limiting French involvement in the sub-continent thereafter and laying the military and mercantile foundations for British rule in India. Engaged in a global conflict, Britain made global gains. These huge successes, secured at tremendous cost, stored trouble as much as they manifested advantage. By 1763 Britain's first empire had reached what would prove an imperfect zenith. It would look very different from the 1770s, a queasy period well reflected in *The Deserted Village*'s presaging of ignominious wasting (4: 303).[11]

Though different in many ways, each conflict raises comparable historiographic questions, often coinciding with debates raging during the period, not least of which are concerned with defining what might have been the aims and purposes of these conflicts. It has been possible to argue that they were driven by clashing dynasties concerned with the balance of power in Europe. George II thought so. It is now more often suggested that conflict was the direct consequence of the aspirations of bellicose nations as they first imagined themselves as communities bent on conquest, with trade the determining factor.

[9] Piers Mackesy, *The Coward of Minden: The Affair of Lord George Sackville* (London: Allen Lane, 1979).

[10] See Frank McLynn, *1759: The Year Britain Became Master of the World* (London: Vintage, 2009); and Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America 1754-1766* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000).

[11] See Eliga H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

These questions pose others, including deciding where the principle theatres of the conflicts lay. It was conceivably at sea, in line with the 'Blue Water' instincts of many British politicians, though equally in Europe (home to the contending powers); or perhaps the Americas, or the East Indies. When the conflict took place outside Europe, the role of and consequence for indigenous people were frequently considerable (though there is scant reflection of that in Goldsmith's work). Colonial and trading aspirations launched Britain into more and more conflicts along her empire's borders, but it was rarely clear where the significance of these recurrent naval and military enterprises ultimately lay,. But these wars, most obviously the Seven Years' War, had a cultural impact. Celebrity commanders, such as Anson and Vernon, were summoned into public view and widely cherished, none more so than Wolfe, whose image would be endlessly elaborated and reproduced.[12] Goldsmith considered that the victories gained by 'our soldiers and sailors' might 'raise our reputation above whatever history can shew; and mark the reign of George the Second, as the great period of British glory', but it was sadly true that a 'Country at war resembles a flambeaux, the brighter it burns, the sooner it is wasted' (3: 16-17, 21).

It is how that 'flambeaux' flared out and the dubious light it cast that most exercised Goldsmith. War's bright flame established nothing of permanent merit. The nation's cultural spaces had become shrines to very limited accomplishments. Goldsmith, unlike fellow Irish man Edmund Burke, who thought Westminster Abbey a hallowed space of national memory and glory, found both the Abbey and St Paul's cluttered with bloody tat and pointless lumber.[13] Underwritten by his somewhat contradicting his civic humanist ethics, Goldsmith often wrote that war, its victories and the luxuries it provided and for which it was fought, afforded scant reward, merely laying the groundwork for future crisis.[14] Men are not made great by their endeavours; they are merely popular celebrities, feeders of a tawdry flame, kept high on the acclamation of an unthinking populace (2: 57-62; 170-73, 422-5). The view that war and empire corrode all possibility of real value, especially of 'great men', is best explored when Goldsmith laments a

[12] Alan McNairn, *Behold the Hero: General Wolfe and the arts in the Eighteenth Century* (Liverpool University Press, 1997).

[13] Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, Gen. ed. Paul Langford, 9 vols, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981-2015), 3: 169-71.

[14] See James Watt, 'Goldsmith's Cosmopolitanism, *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 30, 1 (2006), 56-75.

publican who changes the name of his establishment to keep pace with events in Europe. No one is remembered for long:

> An ale-house keeper, near Islington, who had lived at the sign of the French king upon the commencement of the last war, pulled down his old sign, and put up that of the queen of Hungary. Under the influence of her red face, and golden sceptre, he continued to sell ale, till she was no longer the favourite of his customers; he changed her, therefore, some time ago, for the king of Prussia, who may probably be changed, in turn, for the next great man that should be set up for vulgar admiration (1: 470).

Though seemingly an amiable witness to the shifts of the diplomatic revolution, the ale-house keeper is more keenly the embodiment of cynical, cyclical indifference - the eager representative of and caterer to the may-fly enthusiasms of vulgar opinion: first Louis XIV, then Marie Theresa, secure on her throne, and finally Frederick the Great. Amidst this dubious empire of signs, victories and their violence are claimed merely to sell beer and porter. As Goldsmith expresses it: 'Popular glory is the perfect Coquet' (1: 471). It has no lasting merit. Military men seem particularly prone to this see-saw, up and down motion, and perhaps they deserve it, theirs are not the 'mild and amiable virtues' that make society. A later Duke of Marlborough, Goldsmith confides, was a better man than his forbear. So that it is without much regret that he notes: 'I have lived to see generals who once had crowds hallooing after them wherever they went, who were bepraised by news-papers and magazines, those echoes of the voice of the vulgar and yet have long sunk into merited obscurity, with scarce even epitaph let to flatter' (1: 471, 473). The brevity of modern fame, and the declining status of the great, were perennial concerns for Goldsmith, not least as he confronted his own posterity.[15] This should not obscure his insight into the fate of the once swaggering generals, the slide into obscurity and, especially, interchangeability. The loquacious Hardcastle in *She Stoops to Conquer* embodies this fickleness verbosely enough:

> There was a time, indeed, I fretted myself about the mistakes of government, like other people; but finding myself every day grow more angry, and the government growing no better, I left it to mend itself. Since that I no more trouble my head about *Hyder Ali*, or *Ali Cawn*, than about *Ally Croker* (5: 135).

[15] See also Philip Connell, 'Death and the Author: Westminster Abbey and the Meanings of the Literary Monument', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 38, 4 (2005), 557-8.

Ally Croker is a harmless dupe culled from Irish balladry, but Hyder Ali and Mahomed Ali Kahn, defiant of British demands, first from Clive then Warren Hastings, were the rulers of Bengal and Mysore respectively.. But Hardcastle muddles them up. They are first similar names, but now empty signifiers merely in narratives too easily forgotten. Meaning nothing in the country (save in the bodies of its victims) and only producing trash and waste elsewhere, neither war nor empire receive much in the way of endorsement from the partly civic, partly cosmopolitan Goldsmith – though his final position still seems hard to define. He was, if anything very definite, a Tory patriot, wary of empire and the trade and traffic which propelled it. Not without feeling for common soldiers and other sufferers, though seeing the world as stratified and hierarchal, based on climate, race, and culture, Goldsmith was a fit monitor and censor for a luxurious and conquering people.

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