Chapter Forty-Three

THE BIRTH OF A GREAT POWER

WILLIAM III was never a popular king. Cold and withdrawn, his manner stiff and formal, he was devoid of any attribute which would have endeared him to his new subjects. But he was a formidable statesman and general, and it was these aspects of the man which had brought him to England. William saw the island from a European perspective and, as a consequence, was to transform its status. Not since the Elizabethan war against Spain had England played such a major part in European politics. Under Charles II the country had been reduced to the level of being a satellite of France. Under James II it had opted for isolationism. Now all that was to be changed as England, with all her vast commercial, financial and naval resources, was to be deployed in the service of a Grand Alliance against France, designed to curb its expansionist policies and restore the balance of power, that configuration of states whereby no one state dominated all the others. When it began, the war was initially viewed as a short-term commitment. No one could have expected that it was to involve two huge wars and nineteen years of fighting on a massive scale. Nor could anyone have guessed that Britain would emerge from it as a world Great Power.

The war was to be one of two events which were to be instruments of change affecting the country until well into the eighteenth century. The other was the revolutionary settlement itself. That fundamentally altered the nature of royal power. William's claim to the throne was as husband of the rightful and lawful queen who had come to power partly because there was no other option. They reigned as joint sovereigns but power in reality lay with William alone. As one peer observed: 'I look upon this day's work to be the ruin of the monarchy in England, for we have made the crown elective.' William was never to acknowledge that his position was in any way different from that of his predecessors, but in truth it was. The Bill of Rights, which Parliament passed, enshrined a view that the monarchy now existed subject to conditions. The royal suspending power was declared illegal. The king could no

longer maintain a standing army in peacetime without the consent of Parliament. All Catholics were henceforth to be excluded from the line of succession. Any hopes that the revolution would achieve greater comprehensiveness for the Church of England ended in failure as much as they did in 1660. The Toleration Bill passed in May 1689 offered only limited freedom of worship to Dissenters but did nothing to alleviate their status as second-class citizens.

1688 was to be presented by historians of the Whig cause in retrospect as a landmark in the evolution of a limited parliamentary monarchy. What is striking, however, is how little changed. Monarchy and government remained inseparable. Ministers continued to be chosen and appointed by the monarch. Indeed ministers could only remain in office as long as they retained royal favour. They depended too on the support in Parliament of those who received the benefits flowing from crown patronage. The king had at his disposal a huge array of offices, pensions and other perquisites which he was to retain into the nineteenth century. His control of foreign policy continued to remain virtually unassailable.

The two wars straddled two reigns, but unlike earlier periods, the accession of a new monarch heralded no alteration in policy. William and Mary were childless and, on his death in 1702, the crown passed to his sister-in-law, Anne. She was a stout, small-minded woman of thirty-seven with an obsession for tittle-tattle and card-playing. But she was not devoid of political acumen. Devoted to duty and the Church of England, she was seen to bathe in the reflected glory of the achievements of others. She shared with her brother-in-law an exalted view of the royal prerogative and firmly resisted any attempts at its erosion.

For thirty years, however, the country was dominated by a war which was a confrontation with the greatest military machine seen in Europe since the Roman Empire. Up to 400,000 men could be under arms, able to sustain the conflict on more than one frontier. Both of the wars, the Nine Years War, which lasted from 1689 to 1697, and the War of the Spanish Succession, which lasted from 1701 to 1713, were about curtailing French ambitions to dominate Europe, in particular by asserting claims to Spain and her empire on the demise of its last Habsburg king, Charles II. In 1688 Louis XIV had invaded Germany, and early in the following year the Dutch had declared war on France, a preface to the formation of the Grand Alliance of the German Emperor, England, Savoy and many of the states of Germany. England's enthusiasm had only been kindled when James II invaded Ireland.

That invasion triggered a surge of Irish Catholic nationalism causing the Presbyterians to flee for safety to Londonderry and Enniskillen. An English army relieved Londonderry in May but a second army sent in August ended in disaster. The

following year William himself invaded the country and won a resounding victory at the Battle of the Boyne. Even then it was to take more than a year to complete the reconquest of Ireland. The English retribution for Irish insurrection was to leave a bloody inheritance stretching down the centuries. Parliament re-imposed the Anglican Test Acts on all office-holders, with the result that all Catholics and all Presbyterians were outlawed from politics. Catholics in particular suffered savage legal penalties, which effectively wiped them out from the landowning classes. Ireland was callously reduced to colonial subservience under the rule of a repressive landed minority, who subscribed to the Church of Ireland.

Ireland renders fealty to William III, 1690. Medals were part of the king's propaganda campaign along with prints. This one depicts William, crowned by Victory, giving the kneeling figure of Ireland the olive branch of peace. In this way the bitter defeat and repression of the Irish was presented as an act of benign pacification.

William remains a cult figure to this day among the Protestants of Northern Ireland, but to him the whole incident was a remote and tiresome sideshow, deflecting his energies from the great battle against the French on the mainland. There the theatre of war was the Spanish Netherlands (the modern Belgium) and the pattern it took was one of annual summer campaigns, made up of indecisive battles and long sieges. William's campaigns were not particularly successful, but in 1695 he captured Namur. After that, Louis XIV was ready for peace and in 1697 the Treaty of Ryswick was signed. In it Louis abandoned all that he had taken since 1678, except for Strasbourg and part of Alsace. More important, Louis recognised William as king.

The peace settled little, for the succession to the Spanish throne was still an open issue. In the intervening years William and Louis reached two agreements as to what should happen, the Partition Treaties. When knowledge of these became public in 1700, public outrage was such that it began the erosion of foreign policy being a royal prerogative. William's popularity sank even lower. There was bitter resentment about his long absences abroad, the cost of the war, and the continuance of the army. The resentment was exacerbated by uncertainty about the succession for in 1700 Anne's only son died. As a result in 1701 the Act of Succession bestowed the crown on the descendants of James I's daughter Elizabeth, the Electors of Hanover. The same year the ailing Charles II at last died leaving his throne to Louis XIV's grandson, Philip of Anjou. The French king promptly ignored both Partition Treaties and ignored too his recognition of William as king in favour of recognising, on James II's death, his son as James III.

That reawoke in Britain a desire to rekindle the war but it was not this time to be led by William who was past his campaigning days. He appointed as commander-in-chief of the English forces John Churchill, later to become the Duke of Marlborough. William disliked him, although he realised his potential. The king never lived to see it, however, dying, unloved and unmourned, early in 1702. Churchill had been waiting in the wings for years and the advent of the new queen, whose closest confidant was Churchill's wife, only escalated his rise to prominence. The War of the Spanish Succession was to be the vehicle for the ablest soldier ever to command the British army. Endowed with grace, charm and courtesy, this handsome man was the perfect courtier. He was also flawed, for he brought with those attributes a ruthless self-seeking, greed and avarice. But he was a brilliant military commander and tactician and under his leadership the whole pace of the war dramatically changed. Marlborough believed in battles and set about manoeuvring his troops in order to surprise the French army and force it to give battle. There followed a series of legendary victories which made Marlborough the hero of Europe. In 1704 the French army suffered the first defeat for two generations at Blenheim sustaining 23,000 casualties and 15,000 prisoners, including the marshal. The queen created Churchill Duke of Marlborough and bestowed on him the royal manor of Woodstock on which arose Blenheim Palace as a monument to his glory.

Queen Anne presents the plans of Blenheim Palace to Military Merit, 1708. Blenheim Palace was the queen's gift to the Duke of Marlborough to mark his military defeat of the armies of Louis XIV. This is a sketch by Sir Godfrey Kneller for a much larger picture which was to be hung in the palace to commemorate the event. It was never painted as Anne and the Marlboroughs fell out.

This was to be the first of a long series of victories. Ramillies followed in 1706, leading to the surrender of the Spanish Netherlands. Two years later came Oudenarde, and Malplaquet in 1709. In Spain the war went less well, the British being defeated at Almanza, but by then the French were exhausted. Marlborough knew that France could only finally be broken by maintaining a stranglehold on all her many frontiers: Spain, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy. That Marlborough had been instrumental in achieving, but after the victories the allies began to quarrel and, fatally for him, war weariness set in at home. Queen Anne, on hearing the news of the battle of Oudenarde, had commented: 'Oh, Lord, when will all this dreadful bloodshed cease?' Marlborough was dismissed on a trumped-up charge and peace negotiations reached a successful conclusion at Utrecht in April 1713.

Two tapestries from the series ordered by the Duke of Marlborough in Brussels by Judocus de Vos, one depicting the duke surveying his troops at the Battle of Oudenarde on 30 June 1708 and the second the fall of Lille in December of the same year. De Vos was guided by the duke in their composition and had access also to plans of the battles and sieges as well as to portraits of those involved. The tapestries still hang in the State Rooms at Blenheim.

It was a turning point in the country's history, one owed to an unpopular king who saw the importance of Britain within the European arena. By the year that Queen Anne died, 1714, Britain enjoyed an international status unknown since the days of her greatest medieval kings. No European power could afford to ignore her, nor could Britain turn its back any longer on the continental mainland. The maintenance of the

balance of power indeed became a central preoccupation of Britain's foreign policy throughout the eighteenth century. That that happened was not due solely to the whim of William III or the politicians, but to a growing awareness of the important place Britain occupied in Europe, an awareness largely brought about by the growth of the press. The lapse of the Licencing Act in 1695 meant that the case for and against involvement in the war had been fought out in print for every educated person to read, resulting in a public realisation that England could not stand aside from Europe and be certain that her commercial wealth, her sea power, or indeed the Protestant succession, would not be endangered.

In the Treaty of Utrecht Louis XIV was effectively checked, and he actually guaranteed in a secret clause that he would no longer aid the exiled Stuarts. It was also agreed that the crowns of France and Spain would never be united. Britain emerged with concessions which began to form a nascent empire: Hudson's Bay, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Arcadia, St. Christopher, Minorca and Gibraltar. The commercial advantages accrued, especially in respect of trade with the Spanish Empire, were immense.

Both wars had a tremendous impact on the nation. Britain had experienced nothing like them for two centuries. It was the first time since the fifteenth century that a British army was annually engaged in a campaign on the Continent. The war was long and very expensive. The geographical extent of the second war in particular was without precedent, involving military action in Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and the West Indies. At its peak, during the years 1706 to 1711, the British army, excluding officers, numbered some 120,000. James II's army, which had so alarmed the governing classes, had only been 20,000. Just as the army had expanded, so too did the navy, not only in the number of ships but in their quality and performance. By the close of the war the Royal Navy was the largest and strongest navy in Europe. Some index of the rising wealth of the country can be gauged by the fact that the overall cost of both wars was £140 million.

A war on such a scale called for the grass roots support of the nation. Only the backwoods Tory gentry were xenophobic, for both Whig and Tory showed no great divide in the matter of foreign policy. The wars may have begun on the initiative of the Dutch king but as they progressed they became more and more expressions of a national sentiment. Henceforward foreign policy had to have not only the endorsement of both the Cabinet and Parliament but, in addition, the support of the nation. When that waned, as it did in the years before 1713, policy had to change and peace be made.