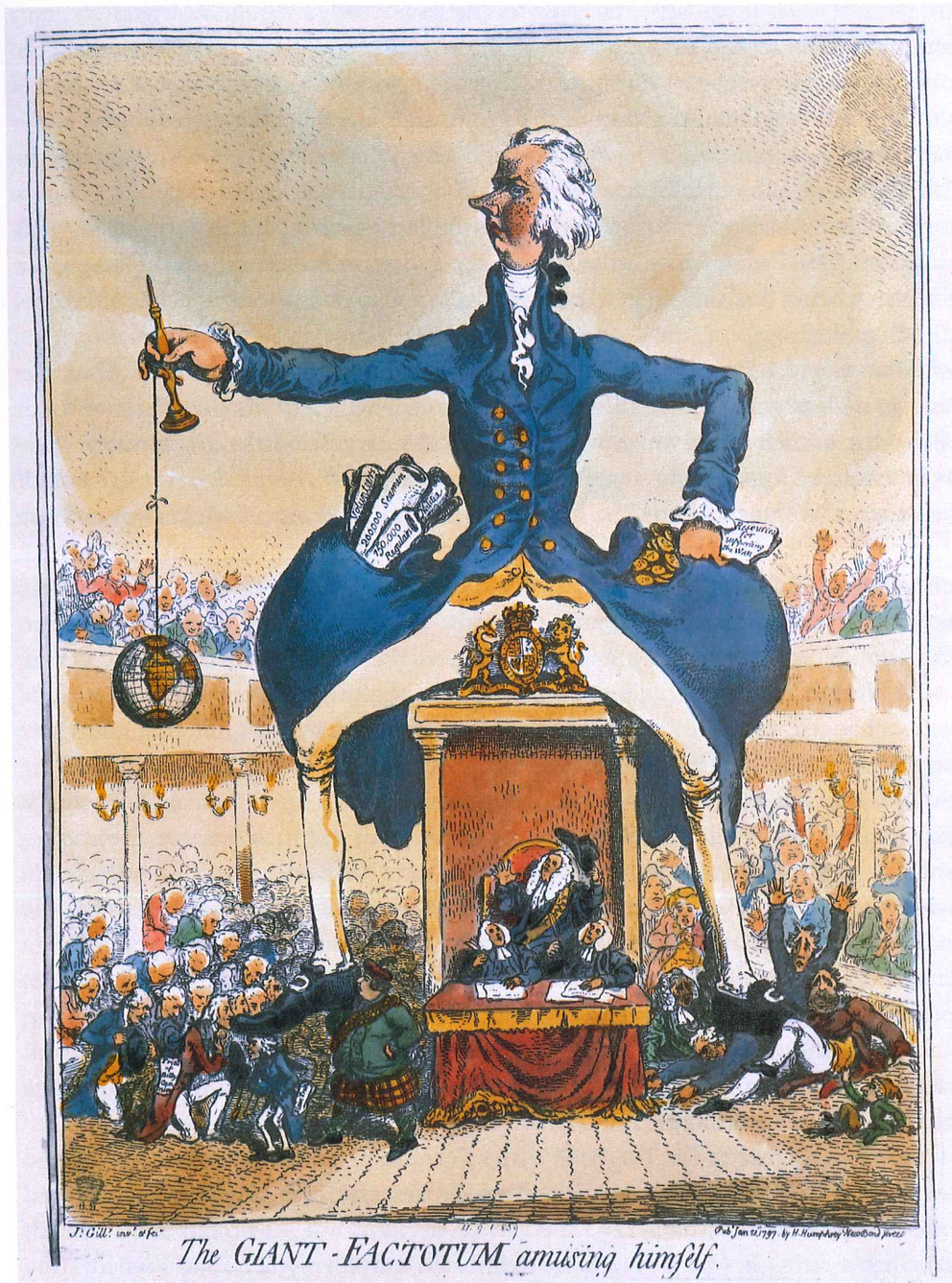
Chapter Fifty-Two

WORLD WAR AND THE INVENTION OF BRITAIN

THE fall of Lord North brought a reversion to the political chaos reminiscent of the 1760s in which one ministry succeeded another. There were two main groups of Whigs, those who clustered around Lord Rockingham and those who followed Lord Shelburne. Each group had its up-and-coming star, in the case of Rockingham, Henry Fox's son, Charles James; in that of Shelburne, William Pitt the Younger. Both had a new political vision to take the country forward after the disaster of the American war. But it was not a shared vision for Fox and Pitt were bitter rivals. Fox, however, stole the march coming to what he believed to be power when he cemented what was viewed as an unholy alliance with his former enemy, Lord North. Rockingham had died in the summer of 1782. The victory was to be short-lived because George III, by then a highly adept political operator, plotted his downfall as much as did Pitt. All that was required was for Fox to present a bill on which Pitt and the king could appeal to the country. That came in the form of a bill proposing a radical restructuring of the East India Company which the king instructed the Lords to defeat. Pitt was called upon to form an administration and in the spring of 1784 a general election was held and the followers of Fox were routed. Pitt entered office for what was to prove a prolonged and secure tenure as Prime Minister.

Pitt was the second son of the earlier Pitt, who was created Earl of Chatham. Except for one brief period the younger Pitt was to remain Prime Minister until his death in 1806, thus dominating the political stage for twenty years. Few men have had such an unswerving belief in their own power and destiny. Together these gave him a sense of mission which was to make him arguably one of the great war ministers in the history of



James Gillray's caricature of Pitt as *The Giant-Factotum amusing himself* issued in January 1797 and reflecting his rise to political dominance. He straddles the Speaker's chair and uses the globe of the world for a game of Cup and Ball. A factotum is a servant who enjoys 'the entire management of his master's affairs'. His right foot rests on William Wilberforce and Henry Dundas, Secretary of State for War, who offer it for veneration to the Tories. His left crushes the opposition including Charles James Fox.

the country. A pragmatist by nature, he was also a brilliant organiser and administrator, carrying through reforms in the civil service, beginning to abolish, for example, the old system of sinecures and fees in favour of properly salaried posts. His reform of government finance was also to contribute significantly to the success of the war effort. Few politicians have mastered the parliamentary scene so rapidly, for although he was never to have a personal following exceeding more than fifty he was to maintain his hold over the independent members, ensuring his majority. George III came to rely on Pitt much as he had come to rely first on Bute and then on North, the difference being that this time he had alighted upon a man who actually deserved his fullest confidence.

That was to be proved in the scenario which began on 14 July 1789 when the Parisian mob stormed the Bastille, the fortress prison which symbolised the inefficient rule of the French kings which we embody in the expression the *ancien régime*. This event was to be the opening scene of a cataclysm whose consequences were to engulf the whole of Western Europe, the French Revolution. In France it swept away in a tide of bloody violence not only a centuries-old system of government, but also a centuries-old aristocratic structure of society. The opening stages of this saga were greeted with enthusiasm in England, especially by politicians like Charles James Fox, who thought that something approximating to the English parliamentary system would emerge. When events later began to take a more macabre turn the attitude swiftly changed, especially when mass public executions by the guillotine got under way and even the French king's head fell on the scaffold. It was to divide the Whig party and create what were in effect unnamed but dim ancestors of the political parties of the next century, which acted in concert not so much because they represented a network of family connection and influence, but were instead a group of men loyal to certain principles. Pitt drew into his government Whigs who defended the tradition of aristocratic government which they saw under threat, forming in effect a conservative alliance. Fox and his adherents continued to welcome the Revolution, oppose the war against France and support reform, thereby embodying a stance which was the ancestor of Liberalism. But both sides continued to act in an essentially eighteenth century way, in which the control of government and policy was seen to focus around the crown and its powers.

The general reaction in England to the Revolution was one of utter horror and revulsion. The aristocratic and propertied classes saw everything they embodied under attack. On 1 February 1793 the French declared war on Britain and Holland, signalling a struggle which was to last almost twenty-five years. The French army offered fraternal assistance to the lower orders of the countries they attacked,

claiming they were throwing off the chains of monarchic and aristocratic society. As the war progressed, the full meaning of this challenge to the British ruling élite was realised and the war took on the character of a crusade for self-preservation.

In Britain it inevitably fuelled a sharp move in a conservative direction so that the slightest glimmer of any demand for change or reform was immediately suspected of revolutionary intentions. But the clock could not be put back after the events of 1789. Political debate had finally moved out of the closed arena of the privileged. The 1790s witnessed the emergence of radical movements which involved the lower orders, in particular skilled artisans in the towns, who formed Corresponding Societies calling for universal suffrage. Their cornerstone was Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791) which denounced a society founded on inherited privilege and wealth and called for equality of opportunity and rights, including universal male suffrage. In view of what had happened across the Channel these developments in England evoked a whole series of seemingly repressive measures: the suspension of Habeas Corpus in 1794, the Treasonable Practices and Seditious Meetings Acts of 1795 and Combinations Acts of 1799 and 1800. These measures went to extremes in which, for instance, anyone who so much as criticised the king or the government was guilty of treason, and any association of workers was prohibited. Collectively, their bark was worse than their bite. Few, in fact, were ever prosecuted and even fewer found guilty. By 1795, however, these radical movements had been easily suppressed and driven underground.

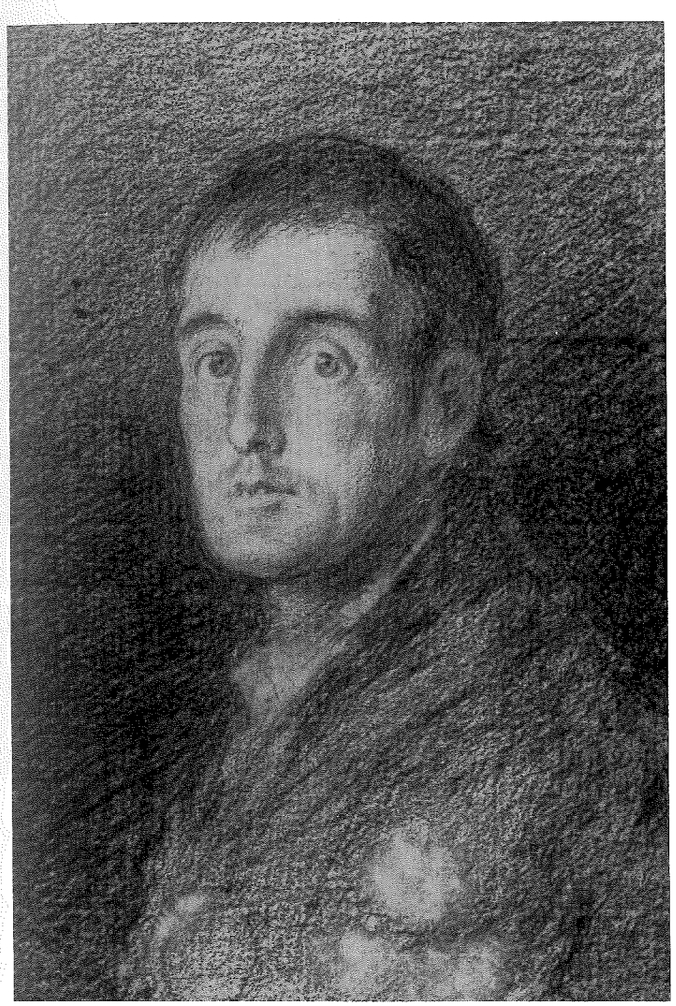
The war not only lasted a long time but also its geographical extent was unparalleled, embracing Europe, Asia, Africa and North and South America. England was seriously threatened with invasion several times and indeed at one point the conquest of the country came at the head of the French agenda. The nature of the fighting was also different from its predecessors for it saw the birth of the citizen army, the French mobilising vast sections of its male population. In response the British gradually had to change their military structure, evolving from an army made up of paid professionals and mercenaries to one which drew into its ranks men of all classes, from all parts of the country, and of every religious denomination. In 1789 the British army numbered just 40,000 men. By 1814 there were a quarter of a million. Add to that volunteers and part-timers and some half million of the male population was under arms. Never before had the people of the British Isles had to be forged together in martial unity on such a scale, able to face first the armies of republican France and then those of Napoleon.

This was war on a gigantic scale with vast armies criss-crossing the entire extent of Europe from the Iberian Peninsula to Russia. On the British side much of it was

enacted in the New World, for the 'empire of trade' was at stake, upon which Britain's success would ultimately depend. The war opened in Europe with the French taking the Austrian Netherlands and Holland, and creating a new republic. British strength was largely naval, and in 1794 Lord Howe defeated the Brest Fleet at the battle called the Glorious First of June. Two years later Napoleon Buonaparte emerged as a military leader of genius, assuming control of the French conquest of Italy. Everywhere the French army went the old order of things crumbled, fuelling further fear at home. In 1796 Spain joined the war on the side of France; the year after that there was a brief pause in hostilities, the peace of Campo Formio.

That gave the French the breathing space they needed to prepare for the invasion of England. Mercifully, in October the British navy succeeded in destroying the French fleet at Camperdown. Napoleon and the French army invaded Egypt. By then one of the British fleets was commanded by a man of quite exceptional ability, Horatio Nelson. In August 1798 he destroyed the French Toulon fleet in the Battle of the Nile, forcing Napoleon to abandon his Egyptian campaign and hasten back to France where he was made First Consul in a *coup d'état*. Russia and Austria entered the war and with British naval aid drove the French out of Italy, but Napoleon defeated the Austrians at the Battle of Marengo in June 1800. Six months later, and after another defeat, the Austrians made peace with Napoleon, recognising the vast French satellite empire through Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the Rhineland. Nelson, however, succeeded in gaining a further victory at Copenhagen in 1801, while a second commander of genius emerged in Arthur Wellesley, who destroyed the last vestiges of French power in India. In 1802 peace was signed at Amiens and the warring parties took respite before a renewal of hostilities. The treaty of Amiens came as a relief to a country which was war-weary, over-taxed and suffering from roaring inflation.

On 17 May 1803 Britain reopened the war. This second phase was to demand far more sacrifice. Income tax, introduced earlier, rose steeply. Pitt, returned to power the following year after his only short spell out of office, realised that Napoleon, who by now had crowned himself Emperor of the French, would have to be defeated on land in Europe. Napoleon on his side knew that his success depended on the conquest of Britain, and turned all his attention towards preparing a massive invasion force of some 100,000 men which assembled at Boulogne. The fact that the invasion never took place in 1804 was due to Russia, then Austria, and finally Sweden, coming into the war on the side of Britain. This meant that the French army had to march east where it defeated the Austrians at the Battle of the Ulm, Napoleon entering Vienna in triumph. Both the Austrians and the Russians were defeated a second time at the



The hero of the war on land, Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, by Goya. The artist made this drawing of Wellington in 1812 probably at the time of his triumphal entry into Madrid after his defeat of the French. From this study he made several paintings including one now in the National Gallery.

Battle of Austerlitz. At sea, the British fleet crowned its series of successes with a legendary victory which destroyed the main body of the French and Spanish fleet, the Battle of Trafalgar on 21 October 1805 in which, at the height of the battle, Horatio, now Lord Nelson, was fatally wounded. Trafalgar meant that Napoleon could no longer invade England and was the occasion of a famous speech by Pitt at the Lord Mayor's Banquet of that year:

> 'I return you many thanks for the honour you have done me; but Europe is not to be saved by the exertion of any one man. England has saved herself by her exertions, and will, as I trust, save Europe by her example.'

The funeral of the hero of the war at sea, Horatio, Lord Nelson. He was accorded a state funeral which took place in January 1806. For three days the body lay in state in the Painted Hall of Greenwich Hospital to which thousands flocked. Here the coffin begins its progress by water to the Admiralty and then, by land, to St. Paul's Cathedral. The water procession was a mile long.

Pitt died on 23 January 1806 aged forty-seven, worn out by the war. He was a tremendous loss and there was no great leader to step into his shoes. Instead there followed a succession of Administrations: Lord Grenville and Fox, in the Ministry of all the Talents, then the Duke of Portland, followed by Spencer Perceval, who was assassinated in 1812, and, finally, Lord Liverpool who was to remain in power until 1827.

The war, however, by no means slackened. In 1806 Napoleon defeated Russia at Jena and occupied Berlin. The year after he routed them again after which he made a pact with the Russian Tsar to divide Europe. By then the emperor had concluded that his only chance of vanquishing Britain was by economic means, and so he closed all European ports to British trade. This was the first major example of an economic war. (The second was with the United States in 1812–14.) As a result exports plummeted, causing industrial unrest, bankruptcies and falling prices, while the cessation of the import of

grain from the mainland led to food riots. But in the end the country weathered the storm for Napoleon was forced to relax his ban because the shortages affected him adversely also. By then he had turned his attention to the Iberian Peninsula making his brother king of Spain. But this time he was to come up against strong national resistance and the fact that that could be kept supplied by British sea power via Portugal.

In April 1809 Arthur Wellesley returned to Portugal as commander-in-chief with 25,000 men and defeated the French at Talavera. For his victory he was given a peerage. Retreating behind the defensive range of the Torres Vedras mountains he bided his time until the French, cut off from any supply line, were forced to withdraw. Wellesley then captured all their fortresses and defeated them again at Salamanca. Napoleon this time turned towards Russia and in the summer of 1812 invaded it with an army of 700,000 men. The Russians retreated, so that when Napoleon reached Moscow he found no Russian army to defeat. The appalling winter then set in with no supplies and the French were forced to retreat with a loss of half-a-million men.

Meanwhile the war continued in Spain, where Wellesley crushed the French at Vittoria, wiping out their hold on the country. After his return to France, Napoleon won one battle at Dresden but lost the second at Leipzig, and was forced to withdraw beyond the Rhine. By then a huge alliance of European powers had formed against him: Britain, Prussia, Russia, Sweden, and later Austria. The allied armies advanced towards Paris which surrendered on 31 March 1814. Napoleon abdicated, and was sent into exile on the small island of Elba. The victorious allies assembled in Vienna to sort out the map of Europe in his aftermath. In May, Britain formally made peace with France but that was not quite to be the end of the saga for Napoleon escaped from Elba and landed in France on 1 March 1815, where he quickly assembled an army. Wellesley, by then Duke of Wellington, left the peace conference to lead the allied army. The British force consisted of 30,000 men. Prussia had promised to send troops, so had Austria and Russia. On 18 June 1815 the final battle of the war was fought at Waterloo in present-day Belgium. Wellington's troops withstood the repeated assaults of Napoleon's men until the Prussians arrived in time to finally rout them. The war was at last at an end.

The diplomacy carried out at Vienna was to settle the map of Europe for forty years. In that process Britain played the dominant part through Lord Castlereagh. His aim was a Europe in which France would in no way be humiliated, but one in which the territorial integrity of all its nations would be respected and stability achieved through a careful balance of forces. On the British side the territorial acquisitions may have seemed small, but they were to be of immeasurable value in forwarding her

empire of trade: Malta, Guiana, Tobago and St. Lucia, the Cape of Good Hope, Singapore and Malaya. Britain's position in India was now unassailable.

It seemed that Britain was the only country to emerge from all this with her ancient institutions still intact. Elsewhere thrones had fallen and a centuries-old order of things had been done away with. Thanks to the country's naval and economic strength and to that series of great war leaders, Pitt, Nelson and Wellington, Britain had triumphed. Her many peoples had found a common identity in the face of such an enemy. Not for nothing in 1800 was a national anthem, 'God save the king', officially adopted. And, in spite of the fact that the war had taken on all the fervour of a crusade to preserve a status quo, the fact was that both the country and the ruling classes were very different in 1815 from what they had been in 1793.

These wars were the great watershed into the nineteenth century, one in which changes were forged which radically altered the nature of both the monarchy and the ruling élite. They, as it were, re-invented themselves in response firstly to the trauma of the American defeat, and then even more in response to the fear of a revolution in their own country. As far as the monarchy was concerned the scene had already been set by George III and his family, who were models of domestic propriety. The king's relapses into madness (the inherited affliction of porphyria which became permanent after 1810) only increased the nation's respect for the man they called 'Farmer George' and regarded as the father of his people. His popularity was further enhanced by the decadence of his son, George, Prince of Wales, later to be Prince Regent and George IV. Victories in the war were celebrated with festivities which focused on the crown as a symbol of national unity. These were no longer confined to the court but were organised throughout the country, the fiftieth anniversary of George III's accession in 1810 being marked by ceremonies throughout the Empire. And if the king played the role of the country's first citizen, his queen, Charlotte, was presented as a pattern for womankind. When George died in 1820 there was national mourning.

If the monarchy began to re-cast itself as an institution deserving of loyalty because it embodied virtue and patriotism, the alteration which gradually permeated the ruling élite was to be even greater. They had seen their peers obliterated on the Continent, and were aware that a hostile and critical attitude already existed in England, where writers had begun to question the rights of an élite to exercise political power based purely on birth and property. During the thirty years following 1780 the landed classes were to reassert that right, and at the same time transform themselves into people deserving of respect from below.

In 1802 the first edition appeared of a standard reference book which is issued to this day, Debrett's *Peerage*. What was startlingly novel about this publication was that

for the first time it combined the aristocracies of Britain into one coherent caste. This reflected what had been happening in the second half of the century where intermarriage, particularly between the English and Scottish aristocracy, had created a new unity. That resurgence was aided by the addition of new creations which brought in the meritocracy of the war: the admirals, generals and administrators. The upper classes were not only reinforced in numbers, they were also fortunate in that the population boom caused income from land to rise dramatically because of the increasing demand for corn.

Other changes affected the nature of the upper classes, welding them as never before into a new coherence of attitude. The old means of education had been by tutor at home. This was now replaced by education at one of the public schools, Eton, Winchester, Westminster or Harrow. By 1800 70% of upper class boys went to one or other of these four schools. There they met their peers at a very young age and formed networks which lasted a lifetime. There also they were inculcated, via an education based on the study of the Greek and Latin classics, in a patriotism which set great store on the cult of heroes, men who were muscular warriors valiant on the field of battle. Along with this came a radical change in appearance. The pre-Revolutionary French fashions had emphasised class by men wearing rich fabrics lavishly embroidered and adorned with lace and jewels. By 1815 such ostentatious display was replaced by a new quiet elegance in shades of beige, grey and black for civil dress, or the wearing of a military uniform to proclaim patriotism.

Nor was that all. The 1770s were seen as an age of shocking decadence in terms of gross extravagance, gambling and sexual depravity, which was countered by a reaffirmation of the traditional view that wealth and rank entailed duty, both in terms of public service and private probity. Those, like the poet Lord Byron, who offended the new puritan ethic sought exile abroad. The upper classes were perceived as owing their status not only to birth and wealth but even more to their industry in the service of others, and their morality within the home. Instead of embodying the vices of an *ancien régime* élite awaiting a revolution, they became examples of virtue for emulation by the classes below.

These consisted in the main of the mercantile classes, whose place in the scheme of things was amply recognised by the ruling élite without allowing any great shift of political power in their direction. Trade, after all, was responsible for 60% of government revenue and contributed substantially to a war which cost one-and-a-half billion pounds. The two classes needed each other, for the class which ran the state maintained the order essential for trade to flourish, including a strong navy. The mercantile net was wide, stretching from the City and the Port of London across

country and up into Scotland (where trade trebled during the second half of the century), and embraced a huge range of people, including manufacturers, middlemen, shopkeepers, and on down to pedlars. Success at war meant an expansion of Empire and with that came new markets for British goods. Patriotism and commerce were seen to march profitably hand in hand.

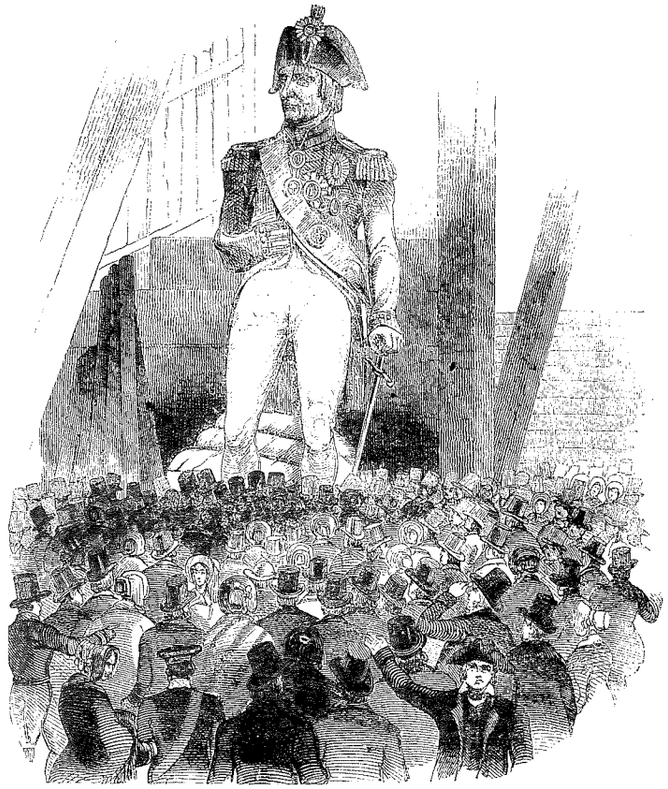
That sense of a new collective British identity was to impinge on the consciousness of the working classes, most of whom had been either directly or indirectly involved in the war effort. Moreover things like the press, popular prints, and celebrations built up a sense of nationhood into which, by 1800, Ireland was deliberately drawn. Scotland had already been assimilated in 1707 but Ireland remained with its own independent Parliament, albeit subject to the Westminster legislature. (The Welsh had legally been assimilated in an earlier century.) The revolt of the American colonies had thrown up a flare as to the potential danger Ireland embodied. For the first time demands for change came not from the subjugated Roman Catholics but from Anglo-Irish Protestants where republicanism had begun to take hold. These demands included parliamentary reform and the restoration of civil and political liberties to Roman Catholics, known as Catholic Emancipation. Moves in that direction sharpened the religious divide in the country leading to guerilla sectarian warfare in the north. There, a rising of Protestant republicans in 1798 was savagely suppressed, and one of Catholic republicans in the south was likewise put down. Pitt believed that the only solution for Ireland was to extend to the country what Scotland had undergone in 1707. In 1800 the Irish Parliament vanished and Westminster opened its doors to embrace a hundred Irish MPs, twenty-eight peers, and four bishops. Due to the implacable opposition of the king, Pitt failed to deliver the promise of Catholic Emancipation. On the surface, the result was a united Great Britain with a single legislature, but it had been achieved without any effort to solve the underlying tensions of a society which was becoming more, and not less, polarised.

In spite of the festering problem of Ireland Britain in 1815 emerged as the mother country of the greatest Empire the world has ever known. The new Empire, which by then included a new continent, Australia, replaced and exceeded in size the one which had been lost, and was this time to be held firmly in place by systems to prevent any recurrence of the American disaster. The 1784 India Act set up a system of government under the aegis of the East India Company which was to last until its power was taken over by the crown in 1858. The 1791 Canada Act established Upper and Lower Canada each with its own elective assembly, a system which was to remain until 1840. In 1770 Captain James Cook claimed New South Wales, on the east coast

of Australia, as British territory. By the 1820s Britain was to govern a quarter of the world's population.

This reborn nation called for shared icons and a shared culture. That too came during those years of endeavour. The landed classes increasingly patronised and encouraged British artists who, in their turn, celebrated the nation's history and the war heroes. The death of General Wolfe at Quebec or that of Nelson at Trafalgar gave them material for pictures designed to stir popular patriotism. Through engravings, they reached virtually everyone. In 1805 the British Institution opened as a gallery for the exhibition of works by British artists. It was also used to house loan exhibitions of works from the aristocracy and gentry, thus beginning a tradition which demonstrated that a work of art could still remain private property but be shared by the community as a whole.

All of this was an astonishing renaissance. The establishment emerged in 1815 wealthier, more powerful, and more influential than ever before. But with the war now over all kinds of other problems arose on the agenda, which the long struggle against France had postponed. Many were the consequence of another very different revolution which Britain was undergoing during those same years, the one we designate as the Industrial Revolution. Its impact was to dominate the new century.



The commitment first made in 1818 to honour Nelson with a public monument was eventually fulfilled in 1843 when the massive 170 feet tall Corinthian column was erected in front of the National Gallery and the huge statue hoisted into place. The famous lions by Sir Edwin Landseer only arrived in 1867.