Introduction

Half a lifetime of teaching and research has left me unwilling to apologize for the appearance of a work of synthesis on British history during the 'long eighteenth century'. The steady increase in the number of books and articles on the period pouring from the presses is a sign of great vitality and health. Strangely, no single volume exists which covers the entire period, although there are several excellent volumes on parts of it. This book is offered to the academic public in the belief that the time is ripe for a general synthesis of the fortunes of these islands in this most fascinating period of British history. After all, we need constantly to test and to review received opinions, to explore different approaches and even to construct new 'models', however tentative, of the history of Britain during the long eighteenth century.

The Whig historians used to portray the eighteenth century as a period of unalloyed success. According to the Whig interpretation, it was in this period that Britain set out upon her distinctive and unique quest. Alone among the European powers, Britain combined steady constitutional progress with unparalleled religious toleration and incomparable levels of freedom of thought and expression. On these secure foundations Britain was to expand her economy, undertake an 'industrial revolution' and acquire a worldwide empire. It was a dazzling vision. Its patriotic simplicities, in one version or another, prevailed into the second half of the twentieth century. Even recent social historians like Asa Briggs treated the last 50 years of the long eighteenth century as part of a period of 'improvement' in which the growth of towns, the development of reform movements, the march of industry and the demand for democracy formed the basic themes of a narrative of steady progress.[1]

Now we have abandoned Whig history and the visions that went with it. In the last 50 years eighteenth century history has been rewritten on several occasions and according to different orthodoxies. The triumphalism of Whig history was first overtaken between the two great wars of this century by the 'high' political school of Sir Lewis Namier and his followers which stressed the importance of material and practical influences upon politics in the past.[2] 'Namierite' history emphasized the role played by individuals on the aristocratic political stage yet minimized the importance of ideas and principles in determining behaviour. Although these general approaches were, and remain, controversial there can be no question that Namier placed the political history of the eighteenth century upon sound scholarly foundations. In the process, however, parts of the great narratives of Whig history were found to be unsustainable. According to Namier there was no steady decline in royal power during the eighteenth century, no gradual development of a party system and still less evidence of a liberal public opinion. Since the 1960s a somewhat different approach, typified in the work of E.P. Thompson and George Rudé, has taken a broader view of eighteenth-century society, focusing less on high politics and more on issues in social history, such as class, gender and popular culture.[3] This invigorating approach has widened the appeal of the long eighteenth century and introduced its practitioners to a range of new methodologies and problems, hitherto neglected. Since the mid-1980s a 'revisionist' school of writers has restored the significance of religion to eighteenth century history, arguing that politics was shaped less by economic than by dynastic considerations.[4] They have substituted for the old Whig, and newer, socially based interpretations of the eighteenth century, a much more traditional view of the social and political order. The strength of Britain, according to this interpretation, lay less in its novel entrepreneurial activities than in the elements of stability and continuity which it derived from its status as a rural *ancien regime* society, the monarchy, the church and the aristocracy.

One of the consequences of revisionism has been to change the thinking of many historians. Although many of them may, and do, differ strongly with particular arguments in revisionist history, most of them now study the eighteenth century for its own sake and in its own terms, not as a preparation for the very different mass urban and democratic society which came into existence late in the nineteenth century. Indeed, one of the most prominent non-revisionist historians, Professor John Brewer, has written of Britain as a 'fiscal military state' in the eighteenth century, similar in many respects to the military monarchies of the Continent, far removed from the liberal state of the Whig historians.[5] Where once it was possible to see 'revolutions', industrial, agricultural and cultural, they now see only steady, unspectacular evolution. Where once they perceived the quickening pace of social advance, they now see the pronounced survival of seventeenth-century forms of thought and politics. Where once they had noted the emergence of a secular civilization, they now see only the obdurate survival of a profoundly religious culture. Where once they had seen the origins of the liberal state of the nineteenth century, they now see only a hierarchical society, based firmly upon birth, rank and property.

Historians divide up the past into periods which suit them and which provide a suitable context to their researches. Such divisions are not always easy to justify on wider grounds. However, to argue for a 'long' eighteenth century between 1688 and 1832 makes a good deal of historical sense. Most of the alternative dates, such as 1700 and 1714 at the beginning, and 1783, 1800 and 1815 at the end, are much less defensible. New centuries rarely mark new beginnings and 1714 establishes a new dynasty, not a new order. True, the significance of the Glorious Revolution can be exaggerated, and we can fall into the trap of assuming that an entirely new epoch opened in 1688. However, in many areas of life and in the history of Scotland and Ireland as well as that of England the Glorious Revolution *was* a watershed. Indeed, during the eighteenth century contemporaries were in no doubt that the political structures and the religious order with which they were familiar had their origins in 1688. Furthermore, the period exhibits a certain consistency in its basic concerns and concepts; these shaped a distinctive

narrative which, to contemporaries, commenced with the overthrow of the Stuart monarchy in 1688–89 and terminated with a series of legislative reforms after 1828. The main elements of the narrative include the fitful drive towards political centralization, the search for a harmonious relationship between king and parliament, the defence of the Protestant realm against the forces of popery and the expansion of industry, commerce and empire. The year 1815 marks the end of a great era, not the dawn of a new historical era. Few new themes appear in the years immediately after 1815. It is true that the significance of the 1832 Reform Act can be exaggerated: historians are now generally agreed that those who framed it were more intent on conserving as much as they could of the old order. Nevertheless, the Reform Act was a sign that this old order was coming to a close. Contemporaries believed this to be the case and, indeed, many of its structures – political, religious and social – were by then undergoing rapid and decisive transformation.

For all that, it remains abnormally difficult to discern the character of the long eighteenth century in all its complexity. Some of its features – the growth of towns, the demand for political, social and humanitarian reform and the establishment of parliamentary government – seem familiar to us because they anticipate the interests of later generations. Others, however – the huge inequalities of wealth, the exacting formality of manners, the destitution of the masses and the dreadful treatment of children – appear to us to be strange and irrelevant features of a society which have (thankfully?) disappeared. To examine the political and social history of the period is to be struck with the complexity of its values and practices, especially within the four nations and within the heavily localized communities in which people lived their lives. With all this in mind, it may help the reader if I identify a number of central themes which give narrative shape and structural cohesion to the long eighteenth century.

The themes with which I shall be concerned in this book are six in number. The first of these is the development of the internal structure of Britain during the long eighteenth century, a period when a United Kingdom of Scotland and England emerged and a sense of British nationhood became a vital historical force. The Glorious Revolution acted as a powerful catalyst in this process, making for the greatest degree of unity and cohesion which these islands had ever known, although it did so with great violence and at the price of creating powerful religious and national resentments. Wales had been peacefully absorbed in the sixteenth century but the loyalty of Scotland to England was uncertain for at least 40 years after the Act of Union of 1707. Ireland, moreover, was a colony suffering military occupation, dominated by English troops and a small number of English native, and largely non-resident, landowners. During the course of the century these unwilling partners were, to a degree, integrated with England, but in many respects it was an uneasy and incomplete integration. The history of this Britain in the long eighteenth century is introduced in the first part of Chapter 1.

The second theme of the book is the role of religion in the life of the state and the life of the people. After all, religious divisions had been of vital – indeed, of revolutionary importance – during the seventeenth century. Recent attempts to depict England as a 'confessional state', an Anglican state

whose essential unifying force was Protestantism, have served the invaluable function of reminding historians that England, to say nothing of Scotland and Ireland, in the eighteenth century remained a profoundly Christian society, one which rested on a nexus of traditional beliefs and practices. Although there can be no denying the importance of secular forces in this period, especially new developments in thought and science, to say nothing of the new opportunities for leisure, prosperity and the massive hunger for new consumer commodities, religious belief adjusted itself to the new realities of social life. Complete loss of faith was a rarity. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, in fact, a powerful religious revival was under way, manifesting itself in, on the one hand, a number of humanitarian reform movements and, on the other, the emergence and rapid development of new churches within the state. Obviously, then, religious sectarianism did not disappear during the 'long eighteenth century'. Although the bitterness of religious divisions was normally controlled and kept in check, they retained their ability to excite people's passions. On numerous occasions, both locally and nationally, religious issues broke the surface of politics, most spectacularly during the Gordon Riots in 1780, when anti-Catholic mobs stormed through the streets of London in a riotous binge of arson and violence. These religious themes will be introduced in the second part of Chapter 1.

Of scarcely less significance is a third theme with which this book will be concerned, the cohesion of the social order. It does not intend to celebrate, nor, indeed, to invent, a 'social consensus' in Hanoverian Britain. Indeed, there was always acute tension between the forces of social control and those of social protest. But, for the most part, acceptable compromises could be negotiated, compromises which safeguarded the social fabric. In the late seventeenth and throughout the eighteenth century Britain remained a society of orders and hierarchies. These she succeeded in maintaining, largely due to the harmony which prevailed between the landed elite and the increasingly wealthy, and numerous, middling orders. This collaboration was to be of the greatest importance, especially in view of the exclusion of so many of the poorer elements in society from the growing affluence of the times and their subsequent social and political alienation. This collaboration, together with the striking ability of the propertied classes, in the end, to maintain the patriotic loyalty of the masses, will provide a recurrent theme. It is first confronted in the fourth part of Chapter 1.

Fourth, and, indeed, one of the most widely remarked themes of the long eighteenth century, was the commercial and imperial expansion which contributed so much to the prosperity of British society. During the eighteenth century the wealth of Britain roughly doubled in real terms. The consequence was a growing domestic market which could only be satisfied through commercial expansion both at home and overseas. Britons were island peoples and they were becoming conscious of themselves as a trading nation. They were mobile, expansive and, not least, enthusiastic consumers of foreign as well as domestic products. Consequently, the defence of her empire, her markets and her raw materials constantly engaged British statesmen. Convinced that political and military power depended upon economic power, Britain sought and won an extensive commercial empire

against severe international competition. London was the centre of what became in the eighteenth century one of the great commercial empires in the history of the world, but provincial cities and ports made increasingly significant contributions to Britain's imperial dynamism. It is not too much to claim that the wealth she derived from her commercial and imperial expansion made victory possible in the successive wars in which she was involved after 1688. An introduction to these issues may be found in the fifth part of Chapter 1.

The fifth theme of the book follows naturally from the fourth. It addresses the role of Britain in Europe and considers the status of Britain as a European state. In the eighteenth century the fortunes of Britain were closely bound up with those of her European neighbours. It is scarcely too much to say that the outcomes of the Glorious Revolution, the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745 and the American War of Independence – to take just three major issues of the period – were determined by the actions of other European states. After a century in which Britain's role in Europe had been modest and even marginal, Britain became a major European power in the early eighteenth century. She was involved in six major European wars during 63 of the 144 years (over 44 per cent) between 1688 and 1832. The consequences of warfare of such frequency were to be considerable, in the end affecting the everyday lives of millions of people. There is, moreover, a further advantage in viewing Britain in her European context. It enables us to establish illuminating comparative views of British society. For example, recent writers, not least Dr J.C.D. Clark, have treated Britain as an *ancien regime* society, similar in her aristocratic, monarchical and religious structures to many of her European neighbours. To what extent is this true? Alternatively, was Britain, as the Whig historians used to argue, unique in her political arrangements and in her social and economic circumstances? In dealing with such issues, we deepen our understanding of Britain in the eighteenth century. These issues are introduced in the fourth part of Chapter 1.

The final theme with which this volume is concerned has been the standard fare of many writers on this period, the development of liberal forms of political thought and action which restricted and limited the power of the state. Perhaps some historians have been more concerned to celebrate this development than to explain it and to analyse it. Even so, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that already by the end of the eighteenth century royal government had been transformed into government by the King-in-Parliament. The Glorious Revolution ended the prospect of a centralized and absolute monarchy, giving rise to a system based on local political and judicial independence. Consequently, many key activities ranging from law enforcement and tax collection to economic regulation and the raising of armies were placed in the hands of the local gentry and aristocracy. Yet there is far more to 'politics' than the traditional fare of parliaments and parties. It is a distortion of the political structure of the long eighteenth century to erect artificial polarities between 'high' and 'low' politics, with the former imposing itself upon the latter. The political process was led, even commanded, by the landed elite but it depended upon and found room for men from humbler backgrounds. Their contribution to public life was to be

immense. It was they who manned the local committees and canvassed the voters at election time, who wrote and distributed political literature, who collected and spent political money and who, in general, organized political events, ranging from processions to petitions. Even lower down the social scale, the world of popular political culture, symbolic, festive and unwritten, could serve as an arena for political conflict between the humble and the great. To those excluded from formal patterns of political power, popular culture provided the stage and the language for protest, whether against the state, the church, the market or the landlord. These issues are introduced in the final part of Chapter 1.

Some of these themes would have been familiar to the Whig historians of earlier generations, but modern historians treat them in a different manner. To historians of our own generation, however, it is less permissible than it was in the days of the Whig historians to use the historical record as an opportunity to celebrate the virtues and victories of any particular social and political regime. We are more genuinely aware of the harsh face of eighteenth-century life than our predecessors were. Polite society rested somewhat precariously upon the tolerance of millions of people for whom life remained hard, uncomfortable and unhealthy. It took little to drive the social leaders of this reputedly strong and stable society into alarmism and panic. Contemporaries may have been agreed about the merits of the British constitution, for example, but they – Whigs and Tories, court and country, government and opposition, Anglican and Dissenter – disagreed deeply about political issues, and sometimes with a terrifying intensity. Contemporaries may have boasted about the stability of the social order, but that order was easily panicked. Furthermore, on many occasions it was clear that there was not much love lost for the upper classes, who protected themselves and their wealth behind the symbolic fencing of the legal system.

We no longer accept the Whig historians' agenda for the long eighteenth century. We no longer see the period as a great patriotic drama, as a continuing story of national success, because we can see the massive evidence of inertia, continuity and reaction. I have attempted in what follows to recognize the complexity of the long eighteenth century while attempting to identify some of its key thematic patterns. From the existing viewpoints available to historians at the end of the twentieth century, the long eighteenth century has no single identity, no single vocabulary and no single characterisation. This is arguably healthy, if sometimes confusing, since overarching interpretations always seem to oversimplify some complex issues and ignore others. I have striven to offer generalizations of national relevance without assuming that national considerations were the only ones that mattered. Finally, I have tried to recognize that social and political history are inextricably intertwined without assuming that one determines the other. In this way the book may illuminate both.

Notes

1. A. Briggs, *The Age of Improvement* (1959).
2. L.B. Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, 2nd edn (1982); *England in the Age of the American Revolution*, 2nd edn (1961). The student seeking an easily digestible introduction to Namier's ideas is recommended to try 'Monarchy and the Party System' in Namier's *Personalities and Powers* (1955).