Reclaiming England's European Past

Between 10 and 11 o'clock on the night of December 17th 1688, the Dutch Guards under Count von Solms replaced the Coldstream Guards under Lord Craven at Whitehall, Somerset House and St. James's. The most momentous Changing of the Guard in English history was proof that William of Orange was master of England – and that England had been claimed for Europe. For the 'Glorious Revolution' was a European enterprise, which would not have succeeded without William's European army of Dutch, English, Scottish, German, Danish and Huguenot troops (and the German and Swedish troops hired to guard the Netherlands while he was in England). His goal was European: to use the resources of England to save 'the liberty of Europe' and check the territorial expansion of France.

English resentment of William III's foreign troops (large numbers of whom remained until 1697) and 'Dutch junto' could be violent: his own sister-in-law, Anne called the king 'the Dutch abortion'. However, this European prince did succeed in winning English support for the war against France, and in transforming England into a European great power. The Grand Alliance with the Holy Roman Emperor and the Netherlands outlasted William III. The army which the Duke of Marlborough led to victory at Blenheim and Ramillies was a European army.

Under George I and his successors, despite much verbal xenophobia – even the future George III called Hanover 'this horrid Electorate' – the relationship between the Crown and the Bonnet (the Kingdom of Great Britain and the Electorate of Hanover) worked to mutual advantage. In 1715 and 1745-46 the transfer of Hanoverian troops to the Netherlands released 6,000 Dutch troops – less resented than when under William III – for service in England, in defence of the Protestant Succession against the Jacobites. By tying up French forces in the empire, Hanover helped Britain win Canada in the Seven Years War. On the other side, British resources helped George I expand Hanoverian territory.

British ministers frequently took part in ministerial meetings with Hanoverian colleagues, both in London and, on the fifteen visits made by George I and George II between 1716 and 1755, in Hanover. Ragnhild Hatton writes: 'it is certainly striking how quickly British politicians who in opposition had been highly critical of the links with Hanover changed their tune when they achieved ministerial office'. If the possibility of a separation between the kingdom and the electorate was raised, British ministers generally opposed it. Hanover was a political as well as a military asset. Until the 1830s Hanoverian postal intercepts were a valuable source of information for the British government. In 1809 and 1811-12 British relations with Austria, suspended under pressure from Napoleon I, were resumed through the medium of the unofficial Hanoverian representative in Vienna, Graf von Hardenberg.

During the long struggle against 'the common enemy of Europe' i.e. Napoleon Bonaparte, Britain was joined, at one time or another, by most of Europe, and subsidised the exiled Bourbons and their followers. As a result its continental connections grew closer. As the great diplomatic historian, Sir Charles Webster, wrote: 'Both Pitt and Castlereagh were more interested in reconstructing the new Europe than in completing the ascendancy of the British Empire in the rest of the world'. In 1814 British diplomatic pressure helped win Hanover more territory (including the strategic district of East Frisia, a century later the site of The Riddle of the Sands) and the rank of kingdom: some German historians call Britain in this period the third German great power. In 1815 Castlereagh, a foreign secretary with a real understanding of Europe, personally drafted Article VI of the Quadruple Alliance between England, Austria, Russia and Prussia. It committed 'the High Contracting Parties' 'to renew their meetings at fixed periods... for the purpose of consulting upon their common interests... and for the maintenance of the Peace of Europe': hardly a precursor of the European Council of Ministers, but a sign that it is not entirely alien to the British past.

Castlereagh's successor, Canning, disliked congresses and was often accused by Metternich of putting England in the place of Europe. Yet he wanted to lead Europe rather than to be isolated from it. Believing that we are 'intimately connected... with the system of Europe', he tried, with considerable success, to be on 'a footing of confidence' with the French government. In 1826, while in o6ice, he spent over a month in Paris, and jokingly suggested the Foreign Office be transferred there. He treated Portugal as 'English', and in 1827 co-operated with France and Russia to save Greece from Ottoman reconquest.

Palmerston also hoped to make London the centre of 'the European system'. 'In the name of all Europe' he coerced the king of the Netherlands to acknowledge the independence of Belgium, and in 1855 committed Britain to the cause of constitutional monarchy in Spain and Portugal. Like Castlereagh, Canning and Wellington, he was part of the network of European statesmen created by the contest with Napoleon, and the shared pleasures of Paris and Vienna after 1814, which helped defuse many political disputes. On a visit to Paris in 1846, Lady Palmerston wrote: 'our invitations and visits still go on pouring like a cascade and almost overwhelm us'.

In 1837 the accession of Queen Victoria in the United Kingdom, and her uncle the Duke of Cumberland in Hanover (which did not follow female succession), finally separated the two thrones. The 'Hanoverian office' which had existed at St James's Palace since 1714 was repatriated, with its archives, to Hanover. However through the Queen's Coburg connections German influence at court continued. In her diary for August 24th, 1839, the queen wrote: 'I said to Lord Melbourne "it must be so tiresome to hear German always spoken before him, which he didn't understand." "Oh not at all he said most kindly."' Her editor, Lord Esher, writing in 1907, added a brief but pointed footnote: 'The Queen here alluded to the practice of the Royal Family at that date and for many years afterwards'.

This German influence increased after her marriage. Victoria, Albert, and their eldest daughter Victoria, Crown Princess of Prussia, were dedicated to the cause of what the queen called 'a strong united liberal Germany', led by Prussia. Many of the queen's ministers saw this German cause as helpful to England (indeed, Andrew Sinclair has pointed out, through her daughter the crown princess, the queen was often better informed than her foreign secretary about German politics). A memorandum of September 15th, 1847, from Lord Palmerston to Prince Albert stated:

> There can be no doubt that it is greatly for the interest of England to cultivate a close political connection and alliance with Germany as it is also the manifest interest of Germany to ally itself politically with England. The great interests of the two are the same.

If (despite a later attempt by Joseph Chamberlain) this 'connection and alliance' never materialised, not British isolationism but Prussian distaste for British constitutional monarchy – and the brevity of the reign of Queen Victoria's son-in-law Frederick III – were responsible. The intense royal concern for Germany raises questions about the course of German unification if Queen Victoria had been King Victor – of Hanover as well as the United Kingdom.

Thus from 1689 until the 1850s the British government generally acted as a European power, and often advocated closer European links. 1n addition many English individuals found it natural to behave as Europeans, in a European context (the triumphant European careers of Irish and Scottish Jacobites, like the relations of Ireland and Scotland with Europe, are a separate subject). What other European nation has produced leaders as skilled at keeping European armies and alliances together, as Marlborough and Wellington? In the early nineteenth century, in particular, England was led by a generation of Europeans. Portugal's long political and commercial connection with England was epitomised by Marshal Beresford. A former governor of Madeira, and subordinate of Wellington, he was commander of the Portuguese army – and unofficial ruler of Portugal – from 1814 to 1822.

Lord William Bentinck, a descendant of William III's most influential favourite, shows that service in the British Empire was compatible with a career in Europe: between spells as governor of Madras (1803-7) and Bengal (1827-35), from 1810 to 181 Bentinck was commander-in-chief of British forces in Sicily. He imposed a liberal constitution there in 1812, and, against his government's wishes, strove to make constitutional Sicily 'not only the model but the instrument of Italian independence'. In 1814 he landed at Livorno at the head of troops bearing the flag 'Italian union – national independence' – possibly the first troops enrolled under such a banner.

Another Englishman who acted as an Italian liberal – and, of course, Greek patriot – was Lord Byron. While living in Ravenna with Teresa Guiccioli, he joined conspiracies against the Papal government:

> I have lived among the Italians – not Florenced and Romed and Galleried and conversationed it for a few months and then home again – but been of their families and friendships and feuds and loves and Councils and Correspondences.

From 1821 to 1824 he led the struggle to free Greece. When he died his ally Prince Alexander Mavrocordato wrote to Byron's sister: votre perte est une perte europeenne.

Byron was no doubt right: many Englishmen on the Grand Tour, more intoxicated by the classical past than the European present, simply 'Florenced and Romed and Galleried and conversationed it'. However, the English love for European travel – in 1785 Gibbon was told there were 40,000 English travellers on the Continent – did show that they were more cosmopolitan than contemporary Frenchmen or Germans, most of whom, whatever their income, preferred to stay at home. And England's cultural connection with Europe was confirmed by the impact of France. Despite constant wars, widespread xenophobia and intense anti-catholic feeling, French, the language of Europe, remained, until the twentieth century, the second language of the educated elite of the British Isles. Since George I did not speak English well, he spoke to his ministers in French. In 1822 Chateaubriand claimed that, at the court of George IV, on n'entendait pas quatre paroles anglaises. Until 1834 the British government often used French in official communications with other governments and diplomats.

Many English writers, such as Horace Walpole and Swinburne, also wrote in French – sometimes more freely than in English. Even the quintessential English figure, Dr L Johnson, knew French and Italian so well, according to Boswell, as 'to be sufficiently qualified for a translator'. Gibbon, who lived in Lausanne for over fourteen years, wrote his first books in French: Essai sur l'Etude de la Litterature (1761) and Memoires Litteraires de la Grande Bretagne (1767-68). They were both published a Londres, then a centre of French as well as English publishers: the first chez T. Becket et P.A. De Houdt, dans le Strand, the second chez C.Heydinger dans Grafton Street, Soho. Such English immersion in French culture, as well as a common commitment to monarchy, help explain the exemplary generosity of English support for French emigres – including Roman Catholic priests – after 1793.

Many English loved France so much that they went to live there. In 1814, according to a popular song:

> London now is out of town,
> Who in England tarries?
> Who can bear to linger there
> When all the world's in Paris?

At this high-tide of Anglo-French relations, when Frenchmen visited London to see how parliamentary monarchy worked, and the English were rediscovering the joys (and cheapness) of the Continent, connections could be very close. In the years 1814-18 Wellington, a favourite of Louis XVIII and a friend of Madame de Stael, operated as a skilful French royalist politician as well as a European general. Bonington shared a studio with Delacroix. Lamartine, de Vigny and Tocqueville were among the many prominent Frenchmen with English wives. Another human link with France was the decision of some emigres – the most famous examples being the Du Maurier and Brunel families – to remain in England.

In addition dynasties of English merchants were established throughout Europe: the Bartons of Bordeaux, the Boyds of Oporto, the Blandys of Madeira, the Whitakers of Palermo, the Whittalls of Constantinople. They were there to make money, and retained English customs and in most cases religion (Oporto still has the Oporto Cricket and Lawn Tennis Club, an Anglican church and a British school, where most of the pupils are now Portuguese). Yet many became integrated in the life of their new country. In 1814 one mayor of Bordeaux, Comte Lynch of Irish Jacobite stock, led his city to declare for the Bourbons – with the help of the Duke of Wellington; the present maire adjoint of this anglophile city is called Jean Lawton.

In contrast to this European past, the century 1850-1950 was a period of rampant nationalism for all countries of Europe, France and Germany as well as Britain. Lord Derby wrote to Queen Victoria of his determination 'to keep the country as far as possible from any entanglement in continental politics'. Britain turned increasingly to its empire.

Yet even at the height of British insularity, until 1914 it remained part of what was called 'the concert of Europe', a diplomatic reality which, for example, limited Russian expansion, and determined frontiers and dynasties, in the Balkans. Britain's decision to go to war, in 1914 for Belgium, and in 1939 for Poland, demonstrated its commitment to 'the liberty of Europe'. Despite the attractions of the empire, no nation produced so many individuals capable of adopting another European country, or countries, as their own. Miss Irby and Miss Muir Mackenzie ('the Angels of Mercy') chose Bosnia, Miss Durham (the 'Queen of the Mountain People') Albania, and Maurice Baring Russia. In Bulgaria a Times correspondent, J.D. Bourchier, known to Bulgarians as nasha Bourchier, 'our Bourchier', helped create the Balkan League of 1912. Even English writers of popular fiction chose European heroes: Conan Doyle celebrated the exploits of Brigadier Gerard, P.C. Wren those of Beau Geste, Agatha Christie those of Hercule Poirot...

The greatest Englishman of the century, Churchill, was dedicated to the British Empire, and 'Anglo-American partnership'. Yet he spent more time in Europe; and his concern for Europe was so intense that he adopted certain European causes, not immediately identifiable with British policy or interests. When Wrangel's White Russian army was advancing on Moscow in 1920, he exclaimed: 'Only ninety-eight more miles to Moscow and Winston Churchill comes into his own! '. In 1940 he advocated Anglo-French union, and in 1943, in pursuit of his hope of a restored Danubian monarchy, pleaded with Anthony Eden to grant a visa for the Archduke Otto of Austria: 'Please try to have a little confidence in my insight into Europe gathered over so many years'. In 1946 he helped launch the movement for a United States of Europe – although he did little about it when he returned to office.

England has had a powerful strain of xenophobia and isolationism, yet the attraction of Europe has been equally compelling. From De Gaulle to Tebbit, those who believe that England has always been different from the rest of Europe have been misled. Europe is behind us as well as in front of us.