

# FOUNDATION OF EMPIRE—ERA SUMMARY

## BRITISH EMPIRE—1707 TO 1815

### ACT OF UNION TO BATTLE OF WATERLOO

When the English Parliament passed the Act of Settlement in 1701, to bypass all members of the Stuart family, and pass the throne on to the Hanoverians, the solidified Parliament's control over the monarchy. When [George I](#), ascended to the throne on the death of Queen Anne, he bypassed many members of the royal family, and took his position solely at the discretion of parliament. His main qualifications were 1) he was Protestant rather than Catholic, and 2) he did not speak English and had no knowledge of political affairs. This, however, was an asset as far as Parliament was concerned, since he was entirely under their control. Since George I was unable to run his own cabinet meetings, his leading minister [Robert Walpole](#) became the first Prime Minister of England, and much of the crown's authority transferred to this position. Walpole served under George I, and [George II](#), and his ministry was generally peaceful but not notable for reform or expansion of territory.

**Jacobite Rebellions**—Although George I had the support of Parliament, there were still many Stuart supporters, especially in Ireland and Scotland. James III, the [Old Pretender](#), led a rebellion in 1715, and his son James IV, [Young Pretender](#), led a second in 1745. Both uprisings, known as [Jacobite Rebellions](#), failed miserably, but the story of Young Pretender, also known as Bonnie Prince Charlie, involved a great deal of romance and dash. There were no further challenges to the Hanoverian rule.



'GENTLEMEN', HE CRIED, DRAWING HIS SWORD. 'I HAVE THROWN AWAY THE SCABBARD.'

### **William Pitt and the Seven Years War**

—During the first half of the 18th century, both France and England had been expanding their settlements in North America, and developing their trade in the far east. In both locations, the long term interests of France and England were at odds, and by mid-century, had reached a crisis point. At this time, one of the greatest statesmen in British History appeared on the scene, [William Pitt](#), also known as the Earl of Chatham. He took charge of Britain's foreign affairs at a critical time, reformed its military, and during the course of the [Seven Year's War](#) (known as the [French Indian Wars](#) in the U.S.), won several enormously important victories with long-lasting consequences for the British Empire. The victory of [General Wolfe](#) at the Battle of Quebec drove France out of North America; [Clive's](#)

victory at Plassey won the Indian State of Bengal for Britain; and the Battle of Quiberon Bay, under [Lord Edward Hawke](#) destroyed French naval power.

The Seven Years' War made Britain the dominant European power in North America and India as well, and gave her uncontested mastery of the Seas. Yet this was only the foundation of her eventual empire, and the struggle against France would not be finally resolved for another half century. For the next fifty years, her politics were dominated by wars and revolutions on four continents, and the beginnings of an industrial revolution at home. In spite of these struggles, Britain grew and thrived during this time, her population, commerce, and agricultural production, all nearly doubling. The reign of [George III](#) lasted nearly sixty years, and, although he attempted, much more than his Hanoverian predecessors, to hold power in his own hands, his misguided policies ended up costing Britain her most valuable colonies in North America. This crisis occurred in the first twenty years of his reign, and for much of his succeeding reign, the real power lay with his Prime Minister, [William Pitt](#), whose father had opposed the War against the colonies, and urged Britain to make peace with Americans. Pitt the Younger was almost as effective a statesman as his father, and favored many important reforms to the British government, but could not implement them until the close of the [Napoleonic Wars](#), which he did not live to see.

**French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars**—The French Revolution, which occurred in 1789 plunged Britain into a complicated series of wars with France, lasting almost a quarter century. At first many people within Britain, sympathized with the rebels, but when the true nature of the revolution became apparent, Britain joined an alliance with most other European powers to oppose the Revolutionary Government. During the first series of battles, lasting from 1793 to 1802, Britain provided arms and support to various coalitions of European powers who fought against France, and won many important naval victories. It was during these [French Revolutionary Wars](#) that [Horatio Nelson](#), the greatest naval hero in Britain's history, proved his mettle at the Battles of St. Vincent, Nile, and Copenhagen. In spite of these victories, France was generally victorious in its wars with the European governments, and [Napoleon](#) had risen to power. Soon after he declared himself emperor, the European powers agreed to recognize him and enjoyed a short period of peace before he began the conquest of continental Europe, known as the [Napoleonic Wars](#).



NELSON AT THE BATTLE OF COPENHAGEN

For many years Britain was the only check on Napoleon's power, and if he had been able to land an army on her shores, he believed his superior army would prevail against her. However,

the [Battle of Trafalgar](#), fought in 1805, destroyed France's naval power, assuring that Britain would remain free from invasion. Though victorious at sea, Britain was unable to stop Napoleon's domination of the continent, and within a year of Trafalgar, most of Western Europe was under his control. Portugal, and to some extent Spain however, was still actively resisting the French powers, so the [Duke of Wellington](#), the greatest general within Britain, rose an army and fought Napoleon's forces in the [Peninsular War](#), on the Iberian Peninsula. This front, which was active from 1808 to 1813, was Britain's main campaign on the continent, but it encouraged smuggling, provided financial support to rebels, and in other ways helped to undermine Napoleon's government, especially following his disastrous campaign in Russia. It was not until the Battle of Waterloo however, in 1814 that Napoleon's power was permanently broken, and France remained in an unsettled condition for years afterward.

**Exploration and Colonization**—The last half of the 18th century was also a period during which Britain's colonial holdings increased, and much exploration done. [Captain Cook](#), the greatest navigator of his age, not only discovered Australia and New Zealand for Britain, in the 1770's but also much improved the British navy by instituting standards of nutrition and cleanliness aboard ships which greatly reduced the incidence of scurvy and other disease. His explorations of the polar areas, and south sea islands, also much improved geographical knowledge of the time. Other explorers of this age included [Mungo Park](#), who traced the mouth of the Niger, [George Vancouver](#), who claimed Western Canada for Britain, and [Alexander Mackenzie](#), who explored the far regions of Northwest Canada for the Hudson Bay Company, and [James Bruce](#), who discovered the legendary source of the Blue Nile in Abyssinia (modern Ethiopia).

The loss of the American colonies in 1783 had the effect of accelerating the settlement of Canada and Australia. In the Americas, Tory sympathizers left the new republic in droves, and settled in upper Canada (now Ontario), and Australia was originally settled as a penal colony, since British felons could no longer be sent to the American colonies. British citizens also began settling in South Africa, which had been won from Holland in 1795 during the [French Revolutionary Wars](#). The British presence in India increased also during this period, still under the auspices of the British East India Company, under the Governorship of [Warren Hastings](#). Unlike Britain's colonies in the west however, India was already heavily populated, and English outposts functioned more as trading centers than expanding settlements. The British also held numerous Island colonies in the West Indies, and continued to import slaves from Africa to work on cotton, sugar, and tobacco plantations there, until the slave trade was outlawed in 1807. Slavery was finally made illegal in all British colonies in 1833.

**British Literature, Science, Industry, Economics and Culture**—The 18th century was a very fertile one for English Literature. There emerged several notable English writers, including [Alexander Pope](#), [Jonathan Swift](#) of [Gulliver's Travels](#) fame, and [Samuel Johnson](#), author of the first Dictionary of the English Language. Literary greats of the revolutionary era included the Robert Burns the Poet, [Sir Walter Scott](#), the greatest of Scottish novelists, [Edmund Burke](#), the political philosopher, who was known to be very sympathetic to the American Revolution but was one of the first to condemn the French Revolution; and Blackstone, the famous jurist and

author of Commentaries on the Laws of England, the authoritative work on English Common Law.

The British writer of greatest long term importance however, was probably [Adam Smith](#), who published *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776. He advocated the novel idea of free trade and low tariffs at time when much of government revenues, monopolies, and money making schemes were tied up with tariffs and other import encumbrances. Although his ideas took several generations to take full effect, they eventually became the foundation of modern capitalism. The economic ideas of Adam Smith, combined with some of the critical inventions of the era, including [James Watt's](#) Steam Engine, [Hargreaves'](#) spinning Jenny, Crompton's Mule, and [George Stephenson's](#) locomotive, eventually set the stage for an industrial revolution in England which had world-wide repercussions and changed the nature of international commerce.