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A History of  
Britain - Volume 3

Simon Schama

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## About the Book

While Britain was losing an empire, it was finding itself...’ The compelling opening words to *The Fate of the Empire*, set the tone and agenda for the final stage of Simon Schama's epic voyage around Britain, her people and her past. Spanning two centuries, crossing the breadth of the empire and covering a vast expanse of topics – from the birth of feminism to the fate of freedom – he explores the forces that shaped British culture and character from 1776 to 2000.

The story opens on the eve of a bloody revolution, but not a British one. The French Revolution never quite crossed the Channel, though its spirit of fiery defiance and Romantic idealism did, sparking off a round of radical revolts and reforms that gathered momentum over the coming century – from the Irish Rebellion to the Chartist Petition. The great question of the Victorian century was how the world’s first industrial society could come through its growing pains without falling apart in social and political conflict. Would the machine age destroy or strengthen the institutions that held Britain together, from the family to the farm? And if the British Empire helped to make Britain stable and rich, did it live up to its promise to help the ruled as well as the rulers? On the way to answering these questions, *The Fate of the Empire* makes stops at both celebrations, like the Great Exhibition, and catastrophes, like the Irish potato famine and the Indian Mutiny. Amidst the military and economic shocks and traumas of the 20th century, and through the voices of Churchill, Orwell and H. G. Wells, it asks the question that is still with us – is the immense weight of our history a blessing or a curse, a gift or a millstone around the neck of our future?

It is a vast compelling epic, made more so by the lively storytelling and big bold characters at the heart of the action. But alongside flamboyant heroes, like Nelson and Churchill, Schama recalls unsung heroines and virtually unknown enemies. Alongside the grand ideas, he exposes the grand illusions that cost untold lives. Schama looks head on at the facts and asks, ‘What went wrong with the liberal dream?’ The answers emerge in *The Fate of the Empire*, which reveals the living ideals of Britain’s long history, ‘a history that tied together social justice with bloody-minded liberty’.

## About the Author

Simon Schama is University Professor of Art History and History at Columbia University and the prize-winning author of fourteen books, which have been translated into twenty languages. They include *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*; *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*; *Landscape and Memory*; *Rembrandt's Eyes*; the *History of Britain* trilogy and *Rough Crossings*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award. He has written widely on music, art, politics and food for the *Guardian*, *Vogue* and the *New Yorker*. His award-winning television work as writer and presenter for the BBC stretches over two decades and includes the fifteen-part *A History of Britain* and the eight-part, Emmy-winning *Power of Art*. *The American Future: A History* appeared on BBC2 in autumn 2008.

# A History of Britain

*The Fate of the Empire*

1776–2000

SIMON SCHAMA



THE BODLEY HEAD  
LONDON

## PREFACE

READERS IN SEARCH of an exhaustive account of the careers of Sir Robert Peel or Reginald Maudling should put this book down right now. For, with this last volume of *A History of Britain*, it will be more than ever obvious that the cautionary indefinite article in the title is truly warranted, both in terms of the frankly interpretative reading of modern British history offered, and in the necessarily subjective judgements I have made about which themes to explore in most detail. As with the BBC2 television programmes, I have opted to concentrate on a smaller number of stories and arguments, but to treat them in detail rather than give equally cursory attention to everything bearing on the transformation of Britain into an industrial empire. As with the two previous volumes, this book gives space to many themes which could not be accommodated within the iron narrative discipline of the television hour. But even this does not mean there is any pretence at all to comprehensiveness. No one will be in any danger of confusing *The Fate of Empire* with a textbook. The last half of the 20th century is deliberately treated with essay-like breadth and looseness – partly, at least, because I have trouble treating any period contemporary with my own life as history at all (an illusion, no doubt, of the passing of years). As the title of this volume suggests, however, I have tried to do something not always ventured in histories of 19th- and 20th-century Britain: to bring together imperial and domestic history, trying at all times to look at the importance that India, in particular, had for Britain's expansive prosperity and power, and at the responsibility that the Raj had for India's and Ireland's plight.

*New York, 2002*

*And out you come at last with the sun behind you into the eastern sea. You speed up and tear the oily water louder and faster, sirroo, sirroo–swish–sirroo, and the hills of Kent – over which I once fled from the Christian teachings of Nicodemus Frapp – fall away on the right hand and Essex on the left. They fall away and vanish into blue haze; and the tall slow ships behind the tugs, scarce moving ships and wallowing sturdy tugs are all wrought of wet gold as one goes frothing by. They stand out bound on strange missions of life and death, to the killing of men in unfamiliar lands. And now behind us is blue mystery and the phantom flash of unseen lights, and presently even these are gone and I and my destroyer tear out to the unknown across a great grey space. We tear into the great spaces of the future and the turbines fall to talking in unfamiliar tongues. Out to the open we go, to windy freedom and trackless ways. Light after light goes down. England and the Kingdom, Britain and the Empire, the old prides and the old devotions, glide abeam, astern, sink down upon the horizon, pass – pass. The river passes – London passes, England passes ...*

H.G. WELLS, *Tono-Bungay* (1909)

*... the country houses will be turned into holiday camps, the Eton and Harrow match will be forgotten, but England will still be England, an everlasting animal stretching into the future and the past and, like all living things, having the power to change out of recognition and yet remain the same ...*

GEORGE ORWELL, *England Your England* (1941)



FORCES OF NATURE:  
THE ROAD TO  
REVOLUTION?

WHILE BRITAIN WAS losing an empire it was finding itself. As redcoats were facing angry crowds and hostile militiamen in Massachusetts, Thomas Pennant, a Flintshire gentleman and naturalist, set off on his travels in rough Albion in search of that almost extinct species: the authentic natural-born Briton. Amidst the upland crags and chilly tarns of Merionedd, he thought he had discovered them: Britain's very own home-grown noble savages, the descendants of the earliest tribes, whose simplicity had survived, somehow, the onslaught of modern 'civilization'. At Llyn Irdinn he walked round two circles of standing stones, which he believed were undoubtedly the remains of 'druidical antiquities'. Nearby, he discovered the human equivalent, at the house of Evan Llwd, where Pennant was treated to hospitality 'in the style of an antient Briton' with 'potent beer to wash down the Coch yr Wdre or hung goat and the cheese compounded of the milk of cow and sheep. He likewise showed us the antient family cup made of a bull's scrotum in which large libation had been made in days of yore ... Here they have lived for generations without bettering or lessening their income, without noisy fame, but without any of its embittering attendants.'

The harsh, rain-soaked countryside was full of such old British marvels, human and topographical. At Penllyn lake Pennant found the hut of the nonagenarian Margaret Uch Evans, although its locally famous resident was off somewhere, perhaps shooting foxes. This was a bitter disappointment, for Margaret, he had heard, was a Welsh Diana, a Celtic Amazon: a prodigious huntress and fisher who, even in her 90s, 'rowed stoutly, was queen of the lake, fiddled excellently and knew all the old music, did not neglect the mechanic arts for she was a very good joiner'. She was also blacksmith, shoemaker, boat-builder, harp-maker, and well into her 70s had been 'the best wrestler in the country'.

Pennant became the specialist in documenting the remnants of ancient, outlandish, unpolished Britain: the wildcat and the ptarmigan; the mysterious, lichen-flecked megalith and the poor, tough people who lived among them. A few years after his 'excursion' into north Wales – and a year before James Boswell and Dr Johnson – he sailed through the Hebrides, taking with him Moses Griffith, his Welsh manservant and illustrator. There he beheld scenes that filled him, alternately, with melancholy and elation. The island people, like the shepherds of the Merionedd hills, were primitives, often dwelling in windowless hovels and surviving on oatmeal, milk and a little fish. Tens of thousands of them had been forced off their little farms in the 1760s and 1770s to make way for profitable herds of Blackface and Cheviot sheep. In desperation, many had made the Atlantic crossing as emigrants to the New World. Yet there were

also little epiphanies: the sight of the herring boats at Barrisdale, ‘a busy haunt of men and ships in this wild and romantic tract’; or the view from the top of Beinn-an-oir, the Golden Mountain, one of the (disconcertingly, three) Paps of Jura, which laid out for Pennant’s exhilarated inspection the scattered pieces of outland Britain – the highland peaks all the way to Ben Lomond in the northeast; the isles of Colonsay and Oronsay in the western ocean; and, to the south, Islay and the distant hills of Antrim in Northern Ireland.

The result of all this clambering and trotting and sketching and jotting made Thomas Pennant the first great tour guide of a Britain still waiting to be fully explored by the domestic tourist. Five editions of his *A Tour in Scotland* (1772) appeared before 1790. But he was not the only author making a modest fame and fortune from the rediscovery, the redefinition, of the nation. In 1778, while His Majesty’s forces were evacuating Philadelphia, and after Pennant’s description of Wales had been published, it was joined by the one of the first guides to the Lake District, written by Thomas West, a Scottish Jesuit living in Ulverston. West, like Pennant, was a scholar, much travelled through Europe. Tired of dragging bored milords through the beggar-infested Forum on their obligatory Grand Tour, he had returned and developed a second career, taking parties of intrepid and interested gentlemen and ladies through the lakes, cliffs and dales. Whether in person or through his guidebook, West would steer tourists to a succession of visual stations, perfect for drinking in the British sublime.

The message that both Pennant and West had to deliver was simple, but revolutionary: come home. The British had wandered too much, too promiscuously, too greedily, from Mysore to Naples. In forcing their native scenery to resemble Italy, tricked out with temples and statues and God knows what – or, just as bad, engineering it to resemble foreign paintings, so that they could stroll from the picture gallery to the picnic and not notice the difference – they had somehow lost touch with what made Britain Britain: its own unprettified landscape. By some miracle it had remained unspoiled in the remoter places of the islands, places thought too far, too ugly and too rude for polite excursions. But now the new turnpike roads had cut travel time to Chester or Edinburgh by half, so that the adventurous traveller could be whisked to the verge of sublime Britain – after which, it is true, simpler, rougher modes of transport such as the pony or the small ferryboat might have to suffice. And it was an unpleasant fact that exposure to the sublime meant being rained on a lot and being blown about by winds.

But it would all be worth it, Pennant and West implied, because a trip to the true Britain was not just a holiday; it was a tutorial in the recovery of national virtue. The British needed roughness because they had wallowed too long in vicious softness. Inspecting all those Roman ruins, they had doomed themselves to follow the notorious example of that empire’s decay. Long before they had lost America, the Jeremiahs said, Britons had lost themselves. Old British virtues had surrendered to modern British vices. Liberty had been perverted by patronage; justice blinded by the unforgiving glare of money; country innocence contaminated by city fashion. The ‘Ancient Constitution’ that had kept the British free had degenerated into what its critics called ‘Old Corruption’ or, more bestially, ‘The Thing’. The triumphalists of empire had supposed that commercial robustness and Protestant plainness would immunize Britain from the usual laws of imperial decadence. But trade had become a

euphemism for the crude gouging of revenue, enforced by British redcoats, or for the brutal traffic in African bodies. And God and history had inflicted their punishment at Saratoga and Yorktown.

The antidote to rot was horror. 'Horrid' was – along with 'bristling', 'shaggy' and 'precipitous' – one of the terms of choice in the promotional literature of Romantic British travel. At Falcon-Crag in Lakeland, West promised, 'an immense rock hangs over your head and upwards, a forest of broken pointed rocks, in a semicircular sweep towering inward, form[ing] the most horrid amphitheatre that ever eye beheld in the wild forms of convulsed nature.' At the Falls of Clyde, an obligatory stop on the itinerary of the British sublime, according to another gentleman travel writer, Thomas Newte, 'the great body of water, rushing with horrid fury seems to threaten destruction to the solid rocks that enrage it by their resistance. It boils up from the caverns which itself has formed as if it were vomited out of the lower region.' But these frightening experiences were not just perversely organized as holidays in hell; they were a spa for the sensations. The agitation of the senses was meant to shock the visitor out of the jaded appetite and torpor that was eating away the national fibre. The crystal waters of Cumbria, Cymru and Caledonia would be the cure for the diseases, moral as well as metabolic, of empire. In the uplands, away from the noxious filth and polluted air of the metropolis, Britons would be able to breathe again. They would start a new life.

Everything was to be stood on its head. The forces of 'progress' – Romans, Plantagenets – were now to be thought of as the bringers of greed and brutish power. Contemplating the archaeology of defeat brought the traveller into communion with lost worlds of old British virtue, an antiquity that might actually serve as a template for the future. The stone circles and Iron Age terraces that bore the footprints of a Britain flattened by the Romans; the shattered Welsh forts blitzed by Edward I; the ruined abbeys dispossessed by Thomas Cromwell and then burned by Oliver Cromwell – all became invested with tragic eloquence. As early as 1740 the antiquarian William Stukeley's *Stonehenge: A Temple Restor'd to the British Druids* had argued that far from being the bloodthirsty barbarians described by Caesar, the Druids had actually been the descendants of one of the lost tribes of Israel, transplanted to Britain to create a new Promised Land, and had survived as the priestly guardians of an ancient and sophisticated culture. Their Celtic tongue was not just the original British language but the fountainhead of all non-Latin European languages.

Suddenly, being British was not the same as being English. Dolbadarn Castle, in the north Welsh fastness of Gwynedd, where Owain Goch, the son of the last independent Welsh prince, Llewellyn ab Gruffydd, took on the juggernaut army of Edward I, became a place of pilgrimage. Initially those who found their way there were Welsh antiquarians like Pennant, eager to reclaim their patrimony as the 'original Britons', but soon enough Romantic English sympathizers followed. The shattered piles of masonry silhouetted against the dark sky were seen (and painted) as incomparably more 'feeling' than the brutally intact Plantagenet castles like Conwy and Harlech, called 'the magnificent badges of our subjection' by Pennant. Carrying their copies of Thomas Gray's epic poem, 'The Bard' (1757), reciting the last curses hurled at the oncoming king by the last blind poet to survive the Plantagenet extermination, Snowdonian thrill-seekers would peer into the ravines and shudder as they imagined the bard hurling himself headlong in a gesture of suicidal defiance. If

they were very lucky they might be invited by the likes of Sir Watkin Williams Wynn to an eisteddfod, one of the gatherings at his country seat of Wynnstay in Denbighshire, featuring choirs and old, preferably blind, harpists like John Parry who would sing the tunes and lyrics of his forebears. From the mid-1750s a group of London Welsh calling themselves the Cymmrodorion met in taverns, and between rounds of strong ale, committed themselves to rescuing those epics and ballads from oblivion by writing them down and publishing them.

Wherever they looked, the Romantic enthusiasts of rough Britain believed, there were lessons to be learned that confounded the equation of cultivation with nobility. It was in the places furthest from corrupting fashion, in the heart of Britain's oldest landscapes – the landscapes which gave 'Capability' Brown nightmares – that truly modern marvels were to be beheld. In 1746 a builder called William Edwards had attempted to throw a single 140-foot stone bridge across the river Taff. After two collapses, by 1755 he had succeeded – no one quite knew how – and the bridge was still standing. By the late 1760s and 1770s, the Pontypridd was being compared in prose and verse eulogies to the Rialto in Venice as a 'monument of the strong, natural past and bold attempts of Antient Britain'.

William Edwards was an exemplar of this old-new Britain: a survivor from a rude world, but also a native *genius*. For now, that word was being used in both its ancient and modern sense, to mean someone who was rooted in a particular place *and* someone who was sublimely inspired. It followed, then, that a voyage of British discovery would have to happen as close as possible to the landscape that had protected and sheltered the true nature of Britain. And to do that Britons would first have to get off their high horse. It was only by direct contact with the earth of Britain that romantic tourists could expect to register, through their boots and in their bones, the deep, organic meaning of native allegiance. To be a patriot meant being a pedestrian.

Of course, the fashionable landscaped park had encouraged the estate-owner and his family to take a stroll along the rambling path, beside a serpentine pond or towards an Italianate pavilion, with the prospect of arriving at a poetic meditation, courtesy of Horace, Ovid or Pope. But the new walking was not just physically strenuous but morally, even politically, self-conscious. Picking up a stick, exiting the park, was a statement. In 1783 when John 'Walking' Stewart, the most prodigious of all the Romantic trampers, left India – where, in a 20-year career, he had served successively as East India Company writer, soldier and a minister of native princes – he was bidding farewell to empire in more than the territorial sense. He seems to have become a kind of Indo-Scottish *saddhu*, a holy walker, making his way through the sub-continent, across the Arabian desert and finally home via France and Spain. Before he set off again for Vienna and then the United States and Canada, 'Walking' Stewart became a minor celebrity – a fixture at Romantic suppers, and pointed out in St James's Park. The writer Thomas De Quincey, who knew him, was also in no doubt of the levelling implications of walking. When he calculated (a little dubiously) that William Wordsworth must have walked 185,000 miles, the figure was meant to advertise the poet's moral credentials – his down-to-earth understanding of ordinary people and places. At the height of the revolutionary crisis in France in 1793, during the reign of Terror, John Thelwall, the son of an impoverished silk mercer, who had

become a radical lecturer and orator, would publish his eccentric verse and prose narrative of a walk around London and Kent, entitled *The Peripatetic* (1793) – a footsore glimpse of the lowly and the mighty.

Not everyone was ready for the sight of ‘men of taste’ taking to the roads. The first guide expressly written for the ‘rambler’ in the Lakes, complete with information on footpaths, and carrying the revolutionary implication that the landscape across which they tracked was a common patrimony (and not just the resort of beggars and footpads), would not appear until 1792. Some 10 years earlier, when the German pastor Karl Moritz walked through southern England and the Midlands, he was constantly greeted with suspicion and disbelief. His host at Richmond ‘could not sufficiently express his surprise’ at Moritz’s determination to walk to Oxford ‘and still further’ and when, on a June day, he became tired and sat down in the shade of a hedgerow to read his Milton, ‘those who rode, or drove, past me, stared at me with astonishment, and made many significant gestures, as if they thought my head deranged’. The landlord of the Mitre at Oxford and his family made sure he had the clean linen that befitted a gentleman, but were bemused by his determination to walk. Had he not arrived in polite company, they admitted, he would never have been allowed across the threshold since ‘any person undertaking so long a journey on foot, is sure to be looked upon ... as either a beggar, or a vagabond, or ... a rogue’.

Moritz presented himself as an innocent foreigner in a country evidently mad for speed, its citizens hurtling along the turnpike roads in carriages and on horses. Yet he also knew that walking made him, if not a democrat, then someone who openly and perversely rejoiced in his indifference to rank. It brought him into direct contact with the salt of the earth: a female chimney sweep and a philosophical saddler who recites Homer: the academy of the road. And it showed off the pedestrian as a new kind of man, a Man of Feeling. In that same year, 1782, he would finally have been able to get his hands on the work that rapidly became the Bible of thoughtful pedestrians, the *Confessions* (1782) of the French political philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and, as an appendix, the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, 10 disquisitions each in the form of a walk.

For Rousseau, a walk had always been away from, as much as towards, something. The *Confessions* – made available to the public through the good offices of an English friend and devotee, Brooke Boothby – recorded his first decisive illumination as he walked from Paris to Vincennes to see his then friend, the writer and philosopher Denis Diderot. Somewhere along that road it dawned on Rousseau, as he walked away from the city, that the entire values of the polite world were upside down. He had been taught to assume that progress consisted of a journey from nature to civilization, when that transformation had, in fact, been a terrible fall. Nature decreed equality; culture manufactured inequality. So liberty and happiness consisted not in replacing nature by culture, but in precisely the reverse. Towns, which imposed an obligation to conduct one’s life according to the dictates of fashion, commerce and wit, were a web of vicious hypocrites and predators. Towns enslaved; the countryside – provided it too had not been infected with urban evils – liberated. Towns contaminated and sickened their inhabitants; the country cleansed and invigorated them. Rather than education assuming its mission to be the taming of children’s natural instincts within the pen of cultivated arts and manners it ought to do precisely the opposite – preserving, for as

long as possible, the innocence, artlessness, frankness and simplicity of those instincts. No books, then, before 12 at least; instead, romps in the fields, stories beneath the trees and lots of nature walks.

All of which made Rousseau's brief, dizzy stay in London, in the winter of 1766, disconcerting to guest and host alike. He had come to England, on the warm invitation of the Scottish philosopher David Hume, because he had run out of asylums and because he had been reliably informed that the country was the sanctuary of liberty. In absolutist, Catholic France his writings had been burned by the public hangman. In his Calvinist native city of Geneva he had not fared much better, falling foul of the local oligarchy when he had rashly and publicly sided with challenges to their monopoly of power. For a brief period he had found an idyllic refuge, together with his mistress, Thérèse Levasseur, on the islet of St Pierre, near Bienne, where he went for botanizing walks or rowed a little boat. His last shelter was the estate of an English-naturalized Swiss, Rodolphe Vautravers, but the long arm of authority, in the shape of the Bishop of Berne's proscription for irreligion, caught up with him. Finally, he accepted Hume's invitation and travelled with him across the Channel.

It was not a pleasure trip. Rousseau arrived at Dover seasick, wet, tearful and cold. In London, where Hume attempted to introduce him to like-minded friends including the actor David Garrick, Prospective Men and Women of Feeling lined up to offer gushing admiration, tearfully sympathetic consolation, discreet applause. But although he came out of his shell enough to drink in the appreciation, and began to appear in his pseudo-'Armenian' peasant's costume of fur cap and tunic, it took no time at all before Rousseau's unique gift for alienating his well-wishers surfaced. When David Hume attempted to recommend him to George III for a royal pension, it was perversely interpreted by Rousseau as a conspiracy. It probably didn't help when, to pre-empt Rousseau's excuse that babysitting his dog, Sultan, prevented him from going to the theatre in Drury Lane to meet the king, Hume locked the dog on the inside of the apartment, and, with Rousseau on the outside, insisted on taking him to the show. What Hume thought was a good-natured attempt to bring Rousseau a harmless degree of benign public attention was perceived by its intended beneficiary as a plot to subject him to 'enslavement' and ridicule. Rousseau even believed that Hume was the author of a hoax invitation from Frederick the Great urging him to come to Prussia. (The writer was actually Horace Walpole.) An ugly public row ensued. Hume himself began to realize, depressingly, that his guest was perhaps a little mad.

Escape to the country, in Rousseau's fevered mind, became virtually a matter of life or death. A house was found for him – where else? – in Wales. But there were delays in getting it ready, which of course further heated the philosopher's already seething suspicions about his hosts. Instead, he accepted the offer of a philanthropist, Richard Davenport, to vacate his country house at Wootton in Staffordshire, on the Derbyshire border and thus close to some of the loveliest scenery in England. Rousseau walked through Dovedale in his strange 'Armenian' costume where locals later remembered 'owd Ross Hall coming and going in his comical cap and ploddy gown and gathering his yerbs'. Occasionally, too, he would let himself be taken to Calwich Abbey where he met a group of local admirers and disciples, including Brooke Boothby, who were already committed to remaking themselves as Men and Women of Feeling (a novel by Henry Mackenzie, entitled *A Man of Feeling*, would be

the best-seller of 1771).

Needless to say, it was not long before paranoia once again got the upper hand. With scant understanding of English, much less the kind spoken by the local servants, Rousseau became convinced they were saying wicked things about Thérèse and were putting cinders in their food. By the spring of 1767 he was back in France. But his cult of sensibility had put down deep roots among the sobbing and sighing classes of provincial England. Just 10 years later, the craziness had been forgotten and Rousseau's sojourn was remembered with the kind of veneration accorded to an apostolic mission. Something like a Derbyshire Enlightenment had come into being in which radical politics kept company with the cultivation of Feeling. A botanical society had been founded in the little cathedral town of Lichfield by Brooke Boothby and the polymath Erasmus Darwin, both of them luminaries of the circle centring on Anna Seward, the poet and essayist who held a salon at her residence in the Bishop's Palace. Unlike Rousseau himself, moreover, the Lichfield circle had no difficulty in reconciling the exhilaration of science with the cult of Nature. In Derbyshire they seemed to have the best of both, with the Peaks offering the breathtaking upland walks and deep caverns, as well as supplying the coal and iron to be mined from beneath the hills. The county's reputation as a place of exhilaration and mystery was such that in 1779 a play was staged at Drury Lane called, without a trace of embarrassment, *The Wonders of Derbyshire*. It featured 21 sets painted by the scenic artist Philippe de Louthembourg, depicting waterfalls, Marn and Matlock Tors, the Castleton caverns (both inside and out) and a 'Genius of the Peaks' who rose, mechanically, from 'haunts profound' to bestow his bounty on the locals.

Likewise the most successful Derbyshire artist, Joseph Wright, was equally at home painting the cliffs and gorges of the Peaks around Matlock or Richard Arkwright's mill at Cromford as if it were a romantically lit palace. It was Wright who supplied the definitive image of an English country gentleman, Brooke Boothby, made over into a Man of Feeling, not, as in a Gainsborough portrait, the imperious master of a landed estate, but folded into the greenery in the pensive, heavy-lidded attitude of a Jacobean poet. Boothby's dress is a studied advertisement for the new informality: the double-breasted frock coat and short waistcoat, left unbuttoned the better to expose the transparent sincerity of his heart; a silk cravat replaced by simple muslin. And where an earlier generation of gentlemen might have demonstrated their virtue by holding a copy of the Bible or volumes of the classics, Boothby holds the gospel of his generation with the single word 'Rousseau' just legible on the spine. Painted in 1781, the picture is not just a portrait but an advertisement of Boothby's role as the St Peter of the cult. For the book is surely *Rousseau, Juge de Jean-Jacques*, the confessionalary autobiographical dialogue on which Rousseau had worked while he stayed in England. Five years earlier, in 1776, Boothby had travelled to Paris and received the manuscript from the great man's own hands. Two years later Rousseau was dead, and the park at Ermenonville (inspired by Rousseau's ideas and where the philosopher spent his final days) was turned into a place of pilgrimage and memory for his cult. No wonder Boothby burned to spread the word.

The self-appointed task of all these disciples of the church of sensibility was not just to transform *themselves*, through pensive walks, into new Britons sympathetic to the sufferings of their fellows and ingenious in devising ways to relieve them. They

were also resolved, through literature, education, philanthropy and their own personal example, to raise an entirely new generation reclaimed from the cruelty and corruption of fashionable society. In the midst of modern Albion, they would re-create the kind of ancient British innocence they had seen hanging on (although reduced to poverty-stricken subsistence) in the remote rocky north and west. In fact, what seemed to the cultivated man of the town to be the most miserable aspect of those societies – their weather-beaten coarseness – was precisely the kind of life that had to be instilled into coming generations if Britain were to be saved from degeneracy. The goal – however impossibly paradoxical on the face of it – was to preserve the instinctive freedom, playfulness and sincerity of the natural child into adulthood. The child, as Wordsworth would put it, would be ‘father to the man’. If they succeeded, they would make the first generation of truly free compatriots: natural-born *and raised* Britons.

This, at any rate, was the task that another of the Lichfield Rousseauites, Thomas Day, set himself. His mission would be as a father–teacher to a purer generation of Britons, who would respect nature – all of it, for Day had become an ecologist *avant la lettre*, who believed in the inter-connectedness of all created life and was therefore a vegetarian and an ardent foe of the then popular sports of cock-fighting and bull-baiting. Animals, he believed, just as much as humans, could be conditioned by kindness towards a life of gentle happiness. Would he want to treat all creatures with the same consideration, asked a sardonic lawyer friend, even spiders? Would he not want to kill *them*? ‘No,’ answered Day, ‘I don’t know that I have a right. Suppose that a superior being said to a companion – “Kill that lawyer.” How should you like it? And a lawyer is more noxious to most people than a spider.’

Day set about making the perfect family for himself when, in 1769, he hand-picked, rather as if choosing puppies from a litter, two young girls as candidates for eventual wife and mother. His commitment was to raise them in line with Rousseau’s principles, then to marry whichever turned out to be most suitable, and to provide the wherewithal for the other to be apprenticed. A 12-year-old blonde was taken from Shrewsbury orphanage and renamed Sabrina, a brunette from the London Foundling Hospital and given the name of the virtuous wife of Roman antiquity, Lucretia (overlooking that heroine’s suicidal end). Not surprisingly to anyone except Thomas Day, the experiment did not turn out as planned. Whisked off to France to avoid the scandal of a grown man playing dubious godfather to two girls, Lucretia and Sabrina fought like hellcats with each other and with their mentor, even while he nursed them through smallpox and saved them from drowning in a boating accident on the Rhône. Brought back to England, Lucretia, condemned by her adoptive father as ‘invincibly stupid’, was apprenticed, as Day had promised, to a milliner, while Sabrina was taken to Lichfield where she suffered Day’s often inhuman experiments – hot wax was poured on her arm to test her pain threshold, and guns loaded with blanks were fired near her head. Only when Day finally despaired of ever being able to turn her into his dream spouse did he pack her off to boarding school, an escape for which she was deeply grateful. She ended up married to a barrister.

Day, who awarded Jean-Jacques the title of ‘the first of humankind’, believed he knew exactly how Jean-Jacques felt, for he too had suffered from the spite of the fashionable. His origins were, like those of his spiritual mentor, undistinguished – he was the son of a well-to-do customs collector. But his heart had been smitten in 1770



by the daughter of an army major, on whom he had struggled to make any kind of impression. To improve his chances, Day had taken himself off to France for a drastic makeover: dancing masters, fencing teachers, tailors, fine wigs, even subjecting himself to the torture of a painful mechanical contraption designed to straighten out knock-knees. It was all to no avail. The object of all these efforts at personal enhancement took one look at the new Day and laughed even harder than she had at the old Day. Stung by his rejection, Day turned his back on the Quality. What did they know of sincerity, of the burning, beating heart? He eventually found an heiress to marry but salvaged his social conscience by inflicting a Jean-Jacques regime on her: no servants and no harpsichord, for he deemed it wicked to wallow in such luxuries 'while the poor want bread'.

None of these follies and disasters inhibited Thomas Day from imparting his wisdom about childhood in a three-volume novel, *The History of Sandford and Merton* (1783), which, as an extended parable of 'natural instruction' was almost as important in Britain as Rousseau's *Emile*. The book recounted the clash between the spoiled bully Tommy Merton and the quieter epitome of rustic virtue, Harry Sandford, who cries when he realizes he has inflicted pain on a cockchafer. Now deservedly forgotten except in university seminars on the sentimental novel, *Sandford and Merton* was a huge publishing success in its day. Reprinted 45 times after the initial appearance of the first volume in 1783, it was *the* book young parents read when they wanted to savour the victory of natural over unnatural childhood. As for Day himself, his peculiar life ended abruptly in September 1789 in his 42nd year, during an experiment to test his pet theories about taming horses with gentleness rather than breaking them. An unbroken colt he was riding failed to respond to the tender touch, and threw Day on his head.

The problem with Day's experiment, some of his friends might have told him, was that virtuous conditioning could only go so far. Perhaps the damage to Sabrina's and Lucretia's natures had already been done by the time that Day got to them, beginning with the contamination of their mother's milk. For it was another of Rousseau's axioms that virtue began at the nursing nipple, from which moral as well as physical sustenance was imparted. Nothing was more harmful to the prospects of raising true children of nature than the habitual practice of farming babies out to wet-nurses who had no interest in their charges except that of commerce. Not surprisingly, babies from more ordinary families packed off to country women died in thousands. But if fashionable mothers could afford to see their infants better cared for, they had no means of knowing what kind of sustenance was being fed along with the breast milk. Who knew how many innocents had been poisoned and corrupted out of their true nature, from their nursing months, by women whose milk was already tainted with drunkenness and sexual disease? Breast-feeding began to play a conspicuous role in sentimental novels, especially those where both men and women could be redeemed by recognizing the simple power of natural instinct. Men for whom the tantalizing glimpse of nipple was an invitation to lechery could be converted by watching the act of nursing. Women who had flaunted their décolletage, like the wicked wife in Samuel Richardson's novel *Sir Charles Grandison*, could advertise their conversion to virtue by making a spectacle of the same act. 'Never was a man in greater Rapture!...' the wife narrates: 'He threw himself at my feet, clasping me and the little varlet together

in his arms. “Brute!” said I, “will you smother my Harriet?...” “Dear-est, dear-est, dear-est Lady G... Never, never, never saw I so delightful a sight!”

Assuming newborns had been given the healthiest possible start to their lives through the gift of their mother’s milk, the next task of parents of sensibility was to ensure that natural instincts were not prematurely crushed by too heavy a dose of either parental discipline or rote learning. In the older morality books animal spirit was by definition a sign of unchristian diabolical beastliness, Satan frolicking in his favourite playground: the soft and receptive bodies of the young. The first duty of parents wanting to save the souls of their offspring was to thrash this devilry, if necessary literally, out of their bodies. But if the connection between animals and humans were now regarded by the likes of Thomas Day as benevolent and not malevolent, and the resemblance to puppyish or kittenish animal play the sign, not of innate wickedness but of innocence, then it was important to preserve and nurture playfulness as the gentlest route to learning, even if the consequences might sometimes seem, to an older generation, shockingly anti-social.

A generation of frantically attentive and slap-shy parents was the result. Erasmus Darwin urged parents to follow his example and ‘never contradict children but to leave them their own master’, and was notorious for doing just that (with his own children). Even so flinty a father as Henry Fox, Lord Holland, paymaster-general in Whig governments, capitulated (after hearing endless Rousseau sermons from his wife, Lady Caroline Lennox) to the cult of play. The Foxes were a byword for indulging, not to say grovelling before, the sensibilities of their children. When his son, the future Whig leader Charles James, hurled a brand-new watch to the floor, his helpless papa merely managed a pained smile and muttered, ‘If you must, I suppose you must.’ On that topic of perennial inter-generational conflict, the length of hair, Fox virtually petitioned his older boy, Stephen: ‘You gave me hopes that if I desired it you would cut it ... I will dear Stephen be *obliged* if you will.’

Although there were plenty of books which still insisted on the strictly enforced moral policing of the young, rather than simply laying down the law to them, a new literature expressly written to be read *by* as well as *to* the young, and vividly illustrated, aimed to show through exemplary and cautionary stories what would befall those who took the right or wrong path. John Newbery, the entrepreneurial genius of children’s books who published the tale of Dame Margery (otherwise known as Goody) Two-Shoes in this genre, also specialized in the sixpenny illustrated books that emphasized playful and practical learning. His bestseller, the first popular science book for children, *Tom Telescope* (1761), was the ancestor of all the ‘do your own experiment’ books, and aimed to make all kinds of knowledge, historical, geographical and mechanical, exciting as well as ‘useful’.

One of Newbery’s army of illustrators was someone who had himself, without any benefit of exposure to Rousseau, experienced precisely the kind of natural schooling supposed to make virtuous British patriots. Born in 1753 at Cherryburn House in the parish of Oringham in Northumberland, Thomas Bewick was the son of a farmer who also worked a colliery on his land. His family was, then, solid north country yeomanry, neither very rich nor very poor, but in any event many leagues away from the Derbyshire gentry who panted after Rousseau. Even so, he remembered in the lovely memoir written in the 1820s for his daughter, Bewick was spoiled rotten by his aunt

Hannah who ‘made me a great “pet”. I was not to be “snubbed” (as it was called), do what I would; and, in consequence of my being thus suffered to have my own way, I was often scalded and burned.’ At Mickley School, close by the colliery at Mickley Bank, Thomas was entrusted to the none too tender mercies of a local schoolmaster who, to judge by his enthusiasm with the switch, evidently had little time for the New Schooling. His punishment of choice was ‘hugging’ in which the little offender was mounted on the back of a ‘stout boy’ – rather like a mating frog – with his bottom bared for the flogging. When subjected to the ordeal, Thomas’s reaction was to bite his mount in the neck, and when grabbed by the master, ‘I rebelled, and broke his shins with my iron-hooped clogs, and ran off.’

Instead of being made to suffer for his revolt, Bewick compounded matters by playing truant ‘every day, and amused myself making dams and swimming boats, in a small burn’, joining his ‘more obedient schoolfellows’ on their way home. The school of nature, then, became his real tutor – much like the childhood of William Wordsworth 20 years later on the other side of the Pennines. Even when Bewick was eventually obliged to learn fractions, decimals and Latin, he escaped from the dreary chores by filling every surface he could find – slates, books, and then, when he ran out of space, the flagstones of the floor at home, gravestones and even the floor of the church porch – with chalk drawings. His eye feasted greedily on images wherever he could find them, especially inn signs where the birds and beasts of Britain – bulls, horses, salmon – were gaudily displayed. To anyone with half an eye, it was obvious that Thomas had a precocious gift and – after he had chalked his way through every floor in the village – a friend finally supplied him with pen, ink, blackberry juice, a camel-hair brush and colours. His career as the first and greatest of all Britain’s naturalist-illustrators, the British Audubon with a difference, had already begun. He painted scenes of the local woods and moors, and the beasts and birds that inhabited them, and got paid, though not very much, for hunting scenes – every hound ‘faithfully delineated’ on the walls of his neighbours’ houses.

Two moments from his childhood years stood out in Bewick’s memory as converting him from a rough and ready likely lad of the north into someone already feeling the pangs of sympathy for the rest of God’s creation. The first was when he happened to catch a hare that was being coursed, and although he wrote that it had never crossed his mind for a minute that there was anything wrong or cruel about hunting, when he stood there with the warm, palpitating animal in his arms, and when ‘the poor, terrified creature screamed out so piteously – like a child ... I would have given anything to have saved its life.’ Told to hand it over by a farmer, he did so – only to see the hare have one of its legs broken for fun and then made to set off again, limping, in order for the dogs to have theirs; ‘from that day forward, I have ever wished that this poor, persecuted, innocent creature might escape with its life’. Bewick was too much a son of the British countryside to be against all hunting, especially where he considered the animals had a fair chance of giving the dogs and men a run for their money – badgers, for example, could fight back ferociously. But he hated gratuitous cruelty. When he knocked a bullfinch off its perch with a rock he took the bird in his hand, where it ‘looked me piteously in the face; and, as I thought, could it have spoken, it would have asked me why I had taken away its life’, and suffered another terrible pang of conscience, turning the dead bird over and over as he looked

at its feathers. ‘This was the last bird I killed,’ he wrote, although he added, perhaps referring to all the stuffed birds he would use as models for his spectacular illustrations, many ‘indeed, have been killed since on my account’.

Bewick was emphatically not a sentimentalist. He inspected the habits and habitats of the animal kingdom, and especially the combative, bustling universe of insects. Two centuries before the American sociobiologist Edmund O. Wilson, Bewick had already noticed that the colony of ants on Boat Hill, near Eltringham, formed a coherent social community ‘as busily crowded as any among men leading to or from a great fair’ and were so well organized that, when disturbed by a stick, they would quickly regroup and continue their business.

The social curiosity and compassion that, all through his long life, would remain one of Bewick’s strongest qualities also drew him, when he was still young, towards ordinary people who had their own common, often awesomely encyclopedic knowledge of the world and its ways. One of them was an old pitman from the Bewicks’ mine who had once rescued a fellow worker from a colliery accident; sitting on a stone bench, he showed Thomas the constellations in the sky. Another neighbour, Anthony Liddell, was remembered by Bewick as the ‘village Hampden’, the epitome of the no-nonsense free man of the village. He had memorized the works of the first-century Jewish historian Josephus and a lot of other history besides, and dressed as if he were some sort of feral person in old buckskin breeches and a doublet ‘of the skin of some animal’. Liddell was articulate, stubborn and hot-tempered when it came to the subject of liberty and property, especially birds and fish, which, he insisted, God had provided for everyone, giving him the right to poach as freely as he wanted; for him, ‘gaol had no terrors for he lived better there than he did at home’. But it was another of his father’s pitmen, Johnny Chapman, who ‘thought it no hardship’ to work standing up to his waist in freezing cold, filthy water, who stayed in Bewick’s mind as something like the ideal working-class stoical hero. He lived on milk, bread, potatoes and oatmeal; rambled, when he felt like it, in the open country or went off to Newcastle for some ale; and paid for his lodging by singing and telling jokes and stories in his broad Geordie dialect. When he got sick and old, Chapman, the innocent, was turned away from one parish after another as each attempted to offload its responsibility for poor relief. Living hand to mouth from odd jobs, ‘he was found dead on the road between Morpeth and Newcastle’.

These, along with his open-air Northumbrian playground, were the scenes that lodged in Bewick’s mind when he recollected his childhood; and which in their gritty, black, sharply defined detail were translated into the extraordinary wood-engraved vignettes that punctuate the beginnings and ends of his bird and animal books. Between the plover and the waxwing, and in the guise of little morality tales, he smuggled in a portrait of an entire rural world – one a long way removed from the prettified illusions of ploughmen, shepherds and woodsmen who populated the Gainsboroughs on the walls of Palladian country houses. Bewick’s country people do not pose in fetchingly ragged pastoral dress, nor are their babes in arms all apple-cheeked and dimpled. At the end of the Preface to Volume I of the *History of British Birds* (1804) a smartly dressed country gentleman, armed with a gun, points adamantly down the road to an old wanderer huddling against a stone wall for some shelter from the Northumbrian wind. The gentleman is not giving helpful directions. Between the