

THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE ENGLISH LITERATURE OF THE 18TH CENTURY

Lecture 13

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In the 18th century Britain was as powerful as France. This resulted from the growth of its industries and from the wealth of its large new trading empire.

Britain had the strongest navy in the world, the navy controlled Britain's own trade routes and endangered those of its enemies.

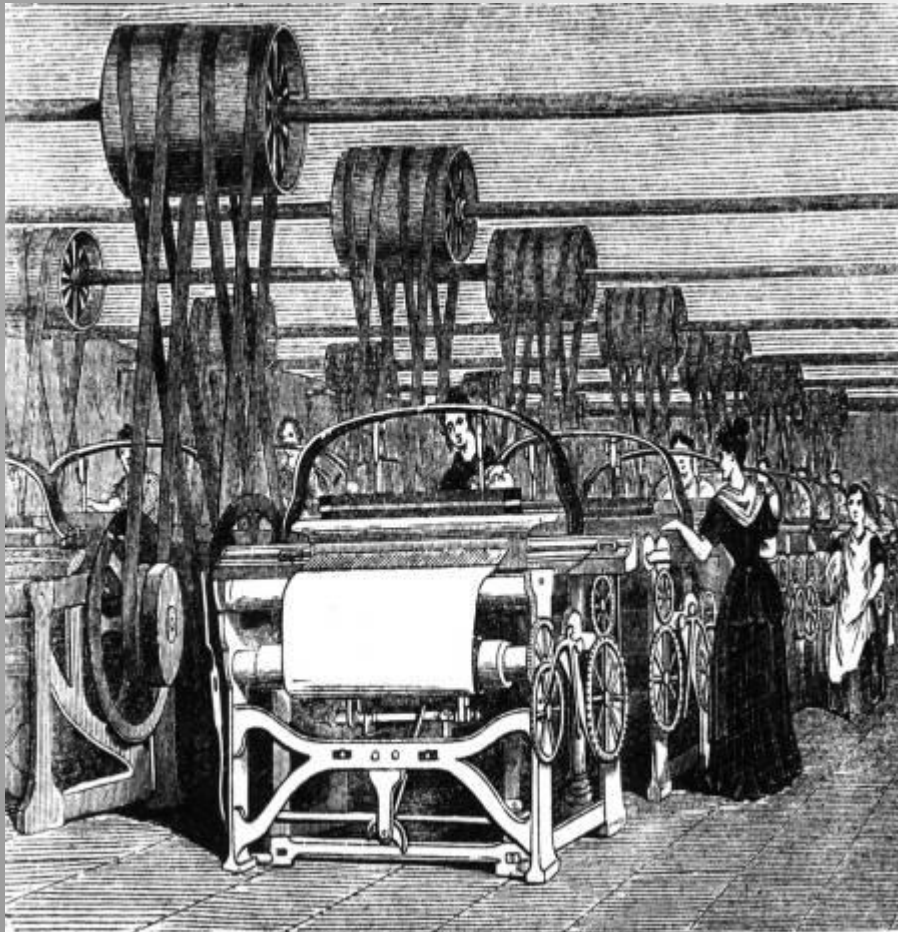
Britain became wealthy thanks to trade. This wealth made possible both an agricultural and an industrial revolution which made Britain the most advanced economy in the world.

However, there was an enormous price to pay, because while a few people became richer, many others lost their land and their way of life.



Families were driven off the land in another period of enclosures. They became the working “proletariat” of the cities that made Britain’s trade and industrial empire of the 19th century possible.

The invention of machinery destroyed old “cottage industries” and created factories. The development of industry led to the sudden growth of cities like Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow.



This century also saw the change of the ruling dynasty: after William and Mary, came Mary's sister, Queen Anne, the last of the Stuarts, who reigned from 1702 to 1714.



After her death a difficult situation arose: the direct succession to the throne belonged to the line of the deposed James II, his son and then his grandson, who, supported by the “Jacobites”, were waiting in France.

In order to avoid the Stuart succession, the crown was offered to a cousin of Queen Anne, the ruler of a small German kingdom of Hanover, who took the throne in 1714 as George I.



He was followed by his son, George II, and his grandson, George III. The Hanovers were not a very happy choice, but two attempts to restore the Stuarts proved a failure.

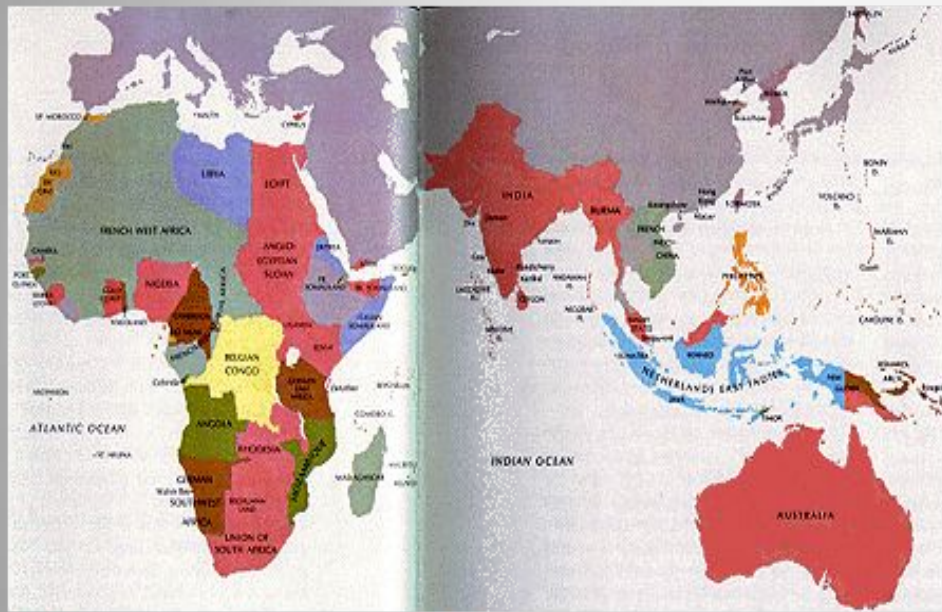


From now on the two-party system came into being.



The Whigs represented the financial interests, the cities and towns, and were against any interference of the monarchy in politics. The Tories, many of them Jacobites, represented the country squires, and their folk, those who favoured old traditions.

The 18th century could also be called a century of wars.



■ *British colonies in Africa* ■ *British colonies in Asia & Oceania*

From the beginning to the end of the century the great rival, the enemy was France. At first the struggle was for European supremacy, but by the middle of the century the struggle was for overseas empire. It was during these years that the huge British Empire was built up.

But though it was a century of wars, they were completely different from what we understand by “a war” in the 20th-21st centuries: these were usually fought by small professional armies, and the daily lives of most people were affected hardly at all. Even when Britain and France were at war, trade and cultural exchanges continued between the two countries.

The upper classes and the middle classes in Britain during this age felt more complacent than they had ever felt before or since. They felt that they lived in the best of all possible worlds. This 18th century complacency was partly due to the work of the scientists and philosophers. Human reason and “common sense” played such a significant role in this period that it is often called **“the age of reason”**.

The same key-word “reason” can be found in the definition of the term **“Enlightenment”**: **“the period of the 18th century in Europe when certain thinkers taught that science and the use of reason would improve the human condition.”**

The writers and philosophers of this age thought that man was virtuous by nature, and vice was due to ignorance only. So they started a public movement for enlightening people. To their understanding, this would do away with all the evils of society, and social harmony would be achieved.

But the 18th century in England was also “**the age of elegance**”. Real civilization, superior to the old classical civilization of Greece and Rome, to which the 18th century compared itself, had been achieved at last.

Now society (persons of position, wealth and influence) could enjoy it. At the beginning of this period literature was created for this small society of important and influential people.

It was literature that could be read aloud in a drawing –room, enjoyed in a theatre or discussed in a coffee-house.

The atmosphere of this kind encouraged comedy, satire in verse and prose, pleasant little essays, and criticism, but it did not encourage poetry, because this society did not expect from literature anything private or intimate.

However, very soon the situation changed.

The middle class, especially women, took to buying and reading books This fact shows that by the 1770s **the novel** had won great popularity.

English literature of that time may be characterized by the following features:

- This period saw the rise of the political pamphlet and essay, but the leading genre of the Enlightenment became the novel.
- The prose style became clear, graceful and polished.
- Poetry gave way to the prose age of essayists and novelists.
- The hero of this novel was no longer a prince, but a representative of the middle class.
- Literature became very instructive; writers tried to teach their readers what was good and what was bad.

The literature of the Enlightenment can be divided into 3 periods:

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graph TD; A([The literature of the Enlightenment can be divided into 3 periods:]); A --> B([From the 'Glorious Revolution of 1688-89 till the end of the 1730s: Alexander Pope, Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift']); A --> C([The forties and fifties of the 18th century: Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollet]); A --> D([The last decades of the 18th century: William Goldsmith, Laurence Sterne, Richard Sheridan]);
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