

IV

PETER JOHNSTON

Britons will never be slaves! Britannia and liberty as a construct of British national identity in James Thomson and Thomas Arne's song *Rule Britannia* and Thomas Rowlandson's engraving, *The Contrast, 1792, British Liberty, French Liberty, Which is best?*

In comparing and contrasting the song, *Rule Britannia* and the political print, *The Contrast, 1792, British Liberty. French Liberty, Which is Best?* this paper will evidence how the concept of liberty was a key construct of British national identity in the eighteenth century. Linking the two pieces is Britain's national icon, Britannia, the feminine personification of the nation whose image still resonates today. Notions of British national identity that were developed in the eighteenth century, will continue to reverberate in the twenty-first, as Britain attempts to re-identify itself in the nation's new, post-Brexit, world.

On 1 August 1740 the first performance of *Rule Britannia* took place before Fredrick, Prince of Wales, in the grass amphitheatre at Cliveden, Buckinghamshire. The Prince and his circle of friends in the audience, probably had little idea of how this finale to the masque of *Alfred*, would become a long lasting and popular 'touchstone of British national identity.'¹ Once separated from the rest of *Alfred*, *Rule Britannia* became increasingly accessible to a wider audience and highly popular in its own right. *Rule Britannia's* repeated mantra that 'Britons never will be slaves' highlights how important liberty was to Britain's sense of self during that period. Whilst less fortunate nations kneel before 'haughty tyrants,' *Rule Britannia* is representative of an ongoing movement for the preservation of British liberties. Thomas Rowlandson takes this mantra further in the political print, *The Contrast, 1792, British Liberty. French Liberty, Which is Best?* by comparing the benefits enjoyed by people living under the mantle of 'British liberty' to that of those living under 'French Liberty.'

In comparing and contrasting these two artefacts this paper will evidence how the concept of liberty was a key construct of British national identity in the eighteenth century. Britannia, who first appeared in Roman times, links the song and the political print in her role as the feminine personification of the nation, so it will be

¹ O. J. W. Cox, 'Frederick, Prince of Wales and the First Performance of Rule Britannia!' *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (2013) p. 931.

necessary to consider how this icon developed into her eighteenth-century role and how national icons have a key role to play in notions of national identity. The term ‘national identity’ is widely invoked so it is worth setting down at least some of the theory about what it actually means. This is particularly appropriate in the context of the national identity of Great Britain, a nation that had only been formed a few decades before *Rule Britannia* was written.

Keith Cameron has argued that national identity is a term that is ‘used frequently but which often begs definition.’² Peter Jackson suggests this might be because national identity is ‘contested terrain’ that depends on the interests of those involved.³ There is certainly no lack of scholarly debate around notions of national identity. As Norman Davies drily remarks, ‘there are as many theories on the essence of nations as there are theorists.’⁴ Much of the earlier discourse was largely based on arguments about whether the nation was a natural phenomenon based on its common heritage, or a ‘a manipulative project’ carried out by elites who mobilize their followers using nationalist ideology.⁵ Notwithstanding the merits of these and other arguments, perhaps for our purposes Benedict Anderson’s famous concept of the nation as an ‘imagined political community’ is sufficient.⁶

Following the Treaty of Union in 1706 the imagined ‘British’ political community in the early part of the eighteenth century needed to integrate the identities of the Kingdoms of England and Scotland into one new identity, the kingdom of Great Britain. Linda Colley has suggested that ‘Protestantism was the foundation that made the invention of the new, ‘Great Britain’ possible.’⁷ The new combined nation state was an invention forged by war, mostly with Catholic France, but war ‘could never have been so influential without the impact of religion.’⁸ However, in considering how contemporary Britons saw themselves, David Armitage suggests that they self-identified as, ‘Protestant, commercial, maritime and free.’⁹ The weight given to each of these factors is difficult to determine but in considering *Rule Britannia* and *The Contrast, 1792, British Liberty. French Liberty, Which is Best?* it will be argued that notions of liberty were a much bigger factor in the new imagined community of Britain’s self-identity than Colley postulates.

Within this imagined community the nation is often presented as, ‘a larger than life human being,’ a symbolic character that encapsulates the nation’s characteristics.¹⁰ Gerald Newman points out that this character is much more complex than a stereotype

² K. Cameron, (ed.) *National Identity* (Oxford, 1994) p. 1.

³ P. Jackson, *Maps of Meaning* (London, 1989) p. 4.

⁴ N. Davies, *Europe: A History* (London, 1997) p. 813.

⁵ Calhoun, p. 30.

⁶ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1985) p. 15.

⁷ L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation: 1707-1837* (New Haven and London, 2014) p. 54.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 376.

⁹ D. Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of The British Empire* (Cambridge, 2000) p. 173.

¹⁰ K. Cameron, *The Nation: Myth or Reality* (Oxford, 1994) p. 58.

‘because of its psychological, educational and historic dimensions.’¹¹ Madge Dresser has pointed out how an icon of the nation has the ‘ability to convey a multiplicity of meanings at many levels.’¹² She goes on to point out that the powerful psychological force of a visual symbol transcends logical explanation.¹³ Britannia became established as the visual symbol of Britain from the early days of James I and eventually became a national icon that its people could relate to.¹⁴

Britannia had first briefly appeared as a symbol of Britain in a series of reliefs from the first century AD that celebrated the conquest of Britain by the Emperor Claudius.¹⁵ The Romans gave provinces they had conquered symbolic feminine names that developed into allegorical figures.¹⁶ In one of the reliefs Claudius is seen overpowering a semi-naked Britannia who wears a Phrygian hat. Originally worn by a manumitted slave to denote their free status the Phrygian hat or cap later became a symbol of liberty.¹⁷ It was a symbol that Britannia would continue to wear, sometimes interchangeably with a peaked helmet, as she appeared on coins in the Roman period.¹⁸ Britannia disappeared from view in post Roman times only appearing after the Reformation. In the early seventeenth century she appeared symbolising Britain in a few frontiers pieces and then later some coins.¹⁹ It was in the reign of James I that she appeared frequently portrayed as a symbol of national unity.²⁰ Tamara Hunt suggests that she was used at this time ‘to stress the union of Scotland and England under one crown.’²¹

By the mid-eighteenth century Britannia had become truly established as a national icon and lent herself to *Rule Britannia*, the patriotic song that emphasised Britain’s freedom, backed by its naval power, above all else.²² Britannia was also appearing in political prints, coins and pamphlets, as she became ‘the embodiment of triumphant self-esteem’ and an icon of national identity.²³ Her classical appearance had now become standardised and usually included: a trident or spear, a shield with the arms or stylised flag of Britain and a helmet or cap of liberty.²⁴ This cap of liberty strongly associated Britannia, the personification of the nation, with the idea that Britons were a free people.

¹¹ G. Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History; 1740 -1830* (New York, 1997) p. 123.

¹² M. Dresser, ‘Britannia’ in R. Samuel (ed.) *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity, Volume 3, National Fictions* (London and New York, 1989) p. 43.

¹³ Dresser, p. 43.

¹⁴ T. L. Hunt, *Defining John Bull, Political Caricature and National Identity in Late Georgian England* (Aldershot, 2003) p. 121.

¹⁵ Dresser, p. 26.

¹⁶ H. M. Atherton, *Political Prints in the Age of Hogarth: A Study of the Ideological Representation of Politics* (Oxford, 1974) p. 89.

¹⁷ Dresser, p. 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 28.

¹⁹ L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation: 1707-1837* (New Haven and London, 2014) p. 398.

²⁰ Dresser, p. 30.

²¹ Hunt, p. 121.

²² Atherton, p. 84.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 97.

²⁴ Hunt, p. 122.

Thomas Rowlandson takes the connection between Britannia and liberty further in his political print, *The Contrast 1792. British Liberty. French liberty. Which is best?* (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Thomas Rowlandson, *The Contrast 1792. British Liberty. French liberty. Which is best?* 1792, 27.1 x 37.1 cm, Hand-coloured etching, British Museum, London.

In the two medallions entitled ‘British Liberty’ and ‘French Liberty’ a seated, dignified Britannia is shown opposite her French counterpart, a gruesome ‘Medusa like’ figure.²⁵ Liberty in feminine form had been elevated to an official icon of the French Republic in August 1792 and her image appeared on currency, engravings and statues. British caricaturists were quick to adopt Liberty as an emblem of France and Britannia was the obvious parallel.²⁶ In her right hand Britannia holds Magna Charta, ‘the original guarantee of the nation’s liberties’ and also a symbol of the law that underpinned the Briton’s freedom from tyranny.²⁷ On her left hand are the equally balanced scales of justice. Perhaps the most telling part of this figure is that Rowlandson does not simply adorn Britannia with a Phrygian cap but places it on her staff almost as if she had taken it from her French counterpart.

In contrast ‘French Liberty’ is a medusa-like hag with writhing serpents for her hair and girdle. In direct contrast to the seated and majestic Britannia, this fury runs madly in profile to the left whilst trampling on a decapitated body. Rather than the scales of

²⁵ D. Donald, *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George 111* (New Haven and London, 1996) p. 152.

²⁶ Hunt, p. 141.

²⁷ Atherton, p. 127.

justice 'French Liberty' carries the dagger that she has probably used to murder the bleeding corpse that lies at her feet. Whilst Britannia's staff proudly hoists a Phrygian cap, French liberty's trident impales two bleeding hearts and a severed head. In the background, the body that swings from a lamppost represents the chaos unleashed by French liberty. In direct contrast the sturdy old oak tree underneath which Britannia sits, peacefully reposed, represents the stability of British liberty. The lion seated at Britannia's feet and a large British war ship in full sail leave the viewer in little doubt of the power that defends Britannia's liberty.

Rowlandson backs up this powerful visual imagery in a direct response to the French revolutionary's cry of 'Liberté, égalité, fraternité.' In the left hand medallion 'British Liberty' is inscribed in the border and underneath the medallion is an inscription in large letters: 'Religion. Morality. Loyalty Obedience to the Laws Independance Personal Security Justice Inheritance Protection Property. Industry. National Prosperity Happiness.' Underneath the right hand medallion, inscribed 'French liberty,' the inscription is: 'Atheism Perjury Rebellion. Treason. Anarchy Murder Equality. Madness. Cruelty. Injustice Treachery Ingratitude Idleness Famine National & Private Ruin. Misery.' In these two lists Rowlandson directly compares the virtues of British liberty to the dangers of French Liberty. Briton's 'obedience to the laws' that underpins their liberty entitles them to 'independence, personal security' and 'justice.' In stark contrast French 'rebellion' leads to 'anarchy, murder' and 'injustice.' The viewer is invited to choose, 'which is best?' British 'happiness' or French 'misery.'

Perhaps the popularity of the print evidences how its viewers responded to this question. Loyalist associations set up to counter French republicanism ensured it was perhaps one of the 'most widely distributed and recycled' political prints of its time.²⁸ Demands for more copies and its appearance on pottery mugs indicate its evident commercial success. Moreover, political prints like this were one of the few cultural items available to all classes, as César de Saussure a French visitor noted in 1748.²⁹ Rowlandson's print may have affected public opinion but it also reflected it, as artists were well aware of the importance of their works appeal to its potential audience.³⁰ It seems apparent that the message of *The Contrast 1792. British Liberty. French liberty. Which is best?* struck a chord in the imagination of at least some of the British public at the time.

Like Rowlandson's political print, *Rule Britannia*, also became very popular especially once it was separated from the masque, *Alfred*. The masque's libretto was written by David Mallet and James Thompson and set to music by Thomas Arne. *Alfred* told

²⁸ Donald, p. 152.

²⁹ C. de Saussure, *A foreign view of England in the reigns of George I and George II: The letters of Monsieur Cesar de Saussure to his family* (London, 1995) p. 162.

³⁰ Hunt, p. 17.

the dramatized story of part of the life of King Alfred'.³¹ It was first performed on 1 August 1740 as part of a private stage production for Frederick, Prince of Wales at his country home at Cliveden.³² Michael Burden has suggested that *Alfred* was a tribute to the future King who had been exiled from court.³³ Much of the plot centers around resistance to a Danish invasion of Britain and *Alfred* contains 'much patriotic material ... of the virtues of Britain and the British people.'³⁴ The Prince of Wales was 'so well pleased' with the whole entertainment he commanded it to be repeated a short time later albeit this time it was affected by rain and had to be completed indoors.³⁵

Martha Vandrei has suggested that, 'despite its prominence, few scholars have commented on the significance of *Rule Britannia* in any depth.'³⁶ This is perhaps surprising given that it has been described as 'an important national cultural artifact.'³⁷ In one commentary Tim Blanning points out how the six verses of *Rule Britannia* 'manage to cover all the main characteristic of eighteenth-century British nationalism.'³⁸ The opening stanza sets the nationalistic tone. Britain is not just any old country but one that is divinely ordained, the nation raised from the ocean 'at heavens command.' The declaration that Britain 'shalt flourish great and free' links the concept of liberty to prosperity and the name, 'Great' Britain that had only been established a few decades earlier.

Rule Britannia

When Britain first, at Heaven's command
Arose from out the azure main;
This was the charter of the land,
And guardian angels sang this strain:
'Rule, Britannia! rule the waves:
Britons never will be slaves.'

The nations, not so blest as thee,
Must, in their turns, to tyrants fall;
While thou shalt flourish great and free,
The dread and envy of them all.
'Rule, Britannia! rule the waves:
Britons never will be slaves.'

³¹ M. Burden, *Garrick, Arne and the Masque of King Alfred: a case study in National, Theatrical and Musical Politics* (Lampeter, 1994) p. 2.

³² T. A. Arne, *Alfred: A Masque* (London, 1981) p. xv.

³³ Burden, p. 10.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 3.

³⁵ *London Daily Post and General Advertiser*, 2nd August 1740.

³⁶ M. Andrei, 'Britons Strike Home': Politics, Patriotism and Popular Song in British Culture, c.1695-1900, *Historical Research*, Vol. 87. No. 283 (2014) p. 681.

³⁷ Cox, p. 931.

³⁸ T. Blanning, 'The Hanoverian Monarchy and the Culture of Representation' in A. Gestrich and M. Schaich, (eds.) *The Hanoverian Succession: Dynastic Politics and Monarchical Culture* (London, 2016) p. 144.

Still more majestic shalt thou rise,
 More dreadful, from each foreign stroke;
 As the loud blast that tears the skies,
 Serves but to root thy native oak.
 'Rule, Britannia! rule the waves:
 'Britons never will be slaves.'

Thee haughty tyrants ne'er shall tame:
 All their attempts to bend thee down,
 Will but arouse thy generous flame;
 But work their woe, and thy renown.
 'Rule, Britannia! rule the waves:
 Britons never will be slaves.'

To thee belongs the rural reign;
 Thy cities shall with commerce shine:
 All thine shall be the subject main,
 And every shore it circles thine.
 'Rule, Britannia! rule the waves:
 Britons never will be slaves.'

The Muses, still with freedom found,
 Shall to thy happy coast repair;
 Blest Isle! With matchless beauty crown'd,
 And manly hearts to guard the fair.
 'Rule, Britannia! rule the waves:
 Britons never will be slaves.'³⁹

In *Rule Britannia* Great Britain is not only free, it will remain uniquely free as other nations, 'not as blest ... must, in their turns, to tyrants fall.' The 'haughty tyrants' of France or Spain will 'envy' Britain but they will also fear her. Their attempts to try and 'tame' Britannia will fail and her unflinching opposition to continental despotism will prevail.⁴⁰ At the time *Rule Britannia* was written, Spanish attempts at taming Britain had led to war, partly as a result of the severing of Captain Jenkins' ear, so references to tyrants overseas dreading Britannia's power would have received a very receptive audience. Moreover, *Rule Britannia* warns these continental tyrants that any attack on Britain would merely make its power even more terrifying and only improve the nation's fighting 'renown.' 'Foreign strokes' from tyrants overseas will not weaken Britain, but rather aid her 'majestic' rise to glory.

³⁹ J. L. Robertson (ed.) *The Complete Poetical Works of James Thompson* (Oxford, 1908) p. 420.

⁴⁰ Robertson (ed.) p. 144.

The Great Britain of *Rule Britannia* is eulogized as a beautiful, prosperous and ‘happy’ place to live. The fledgling nation will become home to the ‘Muses,’ those liberty-loving women of Greek mythology. These ‘deities of poetry, literature, music, and dance,’ and later also of, ‘all intellectual pursuits,’ will ensure the nation’s cultural predominance.⁴¹ Their home will be unrivalled for its beauty and as such, a ‘blest isle!’ an allusion to the Blessed Isles (Fortunatae Insulae) of ancient Greece. The new nation will also be prosperous, as commerce ‘shines’ in its cities, and its agriculture flourishes. However, it will not be content to simply stay at home and defend itself from foreign tyranny. In his use of quotation marks around the last two stanzas of each verse Thompson is quoting Britain’s guardian angels who urge Britannia to, ‘rule the waves.’ In this penultimate stanza of each verse, it is these angels of heaven who exhort the newly formed island to its ordained role as a thalassocracy. The angels then go on to sing the stirring mantra, ‘Britons never will be slaves,’ that ends each verse.

Although they are from different genres there are striking similarities in the song *Rule Britannia* and the political print *The Contrast, 1792, British Liberty, French Liberty, Which is best?* Foremost amongst these is the emphasis on liberty as a key element of British national identity. Britannia as the embodiment of the nation is heard in the song and seen in the political print. In the song Britain’s guardian angels constantly reiterate the mantra that Britons will ‘never be slaves’ whilst in the print, Britannia holds the charter that guarantees its people’s liberty. Both the song and the political print strongly emphasize that Britain’s liberty is backed by its naval power. The ‘native oak’ that cannot be moved by ‘foreign strokes’ in the song, is the same oak tree under whose branches Britannia sits serenely, but defiantly, in the print. Both pieces emphasize the benefits of British liberty; the song in boasting how commerce shines in this ‘blest isle.’ the print with its long list of positive benefits including ‘prosperity’ resulting in ‘happiness.’ The print’s classically dressed Britannia contrasts with the allusions to the classical Muses in the song. By rooting Britannia in antiquity each piece confirms the nation’s heritage and rightful place in the world.

Although there are strong similarities in the two pieces there are also differences that partly derive from their different genres. Whilst one is meant to be seen the other is more likely to be heard. Moreover, the stirring music of *Rule Britannia* adds an emotional dimension to the piece that has not been considered here and would be worthy of further study. There is also a difference in gender relationships in each piece. In the song, Britain’s ‘manly hearts’ will guard its ‘fair’ maidens, whilst in contrast in the print there are no visible men other than the two corpses that have been respectively hung and decapitated by French Liberty. However, perhaps the most significant difference in these two representations of British national identity is in their reception. The song’s easily remembered lyrics and tune invite the reader (or listener) to participate, especially in the last two stanzas of each verse. In this way

⁴¹ M. Carey, et al., (ed.'s) *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford, 1949) p. 583.

the reader, or audience are participating in reiterating mantras of British national identity that were written in 1740, but seem to be just as relevant when performed today. The audience participation in *Rule Britannia* in contemporary times can be seen in a clip from the Last Night of The Proms that is televised annually live from Britain's Royal Albert Hall. In this 2010 performance soprano Renée Fleming sings verses one, two and six.⁴²

The Contrast, 1792, British Liberty, French Liberty, Which is best? offers us a tantalizing glimpse, a snapshot, into the mood of the period. In contrast *Rule Britannia* did not remain in the eighteenth century but went on to become even more popular and a long-standing British patriotic song. Britannia too is still with us today, for example, on the 2015 two pound coin. Each piece offers some insights into the ways in which notions of national identity are developed. Moreover, the popularity of each work emphasizes how, in their own different ways, they struck a chord in the way Britons saw themselves at the time. The enduring appeal of Britannia, as an icon of national identity, and *Rule Britannia* as the nation's most popular patriotic song continue unabated. They are as much a marker of British national identity today as they were in the eighteenth century. What being British means will continue to resonate within the discourse of national identity that frames Britain's uneasy post-Brexit relationship with the rest of Europe.

⁴² Thomas Arne, *Rule Britannia*, Renée Fleming sings Rule Britannia - Last Night of the Proms 2010' <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wa3EYcVxboQ>> [accessed 21 Feb 2017].

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