

## *The Emerging British Empire and South Asia in the Eighteenth Century*

### **Abstract**

*The eighteenth century was a time of enormous progress in Britain brought about by a vibrant economy which was the result of innovation and the growth of industry. Although domestically Britain was doing well, it faced numerous vicissitudes in its colonies. By the middle of the eighteenth century the British had become the de facto rulers of India. This was brought about by strong leadership, a robust economy and a dynamic military force. But in America it was facing numerous problems which ensued in the breakaway of the colony. Despite of so many varying occurrences globally it was able to tackle them one by one and remain on the path of progress. This upward trend as a nation was brought about because of a number of reasons which included growing economy and a relatively stable political system which was an unusual blend of Constitutional Monarchy and a Parliamentary form of government.*

### **Introduction**

The growth and emergences of Britain as a world power can be traced back to only a few hundred years with substantial progress taking place in the eighteenth century, with specific reference to the middle of the century from the fifties to the seventies. The insignificant island nation rose from obscurity to become the leading nation not only in Europe but the entire world. It was a time of change which led to progress; through innovation exploration and consolidation of new colonies across the globe, stretching from the East Indies to the West Indies, a feat which had never been achieved before. The reign of Elizabeth I<sup>1</sup> is regarded as a golden period in the history of Britain for its discovery, innovation, art and literature. It was towards the end of her era she sanctioned a charter to the Honourable East India Company in 1601,<sup>2</sup> to discover new territories across the globe, it was a piece of legislature which would change the course of history. The seeds which were sown earlier began to bear fruit in the mid eighteenth century; analyses of the factors which led to the rise of Britain are examined briefly in the following pages.

### **Location of Britain**

Britain is an island surrounded by the North Atlantic and has a very narrow strip of water, the English Channel,<sup>3</sup> separating it from Continental Europe. The island had remained aloof and unassailable throughout history with the exception of the Rome invasion by Julius Caesar in 55 BCE.<sup>4</sup> The accounts of the Romans were among the earliest records of Britain. The closest country to Britain is France, a neighbour on mainland Europe approximately thirty kilometres away, with whom Britain had strained relations for centuries. This proximity and yet a definite amount of distance has been the central theme and the setting of so many incidents between the French and the British. The distance and separation by the Channel has been a major factor for the protection of the British Isles from the onslaught of attacks from its neighbours in recent history, especially during the Napoleonic era.<sup>5</sup> For centuries the Channel served as a barrier for not only military invasions, but also political ideas infiltrating Britain. Gershey writes:

The silver sea in which the precious stone of England was set served it in an office never described by Shakespeare, for one of the greatest benefits that the Channel conferred was to keep England secure from the administrative absolutism of the Continent.<sup>6</sup>

One of the major reasons for the success of the British as an independent sovereign nation up to the twentieth century was this unique geography. Being an island they were protected on all sides by water. It was during this time the British feeling secure at home could focus and divert its energies and resources to the development of industry and economy domestically while the colonisation process supported by military expansionism was taking place abroad. Britain had successfully established itself in North America, West Indies, Africa, India and the East Indies.<sup>7</sup>

### **Political Atmosphere in Britain**

Politically Britain was far ahead of the other countries of Europe in having a parliamentary form of government which was not ideal but represented the masses in a more effective way than the other leading nations. In the

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eighteenth century Britain, the King had power and yet the monarchy was constitutional in nature. The members of the British Parliament were a chosen few who had the support of the people they represented along with the necessary blessings of the King. The Kings were bound by certain rules and regulations and had to select ministers and advisors, who had a popular standing in the Parliament. It was composed of the Whigs; the Labour, and the Tories; the Conservative parties. The Parliament was bicameral in nature, consisting of an upper house; the House of Lords and a lower house; the House of Commons.<sup>8</sup> The cessation of the absolutist monarchs of Britain were the Stuarts<sup>9</sup> whose reign ended the rule of the absolute monarchy on the British Isles; “Britain saw the last of absolutism in 1688. What followed was the mutual adjustment of the two formerly contending parties to a settlement both considered essentially sound.”<sup>10</sup> The amendment which came in 1688; known as The Glorious Revolution, was a reflection of the anti-absolutist philosophies which had taken shape in the late seventeenth century as a result of the ideas propagated by writers such as Thomas Hobbes, Jean Bodin, Robert Filmer, and Jacques-Benigne Bossuet.<sup>11</sup>

George III<sup>12</sup> came to the throne of Britain in 1760, during the Seven Years War,<sup>13</sup> initially a popular monarch, because of being the first Hanoverian monarch to be born on British soil. The long reign from 1760 to 1820, was marked by a number of landmarks in modern British history, such as the establishment of the British Empire, consolidation in India, the loss of the American colonies and the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte. At the commencement of his reign he was determined to be more in control of running the affairs of the Kingdom and take power away from the hands of ministers and the Parliament, similar to the case of Louis XIV of France. “George, be king!” his mother used to drum into his ears as a child and this he had intended to do when the time came.<sup>14</sup> But as time passed he realized he could not run the affairs of the country without the support of the Parliament and the influential ministers. He created a situation where the lead minister, William Pitt the Elder, was forced to resign and appointed Earl of Bute, and then George Grenville to the position of the most important minister and advisor. Later he appointed William Pitt the Younger to the same position. William Pitt the Elder, had been a very successful war leader and his forte was foreign policy *vis a vis* military expansionism and subduing France through effective policies and military engagements. He was a visionary and rightly assessed during the Seven Years War (1756-1763); that Britain’s best defence was to monitor and adopt an aggressive policy against the enemy’s harbours, whereby restricting the movement of their navies, stating “the first line of defence is the enemy’s ports.”<sup>15</sup> With such insightful vision and farsighted policies aided with economic growth the British were able to assert themselves as a maritime superpower in due course. William Pitt the Younger was also an outstanding leader but unlike his father his forte was domestic reforms, yet he played a vital in the struggle against Napoleon Bonaparte at the turn of the century.<sup>16</sup>

The Parliamentary system was able to keep a check on the powers of the King and made him accountable for his actions, on the contrary the absolutist monarchy in France had very little checks and balances, leaving very little room for accountability of the monarch. Many of the Enlightenment thinkers wrote against the unchecked powers of the despots and desired a system similar to the British model. Montesquieu, for one feared it allowed a single ruler to govern unchecked by law or other powers, sowing corruption and capriciousness.<sup>17</sup> The British form of governing had been a combination of different elements working together to build a strong and stable nation; English political theorists had for centuries seen their government as a “mixed” monarchy, composed of monarchical noble and common elements.<sup>18</sup>

### **Industry and Innovation**

The Industrial Revolution was a phenomenon which occurred in Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century. Some writers estimate the date of the beginning of the Revolution to the middle of the eighteenth century calling it the Economic Revolution;<sup>19</sup> encapsulating all the economic upheaval which resulted from industrial development. Others date it to the later part of the eighteenth century, and stress more on the industrial innovations.<sup>20</sup> But all are in agreement of its importance in shaping the society in Britain as well as bringing a social change to the rest of Europe followed by the rest of the world. Coffin and other writers have summarised the phenomena as below:

It represented the first breakthrough from a largely rural, handicraft economy to one dominated by urban, machine-driven manufacturing. It involved technological change, mobilized new sources of energy and power, generated new ways of organising human labour, triggered social changes with revolutionary consequences for the West and the world.<sup>21</sup>

If we consider the earlier date 1760, then the Revolution had already begun by the later half of the Seven Years War. This could be one of the reasons for the outcome of the war in favour of Britain. In the earlier half of the Seven Years War, France had been more successful in its operations in the American continent and in India but as the war progressed the tide had turned in favour of the British, forcing the French to become more neglectful of the seas.<sup>22</sup> This outcome of the war occurred for a number of reasons but one of the reasons Britain could fight a long and distant war for a lengthy period of time was its robust and resilient economy. It was able to

continue military engagements, one after the other for such extended periods. The Seven Years War was a political success for the British, but the American War of Independence was a failure yet it managed to come out of both of them, although it had a greater debt than its rival France.<sup>23</sup> The policies of the British government were conducive for the up and coming entrepreneurs who were encouraged to seek their fortune within Britain and abroad in its colonies especially in India. Many of the British Parliamentarians were businessmen and investors having personal interests in the progress of the market at home and economic exploration abroad. Policies were made and bills were passed which created enabling environment for commerce, serving the personal interests as well as those of the ever growing economy especially in fighting battles abroad. “By the 1780s, Britain’s markets, together with its fleet and its established position at the centre of world commerce, gave its entrepreneurs unrivalled opportunities for trade and profit.”<sup>24</sup> In Britain, a number of innovations which gave impetus to industry especially the textile market took place and paved the way making Britain a leading power. The invention of the *Spinning Jenny*, by James Hargreaves in 1764, greatly increased the production of cotton from two hundred to three hundred percent from what it would have been without the machine, and the market went from strength to strength. It is estimated:

In 1760, Britain exported less than two hundred fifty thousand pounds worth of cotton goods; by 1800 it was exporting £5 million worth. In 1760, Britain imported 2.5 million pounds of raw cotton; in 1787, 22 million pounds, in 1837, 366 million pounds. By 1800, cotton accounted for about 5 per cent of the national income of the country; by 1812, from 7 to 8 per cent.<sup>25</sup>

The Industrial Revolution had brought about a sociological change in Britain; the whole population was affected by the boom. Most importantly there was an enormous change in the outlook of the people as far as economy was concerned. There was a great divide amongst those who had resources and those who did not; the capitalists and the labourers, respectively.<sup>26</sup> Men, women and even children were required to work in factories and coal mines in appalling conditions, and the government did not attempt to change or upgrade their conditions, preferring to leave them as they were, a policy of *Laissez-faire*, encouraged by the writer Adam Smith; stating the wages and the work conditions of labour were completely outside human control, and therefore unchangeable.<sup>27</sup>

The arrival of the industrial or the economic age gave Britain an enormous advantage over the rest of the European countries and enabled it to hold out in the lengthy struggle against France; it has been stated, “...the rocks upon which the Napoleonic Empire foundered were the factory chimneys of Yorkshire and Lancashire.”<sup>28</sup> The Industrial Revolution also brought an enormous change in the transportation system across Britain, followed by the rest of the world. Roads were built for the first time ever since the Romans. Better roads meant efficient and faster transport of goods from the factories to the markets. Canals were dug which reduced the transportation time and costs considerably. Similarly railroads played a vital role in the transportation of goods from the factories to the markets and the sea ports within Britain which eventually connected the whole of the British Empire through a network of railway tracks all laid by hand, this pattern was also followed in South Asia.<sup>29</sup>

In India the English East India Company had established itself as the de facto rulers of South Asia after the iconic battle of Buxar in 1764. It was a battle which had consolidated the power of the British as the supreme power in the region, after having defeated the united front led by the Emperor Shah Alam II’s army. The rise in the status had come about as a result of endeavours initiated in the early seventeenth century. The Company had established itself in the regions as other European nations had done so before them, but none at such magnitude. This gigantic leap of faith came about as a result of a booming economy and a vibrant military force led by leaders who had vision and the ability to execute it at a global scale. Chaudhuri stated:

The European East India Companies were the symbols and manifestation of the new developments that were taking place in the history of Western nations from the beginning of the seventeenth century. These were expressed in the art of shipbuilding and navigation, in settlement of colonies in the New World, the ability to organise and manage distant commercial ventures, and in new forms of financial institutions.<sup>30</sup>

### **Turmoil Outside Britain**

The latter half of the eighteenth century and the earlier half of the nineteenth century were a time of remarkable change for Britain and the rest of the world. It was a time which saw changes not only in the political sphere but also saw enormous changes in the field of economics, finance and industry leading to enormous and inevitable social changes. Some would argue the two are inseparable and one is dependent on the other, saying politics and economics go hand in hand. In fact Rayner has referred to the significant military conflicts of the eighteenth century as “trade wars”, all aimed at expansion of borders but also of economic opportunities. According to him these trade wars included the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48), the Seven Years War (1756-63) and the American War of Independence (1775-83).<sup>31</sup>

Three major revolutions took place in the century and all three were linked to one another, in some way. The major revolutions being the Industrial Revolution, the American Revolution also known as the American War of Independence and the French Revolution. All had enormous impacts on their countries of origin and had repercussions which spread to the rest of the world. These revolutions affected the domestic politics and the foreign policy of their home countries as well as their colonies overseas. The colonies established in America were an important source of income for the British and they were dependent on them for their economic growth. Yet in 1775 the disgruntled colonies broke away from the centre leading to the American War of Independence. This was another important event which occurred in the second half of the eighteenth which had serious and long lasting effects on Britain.<sup>32</sup> It too had economic and political causes which were not very different from the Industrial Revolution. The American War of Independence occurred in between the commencement of the Industrial Revolution in 1760, and the outbreak the French Revolution in 1789, as a result of political and economic mismanagement in the colonies, spread out across the globe:

The French and the Indian War set the stage for the imperial crisis of the 1760s and 1770s by creating distrust between England and its colonies and by running up a huge deficit in the British treasury. The years from 1763 to 1775 brought repeated attempts by the British government to subordinate the colonies into taxpaying partners.<sup>33</sup>

The British government had imposed a number of taxes on the colonists, which over the course of time proved to be burdensome. These were difficult for the settlers to digest because they had considered themselves to be a part of the British nation. This was felt more strongly when they realized the people of Britain were not paying even a fraction of the number of taxes the Americans were paying. The colonist had voiced their concerns over the increase of taxes but it fell on deaf ears of the local administration and in London. This was an oversight, which the British would live to regret. The slipping away of the most important colony of the British Empire was underway. With complete disregard for the economic condition of the local population the British kept on increasing taxes one after the other in an attempt to monopolise the trade of the local goods, in such a way where no other nation but the British could benefit from the trade. The Stamp Act and the Tea sanctions finally broke the back of the European American population. Both the measures were extreme in nature and spoke of the short sightedness and lack of contact with the people, of the local governments and the government back home in Britain. The formulation of the Stamp-Act in America was the indication for universal commotion, which would lead to an uprising.<sup>34</sup> On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1776, the American Congress declared the Independence of the Thirteen States.<sup>35</sup> It was a proud moment for the Americans and a death-blow for the British, who had so far only seen positive outcome of their endeavours abroad. At the beginning of July 1776, the European American population severed its bond with its parent country: "Finally, the British abdicated civil power in the colonies in 1775 and 1776, when royal officials were forced to flee to safety, and they never really regained it."<sup>36</sup>

The British got a taste of their own medicine and suffered a rare defeat, which fortunately for them was only confined to the western hemisphere. In India they were doing well and continued to rule for about two more centuries. Over the course of time the Americans had grown distant with their parent country and when the final bond was severed it was not an emotional loss for the inhabitants of the New World. "Nothing but the loose tie, which had connected America with England, was broken; none of the internal relations were discomposed; all the laws remained in force; the condition of persons and of property suffered no other revolution, than that which was necessarily brought with it."<sup>37</sup>

### **Stability Brought by Parliamentary Government**

Britain was and is famous for its parliamentary system of government, which had also been admired by thinkers on the continent. Unlike other nations the British form of government has been more or less consistent and has gone through not as many changes and disruptions as have taken place in other countries. This has also been the strength of the British system of government; consistency and stability have been the reasons for the progress and the success of the nation as an economic and a political power with an incomparable navy. It not only survived but thrived on the solid foundations of its government resulting in the rapid growth in the economy and industry of Britain during the Industrial Revolution in the face of numerous threats from overseas. The economy prospered due to legislations which were in its favour by creating an enabling environment. It was a long and steady road to consolidation of the parliamentary system which we have become accustomed to seeing:

Continuity has been the dominant characteristic in the development of English government. Its institutions, though unprotected by the fundamental organic laws which safeguard the "rigid" constitutions of most other states, have preserved the same general appearance throughout their history, and have been regulated in their working by principles which can be regarded as constant.<sup>38</sup>

The British Parliament, often been referred to as the mother of parliaments had existed for more than seven centuries. The initial document of Britain's constitution is regarded as the *Magna Carta*, or Great Charter of the Liberties of England, which the aristocracy drafted and pressured King John to sign in 1215.<sup>39</sup> The principles of

this document have guided the evolution of law over the centuries, as well as served as a model for numerous constitutions drafted by other nations. Among some of the important bills which have laid down principles in the British Constitution is the Bill of Rights 1689, passed after the Glorious Revolution of 1688.<sup>40</sup> The Bill of Rights created separation of powers, curtailed the powers of the monarchs and solved the hereditary issues of the throne. It enhanced the democratic process by election and encouraged freedom of speech. The next important amendment in the constitution was the Acts of Union of 1707 which brought about the unification of Scotland with Britain, establishing Great Britain. The laws of England were amalgamated with those of Scotland to form a constitution which was valid for almost a century until Ireland was merged into Great Britain under the Act of Union of 1801, which created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.<sup>41</sup>

One certainty persisted; the British system has always had a monarch as the head of the state, whether it was a despot as in the case of Henry VIII<sup>42</sup> or a constitutional monarch as most of the monarchs of Britain have been. But the government has always been parliamentary in nature despite the overthrow of Charles I in 1649 by Oliver Cromwell who claimed to be the Lord Protectorate and leader of the nation. The Restoration in 1660 saw the British revert to traditional monarchy. Despite turmoil and experimentation with and without monarchy, Britain has maintained its unique character. Keir writes: “Neither in its formal and legal, nor in its informal and practical aspect, has English government at any stage of its history violently and permanently repudiated its own tradition.”<sup>43</sup>

### Conclusion

Britain has been an important player in the geo-politics of the world ever since the post Renaissance period, but it was in the eighteenth century when it established itself as the most important and powerful nation in the world. As discussed above it was a long and arduous road to success which did not happen overnight. Correct and timely actions as a result of correct, wise and timely decisions put the country on the path of growth and progress the likes of which the world had never seen before. One of the most important decisions was taken to colonize the Americas; the New World provided unlimited opportunities and openings for the adventurous colonizers. Being amongst the earliest settlers in America gave them an advantage over the other European countries, an advantage which would last till the War of Independence. Another important decision was the charter granted to the English East India Company to conduct trade and to look for lucrative trading opportunities for the expansion of British influence in Asia. Unlike other European companies it was not only a charter in name only but they were also provided with support in legislature and finances. The colonization of the Americas was a very profitable venture in terms of economics and it also provided a new home for the daring immigrant population of the British Isles. Coupled with the blessings of the highest offices in Britain it was also a personal matter for a lot of the politicians of the parliament. They had business interest abroad and would make sure of propagating and pushing favourable legislature at home, legislature which would favour their business at home and abroad, at the best rates possible. Inventions in industry played an important role in the rise of Britain as a superpower. The Industrial Revolution was the impetus which provided the economy the backbone in the rise of the ‘new’ Britain. The same economy and military might added with a steely determination gave the British the edge over their traditional foes, the French, and this played a vital role in the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte, the main threat in Europe towards the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. The new and improved means of transport brought the goods directly to the ports, which increased and improved the speed and efficiency of trade, by many folds. The Seven Years War was a success for the British but it came about after a long and difficult struggle overseas and although the loss of America was a blow for the British Empire but because of their strong economy and efficient legislature, were able to sustain themselves. Not only did they manage to remain a float but they also kept on progressing and growing, now they had to turn their attention completely to South Asia. The environment of eighteenth century Britain was one which enabled the entrepreneurs to venture to new lands. Likewise the political scenario was progressive, enabling and above all stable, it providing a voice to the common man and yet maintained the majesty of the Crown, thereby creating a harmonious balance which was not seen anywhere else in Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth I, bynames the Virgin Queen and Good Queen Bess, (born September 7, 1533, Greenwich, near London, England—died March 24, 1603, Richmond, Surrey), queen of England (1558–1603) during a period, often called the Elizabethan Age, when England asserted itself vigorously as a major European power in politics, commerce, and the arts. Although her small kingdom was threatened by grave internal divisions, Elizabeth’s blend of shrewdness, courage, and majestic self-display inspired ardent expressions of loyalty and helped unify the nation against foreign enemies. The latter half of the 16th century in England is justly called the Elizabethan Age: rarely has the collective life of a whole era been given so distinctively personal a stamp. New *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 15<sup>th</sup> ed, s.v. “Elizabeth I.”

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- <sup>2</sup> P.E. Roberts *History of British India under the Company and the Crown*. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1977). 25.
- <sup>3</sup> Channel; the English Channel arm of the Atlantic Ocean separating the southern coast of England from the northern coast of France. The French name (“The Sleeve”) is a reference to its shape, which gradually narrows from the west to east from a maximum of about 112 miles (180 km) to a minimum of about 21 miles (34 km) between Dover, Eng., and Calais, Fr. *New Encyclopaedia Britannica* 15<sup>th</sup> ed, s.v. “English Channel.”
- <sup>4</sup> Julius Caesar. *The Conquest of Gaul*. S.A. Hanford, trans. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951), 119.
- <sup>5</sup> David G. Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 324.
- <sup>6</sup> Leo Gershoy. *The Rise of Modern Europe: From Despotism to Revolution 1763-1789* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 19.
- <sup>7</sup> James Lawrence. *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*. (London: Abacus, 2001). 51.
- <sup>8</sup> John Merriman. *A History of Modern Europe; From the Renaissance to the Age of Napoleon*. (London; W.W. Norton & Company, 2004). 248
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.
- <sup>10</sup> Judith, Coffin, Robert Stacey, Joshua Cole and Carol Symes. *Western Civilizations: Their History & Their Culture*. Vol. 2, 17 ed. ( New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011). 623.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 610.
- <sup>12</sup> Christopher Wright. *George III*. (London: The British Library, 2005). 8.
- <sup>13</sup> Leo Gershoy. *The Rise of Modern Europe: From Despotism to Revolution 1763-178*. 1.
- <sup>14</sup> Robert M Rayner, *A Concise History of Britain* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1948), 406.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 432.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 494.
- <sup>17</sup> Coffin *et al*, *Western Civilization*, 653.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 609.
- <sup>19</sup> Rayner, *A Concise History of Britain*, 471.
- <sup>20</sup> Coffin *et al*, *Western Civilization*, 773.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 723.
- <sup>22</sup> Robert Kaplan, D. *The Revenge of Geography*. (New York: Random House, 2013). 107.
- <sup>23</sup> Jeremy Black, *From Louis XIV to Napoleon; The Fate of a Great Power*. (London: UCL Press, 1999). 220.
- <sup>24</sup> Coffin *et al*, *Western Civilization*, 726.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 731.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 475.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 476.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 475.
- <sup>29</sup> Coffin *et al*, *Western Civilization*, 737.
- <sup>30</sup> K.N Chaudhuri. *The Trading World of Asia and The English East India Company 1660-1760*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). 462.
- <sup>31</sup> Rayner, *A Concise History of Britain*, 442.
- <sup>32</sup> Maurice Boyd and Donald Worcester. *American Civilization; An Introduction to the Social Sciences*. 2 ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc, 1969). 109.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.
- <sup>36</sup> James L.Roark, Michael P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, Alan Lawson, and Susan M. Hartmann. *The American Promise; A History of the United States. Compact ed.* (Boston: Bedford/Martin, 2000), 181.
- <sup>37</sup> Gentz, 33.
- <sup>38</sup> Keir, *The Constitutional History of Modern Britain Since 1485*, 1.
- <sup>39</sup> Rayner 56.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid* 357.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 468.
- <sup>42</sup> Rayner, 153.
- <sup>43</sup> Keir, 3.