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A Virtual Nation: Greater Britain and the Imperial Legacy
of the American Revolution

ELIGA H. GOULD

ANYONE SEEKING TO WRITE BRITISH HISTORY as something more than the combined histories of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales must begin by accepting a paradox. It is certainly possible to speak of a collective "British" experience, one that at various points over the last three hundred years has encompassed all of the British Isles, together with large stretches of Africa, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and the Americas. But to paraphrase the Scottish nationalist Tom Nairn, Britain's modern history has been a history of fragmentation.¹ Not only has the empire on which the sun never set largely vanished, but, for the better part of the last century, the United Kingdom itself has been beset by the centrifugal impulses of Celtic separatism. While none of this has prevented the "new British history" from attracting growing numbers of practitioners, Britain's "limits and divisions" remain no less conspicuous today than they were a quarter-century ago, when J. G. A. Pocock first noted their extraordinary persistence in his influential series of articles.²

For an essay on Britain and the American Revolution, this might sound like a rather self-evident point with which to begin. Despite the loss of the thirteen colonies, however, British historians have generally chosen to depict the eighteenth

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¹ Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London, 1977). Nairn's conclusions about the weakness of a common British national consciousness find strong support in Benedict Anderson's now classic formulation, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. edn. (New York, 1991), esp. 2.

² J. G. A. Pocock, "British History: A Plea for a New Subject," *Journal of Modern History* 47 (1975): 601–28; Pocock, "The Limits and Divisions of British History: In Search of the Unknown Subject," *AHR* 87 (April 1982): 311–36. See also David Cannadine, "British History: Past, Present—and Future?" *Past and Present* 141 (1987). For an indication of how the interest in British history has continued to grow, see Margot Finn, "Editor's Introduction," *Journal of British Studies* 36 (1997): 1–3. No doubt one reason for this interest is the more general interest in transnational history: see John R. Gillis, "The Future of European History," *Perspectives* 34 (April 1996), as well as J. C. D. Clark's suggestive essay, "The Strange Death of British History? Reflections on Anglo-American Scholarship," *Historical Journal* 40 (1997): 787–809.

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