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*Islands and the British Empire in the Age
of Sail*

edited by

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3

Britain's European Island-Empire, 1793–1815

James Davey

C3

C3.P1

In September 1792, as Britain moved ever closer to war with Revolutionary France, the British Foreign Secretary Lord Grenville received an anonymous letter. Written in crisp, assertive prose, it made a forthright call for the British government to annex the Mediterranean island of Malta, which was controlled by the Order of the Knights of St John. The letter argued that in the event of a European war Malta's military weakness would likely force them to seek protection from one of the 'Great Powers' of Europe, and that whichever nation possessed the island would claim innumerable benefits. Should France govern the island, they would be able to command the trade with the eastern Mediterranean, 'as the Danes have of the Baltic trade by the possession of Elsinore'. Russian control would allow Catherine II to threaten Constantinople with starvation, reduce the Ionian Islands in the eastern Mediterranean, and 'dictate the Terms of intercourse with the Levant'. However, were *Britain* to control the island, it would secure 'every advantage of commercial intercourse with Italy, Sicily, the Eastern half of the Mediterranean, Egypt, the coast of Africa', offering a 'Great Warehouse' for the commodities of England and offering protection to its trading vessels. Lastly, the island of Malta presented Britain with the opportunity to secure a crucial naval base in the eastern Mediterranean which conferred a range of strategic possibilities.¹

C3.P2

Documents like this were part and parcel of political life in the eighteenth century. Statesmen were inundated with papers and pamphlets attempting to inform and persuade, as civilian projectors tried to influence government policy. Ministers in London devoted considerable time to creating and extending networks which sought information and intelligence, but that also included recommendations and advice. Henry Dundas, Secretary of State for War from 1794 until 1801, was at the centre of a vast network of informants who kept him abreast of developments around the world, but who also took the opportunity to advise him on the best course of action. In January 1795, Sir Mark Wood wrote 'cursory

¹ The National Archives (hereafter TNA), FO 49/2, 79–80.

suggestions... most respectfully submitted to Mr Dundas' in a thinly veiled attempt to persuade him to prioritize the capture of Dutch Indian Ocean possessions. Justifying his reasoning by his 'own Local knowledge and experience', he aimed to 'strongly press upon the attention of Government the expediency of it being done'.² Similarly, Andrew James Cochrane Johnstone was a regular correspondent with Dundas from the Caribbean, discussing a variety of affairs and projects ranging from colonial governance to his attempt to argue for the creation of a corps of black soldiers, made up of formerly enslaved people.³ The British Empire was and would remain reliant on the exchange of information.⁴

C3.P3

Projectors could be successful in influencing government policy. Cochrane Johnstone was successful in arguing for the creation of West India Regiments, and Alison G. Olson and Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy have demonstrated the profound influence colonial lobbyists could have on imperial policy.⁵ Motivated by commercial gain, but also the chance to improve one's status in London's corridors of power, the simple act of writing suggests that these individuals had some hope—if not expectation—that their ideas would be heeded. Many of these missives, no doubt, were quietly put to one side. In the example of the anonymous letter sent to Grenville in 1792, it appears that the British politician paid little immediate attention to its broader argument: with the attention of British ministers focused on the advance of revolutionary armies in northern Europe, there was no change in imperial policy, and no attempt to annex the island of Malta. However, the letter would prove to be prescient and, years later, Grenville found himself advocating policy that aligned almost exactly with its key tenets. Following the British entry into the French Revolutionary Wars on 1 February 1793, Malta claimed a much more significant place in the British strategic calculations. In 1800, Britain secured control of the island, and, as predicted by the anonymous

² Huntington Library (hereafter HL), DUN 17, Sir Mark Wood, 'Cursory suggestions, which are most respectfully submitted to Mr Dundas, for the purpose of getting Possession of the Dutch Eastern Possessions, and for preventing them from falling under the Dominion of the Enemies of his Country', 25 January 1795.

³ See for example HL, DUN 22, Andrew James Cochrane Johnstone to Henry Dundas, 20 January 1796; HL, DUN 27, Andrew James Cochrane Johnstone to Henry Dundas, 6 April 1798; HL, DUN 82, Andrew James Cochrane Johnstone to Henry Dundas, 6–7 November 1801.

⁴ Natasha Glaisyer, 'Networking: Trade and Exchange in the Eighteenth-Century British Empire', *The Historical Journal* 47, no. 2 (2004), pp. 451–76; Richard Drayton, 'Knowledge and Empire', in P. J. Marshall (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume II The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 231–52; C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). See also Gary Magee and Andrew Thompson, *Empire and Globalisation: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, c.1850–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁵ For the creation of the West India Regiments, see Roger N. Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795–1815* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979). For work on colonial lobbyists, see Alison G. Olson, 'The London Mercantile Lobby and the Coming of the American Revolution', *The Journal of American History*, 69, no. 1 (June 1982), pp. 21–41; Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

projector, it came to form a vital cog in the wider war effort. Speaking in the House of Lords in 1802, Henry Dundas, recently elevated to the peerage as Lord Melville, described the recently captured island as ‘a great tower erected in the Mediterranean’, defying France and commanding the surrounding seas.⁶ Having left office in 1801, Grenville returned to government in 1806 as Prime Minister, fully persuaded of Malta’s value. That year, he proposed that British control should be extended to Sicily and Sardinia, ‘and thus make all these islands in the Mediterranean an important chain of stations highly useful to us both in war and commerce’.⁷

C3.P4

Indeed, Malta was but one part of a network of European islands occupied by Britain during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1793–1815). In the Mediterranean, a string of islands including Corsica, Minorca, Malta, Sicily, and the Ionian Islands were annexed or temporarily controlled by the British as the war grew in scale. What is more, this chain of island possessions extended into the northern waters, as Heligoland, Anholt, and Hanö were captured, offering the British further critical posts from which French military and naval power could be confronted. Taken together, this formed a European island-empire stretching across the North, Baltic, and Mediterranean Seas that forces us to re-think the nature of imperial control at the turn of the nineteenth century. The growth of the British Empire during the age of sail saw the annexation of numerous island possessions in the Caribbean and North America, as well as in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and when discussing ‘islands’ and ‘empire’, we are accustomed to think of far-flung regions of the world. For good reasons, the focus of historians has tended to prioritize these more distant forms of empire.⁸ What is frequently overlooked, though, is that some of the most important British possessions lay much closer to home.

C3.P5

This chapter seeks to do two things. First, it corrects the lack of attention given to Britain’s European island-empire, exploring its conception and construction during the intense global conflict that characterized the 1793–1815 period. One reason for the relative lack of attention bestowed on the European islands is that historians have tended to think of them as individual, specific cases, rather than as a wider network of imperial possessions. There have been number of excellent studies—particularly those by Desmond Gregory—that cover the imperial control

⁶ William Cobbett, *Annual Register*, 3. 1661–3.

⁷ Grenville to Fox, 22 June 1806, *Report on the Manuscripts of J. B. Fortescue, Esq. Preserved at Dropmore* (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1908), vol. 8, p. 196.

⁸ For example, the debate about the transition from a ‘first’ to a ‘second’ British empire in the aftermath of the American Revolution focuses on the degree to which imperial focus moved from the Atlantic world to one that focused on India and the Indian Ocean. For an expert summation of the debate, see C. A. Bayly, ‘The Second British Empire’, in Robin Winks (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume V Historiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 54–72.

of Corsica, Malta, and Sicily.⁹ Similarly, historians who have noted Britain's Europe-wide imperial strategy have done so as part of much broader works, or by looking at specific individuals and case studies.¹⁰ There has been no real attempt to think about these European possessions as part of a larger imperial effort. This chapter, therefore, compares and contrasts the political and public agendas behind this imperial expansion and analyses the congruencies that emerge. Much as Stephen Conway has argued for a greater recognition of the European functions of the Royal Navy in the late eighteenth century, as opposed to its imperial roles, this chapter suggests that a similar re-appraisal is required of Britain's colonial strategy. For Britain, some of the most significant imperial possessions lay in European waters.¹¹

C3.P6

Second, this chapter places these European acquisitions within the wider context of British imperialism at the turn of the nineteenth century. It considers whether Britain's European island-empire represented a specific or different form of colonial control. Numerous scholars have written about the driving motives behind imperial expansion in this period: Richard Drayton, John Gascoigne, and Alan Frost have pointed to the acquisition of resources—from breadfruit to hemp—as a prime motivator of imperial expansion.¹² Similarly, numerous economic and imperial historians have highlighted the vast commercial ambitions that aligned with imperial outreach.¹³ Other scholars such as Kathleen Wilson and

⁹ Desmond Gregory, *The Ungovernable Rock: A History of the Anglo-Corsican Kingdom and its Role in Britain's Mediterranean Strategy during the Revolutionary War (1793–97)* (London: Associated University Presses, 1985); Desmond Gregory, *Sicily: The Insecure Base: A History of the British Occupation of Sicily, 1806–1815* (London and Toronto: Fairleigh Dickson University Press, 1988); Desmond Gregory, *Malta, Britain and the European Powers, 1793–1815* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996).

¹⁰ Michael Duffy, 'World-Wide War and British Expansion, 1793–1815', in Marshall (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume II The Eighteenth Century*, pp. 184–207; Piers Mackesy, *The War in the Mediterranean, 1803–1810* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957); Diletta D'Andrea, 'Great Britain and the Mediterranean Islands in the Napoleonic Wars—The "Insular Strategy" of Gould Francis Leckie', *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 16, nos 1&2 (2006), pp. 79–89.

¹¹ Stephen Conway, 'Empire, Europe and British Naval Power', in David Cannadine (ed.), *Empire, The Sea and Global History: Britain's Maritime World, c. 1763–c. 1840* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 22–40.

¹² Richard Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the 'Improvement' of the World* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2000); Alan Frost, *The Global Reach of Empire: Britain's Maritime Expansion in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, 1764–1815* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003); Alan Frost, *Botany Bay Mirages: Illusions of Australia's Convict Beginnings* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994); John Gascoigne, *Science in the Service of Empire: Joseph Banks, the British State and the Uses of Science in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹³ Richard B. Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery: An Economic History of the British West Indies, 1623–1775* (Barbados: Canoe Press, 1974); Patrick K. O'Brien, 'Inseparable Connections: Trade, Economy, Fiscal State, and the Expansion of Empire, 1688–1815', in Marshall (ed.), *Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume II The Eighteenth Century*, pp. 53–77; Michael Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar and Seapower: The British Expeditions to the West Indies and the War Against Revolutionary France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); Jacob Price, 'The Imperial Economy, 1700–1776', in Marshall (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume II The Eighteenth Century*, pp. 78–104; H. V. Bowen, *Elites, Enterprise and the Making of the British Overseas Empire, 1688–1783* (London: Palgrave

Holger Hoock have explored the cultural and gendered connections between the British public and Britain's burgeoning trading empire.¹⁴ Resources, commerce, and popular sentiment were of course integral to the development of the European island-empire constructed by Britain in the period. However, a detailed study of this imperial advancement suggests a much more cynical, hard-headed desire to secure empire for strategic advantages. This chapter will consider how statesmen, but also projectors and other writers, argued for an extension of empire, and show that the arguments that held the greatest weight were those that promised a short-term strategic boon. In this, the chapter aligns with Chris Bayly's ideas about a 'new' British imperialism emerging in the 1790s that, in the face of great external threats, saw empire as an end in itself.¹⁵

C3.S1

Origins of a European Island-Empire

C3.P7

British interest in European islands was not unique to the 1793–1815 period. Across the eighteenth century, British concerns on the Continent had seen attempts to establish an imperial base, particularly in the Mediterranean. In 1708 Minorca was captured, with Britain taking formal possession with the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. For the following seventy years, it served as an important naval station in the western Mediterranean, but it also proved difficult to defend. In 1756, the failure of Admiral John Byng to relieve the garrison meant the island fell to the French and Byng was executed for 'failing to do his utmost' in battle.¹⁶ Minorca was returned to Britain in the Peace of Paris in 1763, but it once again came under threat during the American War of Independence, finally falling to Spain in 1782. The struggle to maintain possession of Minorca represented the limit of policy-makers' ambitions in European waters. Britain's vulnerability to invasion meant that during wartime, fleets were concentrated overwhelmingly in the English Channel and as a result, it lacked the naval strength—as well as the political will—to attempt anything more ambitious in the Mediterranean.¹⁷ In

Macmillan, 1996); David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735–85* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Kenneth Morgan, *Bristol and the Atlantic Trade in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹⁴ Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003); Holger Hoock, *Empires of the Imagination: Politics, War and the Arts in the British World* (London: Profile Books, 2010); Geoff Quilley, *Empire to Nation: Art, History and the Visualisation of Maritime Britain, 1768–1829* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2011).

¹⁵ C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London: Longman, 1989), pp. 102–4.

¹⁶ See Daniel Baugh, *The Global Seven Years War* (Harlow: Pearson, 2011), pp. 182–95.

¹⁷ Jeremy Black, 'British Naval Power and International Commitments: Politics and Strategic Problems, 1688–1770', in Michael Duffy (ed.), *Parameters of British Naval Power, 1650–1850* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1992), pp. 39–59.

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Northern Europe, where the hydrographical and logistical challenges of maintaining a military presence were formidable, there was no attempt to send a fleet to the Baltic Sea between 1727 and 1801, let alone initiate new imperial possessions.¹⁸ It follows that while the desire to create a European island-empire during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars was not an entirely new departure for Britain, it represented a significant change in both political and imperial ambitions.

C3.P8 Following the onset of the French Revolutionary War in 1793, British attention once again focused on the western Mediterranean. The need to secure a base from which the French naval port of Toulon could be blockaded was all-important, and the nationalist revolt that broke out in Corsica in 1793 presented an opportunity to create an island possession ideal for that purpose. The leader of the revolt, Pasquale Paoli, persuaded the British envoy Sir Gilbert Elliot that British control was their preferred option. Elliot reported that:

C3.P9 In shaking off the dominion of France, they know however, that her pretensions still remain, and that they have not only that nation but other powerful enemies to dread. I am persuaded there is not a man in Corsica so uninformed, as to believe that their future security and peace can be established without the constant support of a powerful protector, and they are nearly as unanimous in preferring Great Britain in that character to every other nation in Europe.¹⁹

C3.P10 It is not clear how much Paoli was telling Elliot what he wanted to hear, and the tone of Elliot's letters to Dundas is one of naïve optimism. Nonetheless, circumstantial evidence persuaded Elliot that the Corsican could be trusted: he noted with pleasure that 'many thousands' came to see the British delegation, who called out 'Viva Paoli, et la Nation Inglese', and that he was 'satisfied that Paoli's sincerity in this design is little to be doubted as that of his Countrymen. . . . He knows too well the impossibility of maintaining the absolute independence of this little State by her own separate resources'.²⁰

C3.P11 Elliot's attempts to justify the annexation of Corsica raised fundamental questions about the nature of British imperial control. Not everyone was convinced of Corsica's benefits: only the year before, the British envoy in Tuscany noted to Grenville that a neutral port in Italy 'would be more advantageous to us than the possession of the Island'.²¹ Perhaps with these doubts in mind, Elliot wrote to Dundas that:

¹⁸ James Davey, *The Transformation of British Naval Strategy: Seapower and Supply in Northern Europe, 1808–1812* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2012), p. 55.

¹⁹ TNA, FO 20/2, Sir Gilbert Elliot to Henry Dundas, 4 February 1794 (No. 13).

²⁰ TNA, FO 20/2, Sir Gilbert Elliot to Henry Dundas, 4 February 1794 (No. 13).

²¹ TNA, FO 79/8, Harvey to Lord Grenville, 17 July 1793.

- C3.P12 The choice must probably lie between two modes of Connexion with Corsica. We must either acquire the Island as part of His Majesty's Dominions, and as a Dependency on Great Britain, or we must establish the Independency of the Island, and be content with one or two of its Ports, for our use, secured to us by the admission of a British Garrison. In the latter case, we shall no doubt be expected, not only to deliver the Island from the authority of France at present, but to guarantee its future independence.
- C3.P13 He identified two leading questions: 'which is the most *secure*, and which is the least expensive & burdensome method', and hoped that further conversations would reveal clear answers. 'I hope some useful information may be obtained on the spot without much delay', he wrote, and 'I shall endeavour to form some estimate of the charge that must attend the civil Government, on the Supposition of the Island coming under the Dominions of His Majesty . . . as well as the value of some other advantages which may be supposed to accrue from such a requisition'.²²
- C3.P14 In his subsequent report to Dundas, Elliot sold the acquisition of Corsica to the British government almost entirely in strategic terms. 'The advantage which Great Britain may expect to derive from this possession, are of various kinds', he wrote, and 'may be divided into those which it will afford in war, and those which it may furnish in peace'. The most obvious reason for controlling Corsica, he said, was to deprive France of it, 'a circumstance which undoubtedly makes every benefit tell for double'. It would deny France ship timber—perhaps the most valuable resource France could secure from the island—while adding an extra source of wood for Britain, and suggested that Britain should create naval establishments on the island to take advantage of this material boon. The second advantage would be to provide—and take away from France—a reservoir of around 2000 trained seamen and military recruits. 'The nature of their Country', he commented, 'the frequent defensive wars they have had to wage, and their own character and habits, qualify them, perhaps beyond any other people, for excellence in some branches of military service'. Most importantly, it deprived France of a naval base, and in turn presented it to the British. France would be prevented from conducting offensive operations against the Italian coasts; by contrast, 'the harbours of that Island must render us at once Formidable to France, and independent of the little Italian States whose ports are not good, and whose friendship is but slippery'. These harbours presented places where ships could be repaired and re-fitted, as well as facilities to resupply ships, without needing to return to Gibraltar or England.²³

²² TNA, FO 20/2, Sir Gilbert Elliot to Henry Dundas, 7 January 1794 (No. 11).

²³ TNA, FO 20/2, Sir Gilbert Elliot to Henry Dundas, 4 February 1794 (No. 13).

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- C3.P15 As Gregory has noted, Elliot was anxious to minimize difficulties and convince Dundas of the immense benefits that annexation would bring.²⁴ He was brutally honest, though, about the limited commercial gains on offer. ‘In peace, I do not know that the trade of Corsica can suddenly yield much profit to Great Britain’, he stated, and that ‘neither the wants nor the riches of the people can at present be expected to furnish an extensive market’. Instead, this annexation would be for purely strategic purposes:
- C3.P16 In a political view, it gives to us a solid and permanent footing, as a Mediterranean power, & by keeping us constantly in the view of the Italian States as a formidable Enemy, or as a powerful protector, it ought to give us a leading and steady influence in the politics of Italy, and tend either to avert war, or to strengthen us in the prosecution of it, when unavoidable.
- C3.P17 What is more, he recommended that British occupation must be permanent. Any advantage gained by temporarily controlling Corsica’s harbours ‘must be very precarious in its duration’, while a deeper, more permanent annexation where the authority of the British Government was recognized would ensure a more rigorous control of the island.²⁵ His account was fully persuasive. On receiving Elliot’s recommendation, Dundas agreed that ‘There can be no doubt that the acquisition of such a Possession would be in many views advantageous to this Country and the future Preservation of it does not appear likely to be attended with any expence which can be set in opposition to that advantage’. He directed Elliot ‘to avail yourself of any circumstances which may arise for the purpose of uniting this Island to His Majesty’s Possessions’, and annex the island of Corsica.²⁶
- C3.P18 The next few years would show Paoli to be a more unreliable partner than Elliot had predicted and, as the costs of maintaining both military and naval forces on Corsica rose exponentially, the British government refused to send further reinforcements. Naval officers were critical of its usefulness: Horatio Nelson noted that while ‘Its situation was certainly most desirable’, its inhabitants ‘are so greedy of wealth, and so jealous of each other, that it would require the patience of Job, and the riches of Croesus, to satisfy them’.²⁷ More dispassionately, Cuthbert Collingwood noted the ‘immense expence’ incurred, and opined that ‘If we are obliged to abandon [Corsica], none will lament the loss save those who

²⁴ Gregory, *The Ungovernable Rock*, p. 62.

²⁵ TNA, FO 20/2, Sir Gilbert Elliot to Henry Dundas, 4 February 1794 (No. 13).

²⁶ TNA, FO 20/2, Henry Dundas to Sir Gilbert Elliot, 31 March 1794.

²⁷ Horatio Nelson to William Lockyer, 5 November 1796, in Nicholas Harris Nicolas (ed.), *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson*, 7 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011; first published in 1844–6), vol. 2, p. 298.

have good appointments here'.²⁸ French military advances in northern Italy further weakened Britain's Mediterranean position, and by 1796 the decision was taken to leave the Mediterranean altogether. In terms that offer a surprisingly modern understanding of popular political support, the Home Secretary the Duke of Portland also noted that there was no public will to continue with further investment. Corsica's 'cost', he wrote:

C3.P19 renders it unpopular. Our worthy citizens are not interested in foreign policy – they understand accounting and commercial speculation, but as regards power and security beyond the Channel, the mass of the population is incapable of seeing the necessity and understanding its worth.²⁹

C3.P20 While the public was prepared to accept the virtuous circle of imperial advance and commercial growth, the sovereignty of a small impoverished island hundreds of miles away seemed of little relevance. Its strategic function now obsolete, and without popular support, Corsica was also abandoned. *The Times* noted that the troops on the island could be better employed somewhere more useful, but otherwise the evacuation passed with little comment.³⁰

C3.P21 In 1798, following naval victories at Cape St Vincent and Camperdown, the decision was taken for Britain to return to the Mediterranean. While Corsica was not considered again, the need for a western base from which they could blockade Toulon became ever more pressing. Spain was now allied to France, and Britain took the opportunity to capture and garrison Minorca, just as it had earlier in the eighteenth century. It remained in British hands until the end of the French Revolutionary Wars in 1802, acting as an important victualling base that allowed vessels stationed in the western Mediterranean to be provisioned without needing to sail to Gibraltar. This allowed the British to secure foodstuffs from the region and redistribute them: for instance, three victuallers, with a combined tonnage of 1196 tons, were employed conveying cattle from Leghorn (today's Livorno) to Minorca. Port Mahon, the main harbour on Minorca, also acted as a focal point for provisions sent from Britain. These shipments went first to Gibraltar, after which transports with a combined tonnage of over 10,000 relayed these provisions across the western Mediterranean: in 1800, 1842 tons of transport shipping was kept at Minorca as victuallers.³¹

²⁸ Cuthbert Collingwood to J. E. Blackett, 11 May 1796, in G. L. Newnham Collingwood (ed.), *A Selection from the Public and Private Correspondence of Vice-Admiral Lord Collingwood: Interspersed with Memoirs of His Life*, 2 vols (London: James Ridgway, 1828), vol. 1, p. 40.

²⁹ Duke of Portland quoted in Gregory, *The Ungovernable Rock*, p. 175.

³⁰ *The Times*, 30 August 1796, quoted in Gregory, *The Ungovernable Rock*, p. 175.

³¹ National Maritime Museum (hereafter NMM), KEI/L/1/143–5, Transport Board to Keith, 8 March 1800. See also James Davey, 'Within Hostile Shores: Victualling the Royal Navy in European Waters during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars', *International Journal of Maritime History* 21, no. 2 (2009), pp. 241–60.

C3.P22 The island remained a possession for as long as it held strategic utility. Towards the end of the 1790s, the Mediterranean war moved ever eastwards, and—as in 1756 and 1782—Minorca became more of a liability than an asset.³² In 1798, the French broke through the British blockade of Toulon, launching an expedition that captured Malta and subsequently conquered Egypt. British attention turned towards the eastern Mediterranean: an expedition under General Abercromby was sent to restore British control of the region, and in this context the blockade of Toulon—and therefore the utility of Minorca—appeared less essential.³³ Moreover, both naval and military figures reported the impossibility of improving Minorca’s defences to the point that it could withstand enemy attacks. As Abercromby reported to Dundas on 9 December 1800,

C3.P23 no skill of the ablest engineer could protect it, and the Dockyard, and that in the Commencement of a War, it is always in the power of France and Spain to invade the Island, and either take it from us or to destroy the Dockyard.³⁴

C3.P24 The naval officer, Captain Alexander Ball, noted the following year that Malta was infinitely preferable as a base. It was a less vulnerable island and needed a smaller garrison, while Valletta’s harbour was larger and more secure than Port Mahon. The supply of water in Malta was also far superior.³⁵ Minorca had outlived its usefulness, and in the peace settlement of 1802, it was given back to Spain.

C3.S2

Malta

C3.P25 The changing direction of the Mediterranean war brought other European islands to the British government’s attention. Throughout the eighteenth century, the British had shown little interest in the eastern Mediterranean as its share of the Levant trade declined, and as we have already seen, Lord Grenville had studiously ignored an anonymous projector’s attempts to advocate British control of Malta.³⁶ However, France’s capture of the island in 1798 forced policy-makers in London to re-consider its potential utility. In December 1798, Britain and Russia signed an agreement that together they would assist in re-capturing Malta and restoring it to the Order of the Knights of St John. The siege of Malta, conducted between 1798 and 1800, saw the burden of the military effort fall overwhelmingly on the British, and the objective of some government ministers—especially Henry Dundas—switched to securing the island under a British flag.³⁷ In a letter written to

³² Gregory, *The Ungovernable Rock*, p. 176.

³³ Duffy, ‘World-Wide War and British Expansion’, pp. 184–207.

³⁴ TNA, WO 1/344 565, Abercromby to Dundas, 9 December 1800.

³⁵ TNA, WO 1/835/17, Ball, ‘Memorandum on Malta’, 1801.

³⁶ Gregory, *Malta, Britain and the European Powers*, p. 58. ³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 107–15.

Abercromby in August 1800, he noted that suspicions over Russia 'render it necessary to make considerable modifications in the line of conduct you were directed to observe with respect to Malta'. He ordered Abercromby to secure Maltese fortresses for Britain, and to urge the 'right of pre-occupancy' to any late-arriving Russian troops, 'so far as entirely to refuse them admission into the Island', and stopping just short of war:

- C3.P26 In short, the object of this Country in its views upon Malta, being to secure itself the advantage of a very important naval station in that part of the Mediterranean, you will understand that no exertions consistent with the other services in which you are engaged, is to be spared on the one hand for expelling the Enemy, and on the other, that every precaution short of actual hostility is to be taken to prevent our being deprived of this advantage by the interference of another Power.³⁸
- C3.P27 On 4 September 1800, French envoys were sent to the British and in the afternoon Malta surrendered: the island, its dependencies, fortifications, and military supplies were all turned over to British control.
- C3.P28 The British capture of Malta raised questions about its long-term value. Indeed, the discussion over the potential acquisition of Malta offered two competing governmental visions of the purpose of empire. Henry Dundas was convinced that Malta could offer the benefits that Corsica and Minorca had thus far failed to provide and should be permanently annexed. 'I hope in God you will be able', he wrote to Grenville in late 1800, 'to make such an arrangement with Russia as may secure us, as a naval power, all the advantages which the island possesses'.³⁹ Grenville was less convinced. In his reply to Dundas, he stated that:
- C3.P29 It is unquestionably true that, in the hands of the French, Malta might prove a naval station of some, but I conceive of no very great importance in time of war; though it is little likely that a naval war will hereafter, as it has now happened, be carried on between Great Britain and France in the seas of the Levant. . . . In time of peace it is, I think, demonstratable that Malta would be of no use to us or France, for we both have direct access to all the ports and countries of the Mediterranean. . . . My opinion therefore is to leave the thing as it is; to satisfy ourselves with the advantage of having Malta rather in the hands of Russia than France.⁴⁰
- C3.P30 For Dundas, Malta was a well-located naval base that offered a long-term, strategic boon, regardless of its economic worth. For Grenville by contrast, no doubt

³⁸ TNA, FO 49/2 179, Dundas to Abercromby, 1 August 1800.

³⁹ Dundas to Grenville, 20 April 1800, *Manuscripts of J. B. Fortescue*, vol. 6, p. 199.

⁴⁰ Grenville to Dundas, 23 April 1800, *Manuscripts of J. B. Fortescue*, vol. 6, p. 200.

burned by the failures in Corsica, the lack of commercial value made it an unnecessary acquisition, and expendable even in wartime.

C3.P31

In the months after the surrender of Malta, Grenville received numerous other letters attempting to persuade him of the island's worth. The Levant Company laid out the significant commercial advantages for British trade, highlighting its excellent harbours, the space for British merchants to set up warehouses, and the likelihood that Malta could provide expert sailors.⁴¹ This reasoning was not convincing, however, and Grenville maintained that in the aftermath of war the island would be returned to the Order of St John. Grenville went as far as to dismiss Maltese petitions dispatched to George III asking that it become part of the British Empire, and even in the wake of the island's surrender in 1800, it remained expendable. This continued to the case following the fall of Pitt's ministry in 1801. With both Dundas and Grenville now out of office, their replacements continued the policy of their predecessors. Under the Tenth Article of the Peace of Amiens, the preliminaries of which were signed in 1801, the Revolutionary War was brought to a conclusion, and Britain agreed to give up Malta and to return it to the Order of the Knights of St John.

C3.P32

What is notable about this decision, in direct contrast to the earlier example of Corsica, is the storm of protest prompted by the decision over Malta. Both Henry Dundas and William Windham were publicly and privately critical: as the former put it, 'by giving up Malta . . . we have abandoned Egypt to a future danger from France and we have abandoned the proud pre-eminence we had in the Mediterranean'.⁴² As importantly, newspapers—including both opposition and governmental organs—were equally disapproving, with the sharpest criticism coming from William Cobbett in his newspaper *Porcupine*.⁴³ The handover of Malta was described as an affront to national honour, and evidence of an unequal peace, but the most strident criticism focused on Malta's strategic significance. This criticism only grew as evidence of continued French expansion during the Peace emerged. In a bitter editorial entitled 'On the Retention of Malta', Cobbett wrote that:

C3.P33

If . . . the relative position of France and England, and the hostile policy of the former is incontrovertibly manifest, to surrender Malta on pretence of preserving the national faith inviolate, it would be but to aggravate cowardice by stupidity; and to render an act bordering on treason or insanity doubly execrable. . . . We need not be convinced of the eagerness of this Gargantua [Napoleon] to possess himself of Malta, the greatest and noblest trophy of all our naval achievements.

⁴¹ P. Abbott to Grenville, 20 November 1800, *Manuscripts of J. B. Fortescue*, vol. 6, pp. 385–9. See also the enclosed 'Note on the importance of retaining Malta'.

⁴² Henry Dundas to Grenville, 10 October 1801, *Manuscripts of J. B. Fortescue*, vol. 7, p. 57.

⁴³ *Annual Register*, 3.767–80.

C3.P34 In France's hands, he concluded, Malta would be a 'potent engine of destruction', that would allow them to attack Egypt, and even India.⁴⁴

C3.P35 French conduct during the Peace of Amiens only fanned the flames of public discontent. The aggression of the new First Consul of France, Napoleon Bonaparte, and the severe public outcry proved powerful motivators. Britain refused to evacuate Malta, breaking the terms of the Treaty in the process. Having been unwilling to annex Malta, Britain was now prepared to go to war for it. Throughout the short-lived peace of 1802–3, Britain watched nervously as Napoleon showed considerable evidence of continued expansionism, which threatened to upset its longstanding policy of maintaining a balance of power in Europe. In October 1801, France intervened in a civil war in Switzerland, annexed Piedmont in 1802, and organized and dispatched a naval expedition to regain control over revolutionary Haiti and re-occupy French Louisiana. Most worrying, however, were the continuing French designs on Egypt and the Levant. In January 1803, Horace Sebastiani published a report in France that included observations on the ease with which France might capture the former.⁴⁵ These fears, along with Napoleon's determination to exclude Britain from the European continent, led Britain to refuse to comply with certain aspects of the Amiens agreement. Until the end of the peace, Britain refused to give up Malta, and justified this by continually referring to French aggression.⁴⁶

C3.P36 Napoleonic belligerence in Europe between 1802 and 1803 persuaded the Addington ministry that the long-term acquisition of Malta was essential.⁴⁷ Not all were convinced, and the leader of the Whig opposition in Parliament, Charles James Fox, spoke passionately against the move towards war, and denied that Malta was worth another extended conflict. By contrast, Henry Dundas (now Lord Melville) gave a powerful speech suggesting that with a British flag flying in Malta, 'commercial people' from around the Mediterranean, including the Adriatic and Levant, would rally around its protection.⁴⁸ After the debate, the government secured a comfortable majority in both Houses and, on 23 April 1803, Britain issued a final ultimatum: France must agree to the British occupation of Malta on a 'temporary' basis and withdraw its forces from Holland within a month. There was no likelihood of French agreement. On 12 May, the British Ambassador to France Charles Whitworth, left Paris, rejecting a last-minute offer by the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, that would

⁴⁴ *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 18 December 1802.

⁴⁵ John D. Grainger, *The Amiens Truce: Britain and Bonaparte, 1801–1803* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004), pp. 163–8, 211. See also Conrad Gill, 'Relations between England and France in 1802', *English Historical Review* 24, no. 93 (1909), pp. 61–78; Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 231–45.

⁴⁶ Grainger, *The Amiens Truce*, pp. 169, 173, 177–8, 191.

⁴⁷ Gregory, *Malta, Britain and the European Powers*, p. 67.

⁴⁸ Cobbett, *Annual Register*, 3.1661–3.

give Britain a ten-year lease of Malta.⁴⁹ With the naval balance in Europe temporarily in its favour, Britain officially declared war three days later.

C3.P37 Malta became a central cog in Britain's European island-empire. It allowed the British to blockade Toulon, safe in the knowledge that the fortress at Valletta made it invulnerable to all but the longest siege. Malta helped Britain bolster the Ottoman Empire under serious threat from Napoleon, and as the war neared its end, it became clear that it could perform a similar role against Russia in the future. It was not until 1813, however, before the British government realized that it needed Malta as a safe and permanent naval and military base, and incorporated the Maltese islands into the British Empire.⁵⁰ On 28 July 1813, Henry, Earl Bathurst, outlined reasons for the Cabinet's decision when instructing Sir Thomas Maitland:

C3.P38 The circumstances of the present war have occasioned a material change in the actual value of Malta, as well as in regard to the Importance of our holding a permanent station in the Mediterranean. As a Military Post, as a Naval Arsenal, as a secure Place of Depot for the British Merchants, there is no spot in the South of Europe which appears so well calculated to fix the Influence and extend the Interests of Great Britain as the Island of Malta.⁵¹

C3.P39 Whereas before Malta had appeared to be a temporary naval station 'from which the Enemy's Designs upon Egypt or the Levant might be watched and countermanded', likely to be returned in the event of peace, it had now become indispensable to British interests.⁵² Malta's annexation as a crown colony followed in 1813 with the appointment of Sir Thomas Maitland as the island's first governor.

C3.P40 In cabinet discussions, it was the island's strategic worth—rather than its resources or commercial value—that influenced policy-makers. During the Napoleonic Wars, Malta had emerged as a crucial depot for smuggling and for collecting trade, as European markets were closed during Napoleon's Continental Blockade of 1806–12. Furthermore, Bathurst's careful reasoning in 1813 mentioned that the island had the potential to 'offer to his Majesty a wealthy and concentrated Population of an hundred thousand Persons, whose active industry is most satisfactorily attested by the astonishing Increase which has taken place in the Trade and general affluence of the Island within the last few years'.⁵³ The expansion of Maltese trade during the Continental System had been remarkable: by 1812, British exports to Malta had risen to twenty times their 1806 value.⁵⁴ However, by the time Malta was acknowledged as a colony of Britain in 1813, the

⁴⁹ Grainger, *The Amiens Truce*, pp. 187–8, 190, 211.

⁵⁰ Gregory, *Malta, Britain and the European Powers*, pp. 192–3.

⁵¹ TNA, CO 159/4/219/22, Bathurst to Maitland, 28 July 1813.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Gregory, *Malta, Britain and the European Powers*, p. 216.

break-up of the Continental System had shattered Malta's commercial prosperity, as merchants had returned to Leghorn, Trieste, Messina, and Palermo. Trading figures for 1813 demonstrated a decline to one-third of the island's 'golden years' of 1808–12.⁵⁵ Instead, it was the island's strategic value that provided the major justification for annexation: the acquisition of 1813 was a political, rather than an economic act.

Expanding the Island-Empire

C3.S3

C3.P41

Malta was but one part of Britain's burgeoning European island-empire. Between 1807 and 1810, numerous other islands were taken, in both southern and northern waters. In each case, there was little commercial advantage to be gained, only a short-term, strategic windfall. Each of these islands were small and easily defended by a token garrison and the ships of the Royal Navy. Most important, though, was their location, for each was positioned at a point of crucial importance. In May 1809, the island of Anholt, at the entrance to the Baltic Sea, was captured and garrisoned, ensuring a constant supply of water for naval fleets stationed in the Baltic between 1808 and 1812. In his Admiralty orders, the British commander-in-chief, Vice Admiral Sir James Saumarez, had been instructed to investigate the lighthouse on Anholt for potential occupation as a naval station, and in early 1809 he decided that the acquisition of Anholt would prove to be of 'considerable Importance in furnishing Supplies of Water to His Majesty's Fleet', while also affording a good anchorage to the merchant ships and convoys coming or going from the Baltic. 'In other respects', Saumarez warned, 'it can be of little use being a low sandy island with scarcely any vegetation whatever'.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Anholt would therefore take on a crucial role for the British fleet in the Baltic, making up for the lack of naval bases of the size of Port Mahon or Gibraltar in the Mediterranean. Saumarez wondered about the expediency of stationing a military force on Anholt, and was delighted to see the Admiralty arrange for a party of Royal Marines consisting of 150 men to be sent to the island.⁵⁷

C3.P42

In a similar vein, the island of Hanö at the southernmost tip of Sweden provided the fleet with fresh meat and vegetables. This was not a military occupation in the strict sense. As a result of French threats, Sweden was forced to declare war on Britain in November 1810, but neither Britain nor Sweden had any interest in taking military action against each other, and the conflict remained

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 225.

⁵⁶ Suffolk Record Office (hereafter SRO), HA 93/6/1/43, Admiralty Orders, 16 April 1808; TNA, ADM 1/8/360, Saumarez to Admiralty, 20 May 1809; SRO, HA 93, Saumarez to Martha Saumarez, 19 May 1809.

⁵⁷ TNA, ADM 1/8/456, Saumarez to Admiralty, 8 June 1809; TNA, ADM 2/156/545–6, Admiralty to Victualling Board, 15 September 1809.

‘phoney’. Hanö Bay was already the anchorage for convoys returning to Britain, and the Swedish authorities allowed the British to set up a victualling base on the island: a slaughterhouse was built on the island and fresh water could also be obtained. The British settlement was perfectly well known to the Swedish Crown Prince Karl Johan and the Swedish authorities but was kept secret from the French. The Swedish authorities had issued an order in May 1811 forbidding any ‘strangers’ to go into the neighbourhood of Karlshamn, in order to conceal any contacts between the British fleet and the shore. The Swedish government made occasional token gestures to confiscate British shipping, agreed in advance with local naval commanders. However, to all intents and purposes, the island was controlled by Britain, allowing for thousands of tons of beef and water to be supplied to British naval forces in the region.⁵⁸

C3.P43

Only Heligoland, seized in 1807, served an economic function. This tiny island, located off the coast of northern Germany, was taken to provide a smuggling centre for the transit of goods into Europe and bypass Napoleon’s Continental System. The island briefly became the ‘Warehouse of Europe’, used for illicit trade with Europe in a further attempt to undermine Napoleon’s Continental System. The British established a Chamber of Commerce and protected the island with a naval squadron: over 300 merchant ships visited daily.⁵⁹ As with Malta, though, its commercial vitality had long since passed by the end of the war. The rigid enforcement of the blockade from late 1810 ended all large-scale smuggling with Britain. Even running colonial goods through Heligoland became too risky: the island lost its prominence and many merchants withdrew from the trade.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, its strategic purpose had been made clear to British statesmen. The Treaty of Kiel, signed on 14 January 1814 and bringing an end to Britain’s war with Denmark, saw Heligoland ceded permanently to Britain.⁶¹

C3.P44

Not every island annexation was the result of a clear-sighted, government plan. Nowhere is this better seen than with the seizure of the Ionian Islands, located at the southern end of the Adriatic Sea.⁶² The advance of Napoleon’s continental

⁵⁸ For a full account of Britain and Sweden’s diplomatic positioning, see Tim Voelcker, *Saumarez vs Napoleon: The Baltic, 1807–12* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008), pp. 109–13, 121–3, 141–54, 159–63. For a more detailed analysis of the local supply arrangements made at Hanö, see James Davey, ‘Supplied by the Enemy: The Royal Navy and the British Consular Service in the Baltic, 1808–1812’, *Historical Research* 85, no. 228 (2012), pp. 265–83.

⁵⁹ Katherine Aaslestad, ‘Revisiting the Continental System: Exploitation to Self-Destruction in the Napoleonic Empire’, in Philip G. Dwyer and Alan Forrest (eds), *Napoleon and His Empire: Europe, 1804–1814* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 114–32, 119.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 123; Alfred W. Crosby, *America, Russia, Hemp and Napoleon: American Trade with Russia and the Baltic, 1783–1812* (Athens, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1965), p. 196.

⁶¹ For a recent, and more detailed summary of Heligoland as a site of competing British, French, and German interests, see Jan Rüger, *Heligoland: Britain, Germany, and the Struggle for the North Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁶² For recent work on the Ionian Islands, see Evangelos Zarokostas, ‘From Observatory to Dominion: Geopolitics, Colonial Knowledge and the Origins of the British Protectorate of the Ionian Islands, 1797–1822’ (PhD dissertation, University of Bristol, 2019).

empire had seen France extend its dominion towards the Adriatic, eventually controlling Venice, Dalmatia and, in 1807, occupying Corfu. While Corfu itself was too well defended, the other Ionian Islands—Zakynthos, Cephalonia, and the neighbouring islands of Ithaca and Santa Maura—proved much easier prey. They offered innumerable advantages for the naval fleet commanded by Vice Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood: as he noted, 'Many and great advantages would result from the liberation of these islands, and from attaching them to us, and to us alone'.⁶³ They allowed the British to threaten French troop movements, to provision and winter naval fleets, to guard coastal channels used by French naval vessels and also to remove privateer bases.⁶⁴ Between 1809 and 1810 these islands were all seized, under the initiative of Collingwood. 'I hope', wrote Collingwood, 'that this last expedition will be approved in England by His Majesty; but I have undertaken it without instructions and on my own responsibility'.⁶⁵ The government would indeed concur with Collingwood's reasoning. The Treaty of Paris which ended the Napoleonic War saw Britain retain the Ionian Islands, including Corfu; the occupation lasted until their return to Greece in 1864.

C3.P45

There was a limit, though, to Britain's European imperial expansion. In 1806, in the face of oncoming French troops, the British had evacuated the Neapolitan royal family from the Italian mainland to Sicily, where they could be protected by British naval power and a large British garrison. Relations between the British military forces and the Neapolitans grew increasingly strained, and by 1810 the British decided to take control of the island. On 25 February 1811, the positions of diplomatic and military commander were combined, and Lord William Bentinck was appointed as envoy extraordinary, minister plenipotentiary, and commander-in-chief of the British forces. He was a governor in all but name, using forces to quell popular disturbances when necessary, and to compel the Neapolitan royal family to do his bidding.⁶⁶ The British attempted to avoid the impression of tyrannical rule. The Foreign Secretary, Lord Castlereagh, wrote to Bentinck that 'we must try so to arrange to obviate the necessity of frequent acts of undisguised Power', and suggested that there were more subtle ways of ensuring compliance. 'The withholding the subsidy where the Government fails in doing its duty is upon the whole [the] best check that can be applied', he wrote, 'and I should hope may obviate the necessity of taking stronger measures'.⁶⁷ Despite this, in 1813 Bentinck dissolved the Sicilian parliament and appointed a new ministry whose members he picked himself.

⁶³ Collingwood to Sir John Stuart, 15 July 1809, in Collingwood (ed.), *Correspondence*, vol. 2, p. 369.

⁶⁴ Mackesy, *War in the Mediterranean*, pp. 197, 352–3.

⁶⁵ Collingwood to Lady Collingwood, 30 October 1809, in Collingwood (ed.), *Correspondence*, vol. 2, p. 389.

⁶⁶ Gregory, *Sicily: The Insecure Base*, p. 89.

⁶⁷ TNA, FO 70/56, Castlereagh to Lord William Bentinck, 23 May 1813.

C3.P46

While the British Cabinet tried strenuously to avoid further interference, it came under great pressure from projectors, British merchants, and a section of the popular press to annex Sicily permanently. Most notable among these was Gould Francis Leckie, whose *An Historical Survey* was published in 1808, with a second edition to follow in 1810.⁶⁸ Believing that the balance of power in Europe had been fundamentally undermined by the French Revolution and Napoleon, he argued that Britain needed to form ‘an insular empire’ made up of Mediterranean islands. ‘By the conquest of these’, he wrote, ‘she opens up new fields of commerce, colonization and riches to her own subjects’. What is more, these islands would not just provide economic and strategic advantages. They would also present an opportunity to ‘Britannize’ the islands of Europe, establishing British laws and government and using them as ‘constitutional workshops’.⁶⁹ This was an imperialist manifesto in all but name, and offered a vision based on an idealistic and certainly optimistic view of the islands’ economic potential. ‘The revenues of Sicily’, he wrote, ‘will then probably pay the expense of its maintenance and defence, while the population may be useful to serve either by sea or land.’ The further extension of this ‘insular strategy’ would also require the annexation of Crete and Cyprus.⁷⁰

C3.P47

Leckie was not alone in advocating further imperial advance. The writer Edward Blaquièrè noted the ‘amazing resources of this island’ as well as its ‘admirable geographical position’ and fine harbours. ‘One would naturally suppose that Nature had designed Sicily to be the greatest commercial emporium on earth’, he wrote, calling on the government to ‘finally add this beautiful island to the crown of Great Britain’.⁷¹ Similarly, Captain Pasley’s *Essay on the Military Policy and Institutions of the British Empire* was published in 1810, and argued that while the government seemed to regard it as little more than an appendage of Malta, Sicily was potentially an incomparable military asset of far more value than the West Indies. These ideas were picked up in the national press. A letter published in *Morning Post* on 14 August 1810 suggested that Sicily could only be saved by Britain annexing it and pensioning its king, which forced the government to bring legal proceedings against the paper (though they were subsequently dropped).⁷² In 1812, Leckie wrote another pamphlet entitled *Hints for the Improvement of Sicily*, which he addressed directly to Lord Castlereagh, and argued forcefully for its annexation. ‘The master of Sicily regenerated holds Egypt under his foot; Tunis is his tributary’, he wrote, while its commander

⁶⁸ Gould Francis Leckie, *An Historical Survey, of the Foreign Affairs of Great Britain, with a View to explain the Causes of the Disasters of the Late and Present Wars* (London, 1808).

⁶⁹ See D’Andrea, ‘Great Britain and the Mediterranean Islands’, pp. 81–2, 87.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁷¹ Edward Blaquièrè, *Letters from the Mediterranean; Containing a Civil and Political Account of Sicily, Tripoly, Tunis, and Malta: With Biographical Sketches, Anecdotes and Observations, Illustrative of the Present State of those Countries and their Relative Situation with Respect to the British Empire* (London: Henry Colburn, 1813), pp. 389–90, 619.

⁷² Gregory, *Sicily: The Insecure Base*, p. 89.

'watches the fall of the Turkish empire... and forbids the Russians to enter the archipelago'.⁷³

C3.P48 Leckie's plans were submitted to British ministers, but rejected. Britain's population could not provide the vast number of troops such an expansion would require, while further imperial advancement would serve only to antagonize Russia.⁷⁴ This is not to say that those in positions of power disagreed; on the contrary, Bentinck himself put forward a proposal to the then Foreign Secretary, Lord Castlereagh—unhelpfully entitled his 'Dream'—to annex Sicily, believing that under British rule it could become a prosperous colony, independent of Naples. However, for the British Cabinet, in particular Castlereagh, the island was already outliving its usefulness.⁷⁵ The Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, closed the correspondence in March 1814, explaining that annexation was impossible:

C3.P49 Because Bentinck finds his constitution and the Sicilian court never likely to work together, he sees no way out save the annexing of Sicily. If there were no other objections it would be very difficult to manage the island with such a constitution, but you know other Powers are more jealous of our obtaining power in the Mediterranean than in any other quarter. Circumstances have made it necessary for them to accept our retaining Malta, but the idea of our possessing Sicily by an act which in its most favourable light must be considered *douce violence* could not fail greatly to revolt them.⁷⁶

C3.P50 There was a limit to Britain's strategic construction of a European island-empire. In the Treaty of Paris, signed in 1814, Sicily was once again returned to the Neapolitan crown.

C3.S4

Conclusions

C3.P51 Sicily, Hanö, and Anholt were all given up by Britain in the various peace agreements that ended the Napoleonic Wars, just as Corsica and Minorca had been before. Each had outlived its usefulness, and with the onset of peace, Britain needed to be more discerning about the territories it held on to. Mindful of storing up future resentments, and conscious of the need to at least appear to be recognizing a new balance of power in Europe, conscious decisions were made to prioritize certain conquests. The peace settlement left Britain with an island-

⁷³ Gould Francis Leckie, *Hints for the Improvement of Sicily* (London, 1810), quoted in Gregory, *Sicily: The Insecure Base*, p. 121.

⁷⁴ D'Andrea, 'Great Britain and the Mediterranean Islands', p. 86.

⁷⁵ Gregory, *Sicily: The Insecure Base*, pp. 122–5.

⁷⁶ Cited in Charles Webster, *The Foreign Policy of Castlereagh, 1813–1822*, 2 vols (London: G. Bell, 1934), vol. 1, p. 526.

empire of bases in the central Mediterranean and the North Sea: Malta, Corfu, and Heligoland, each of which offered Britain long-term strategic value.⁷⁷ This was not the product of a long-term, systematic, and clearly elucidated policy; nor was it the result of a grand strategy, of the sort outlined by Gould Francis Leckie. Instead it was the result of numerous short-term decisions based on immediate strategic advantages. In the crucible of the global conflict fought between 1793 and 1815, Britain entered into imperial control hesitantly and opportunistically, always conscious of how the balance of power might be perceived, and aware of the financial and manpower costs of empire.

C3.P52

When Britain did decide to lay permanent imperial roots in Europe, though, it did so for political and strategic reasons, rather than for trade or resources. Given this, the agendas at work in the Baltic, North, and Mediterranean Seas seem very different to the raw commercialism of the West Indies, or the more scientific search for resources in the Pacific Ocean, and far more in line with Bayly's ideas about a 'new' imperialism that prioritized territory and strategic utility over commercial value. Britain's European island-empire was not entirely unique or distinctive in this regard. The Cape of Good Hope, captured in 1806, offers a notable example of a territory annexed for strategic reasons, and the islands of Java, Ceylon, and Mauritius were also secured for non-commercial purposes. Nonetheless, Britain's European advances represented this 'new' form of imperialism more obviously than more far-flung forms of imperial control in the same period. Indeed, what is perhaps most notable about the discussions that occurred over the annexation of various territories is the degree to which projectors and propagandists could intervene in the process. The British government did not always listen, and in some cases—particularly Leckie's—they followed an almost opposite path. However, writers and journalists offered sophisticated strategic analysis that was often ahead of the government's own ideas, and looked forward to a time when imperial advance and public opinion were ever more closely aligned.

⁷⁷ Duffy, 'World-Wide War', p. 206.