

The following was written and contributed by Prof. David McLean, King's College, University of London originally as a contribution to an exhibit held at The Bermuda National Gallery in 1994 entitled "The Fine Art of Bermuda Maps 1511-1861" curated by Nicholas Lusher of Nicholas Lusher Antiques & Fine Art:

By the early decades of the sixteenth century European society had begun the long transformation which was to lead from agrarian feudalism to commercial and eventually to industrial capitalism. Although the great majority of people worked on the land as peasants or farm labour until the nineteenth century, the administrative and legal structures by which their lives were ordered changed in ways which reflected fundamental shifts in both political thought and economic development. The map of Europe was gradually redrawn from one of dynastic territories to the modern pattern of ethnically based and culturally exclusive nation states.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw in Europe the growth of royal bureaucracy and the accretion of power by centralized authority at the expense of the traditional autonomy of provincial nobility. During this time Europe withstood the westward expansion of the Ottoman empire which conquered and absorbed much of eastern Europe and which could not be resisted until the great naval battle at Lepanto in 1571. Internally, however, Europe was beset by religious divisions after the Reformation of the early sixteenth century. Intolerance and persecution were common features of European life; wars between Catholic and Protestant princes dominated the continent for decades and culminated in the devastation of the German lands during thirty years of warfare among the powers of Europe between 1618 and 1648. In England, religious differences contributed to the outbreak of a civil conflict in the 1640's which ended with the execution of a king and the assertion of parliamentary government. By the late seventeenth century France, with its large population, had emerged as the most powerful European nation. French armies triumphed over those of Spain; its merchants and its banking houses vied for dominance with those of Britain and the Netherlands. Intellectually, Europeans increasingly questioned royal prerogative and aristocratic privilege. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also witnessed a continuing challenge to ecclesiastical authority through a proliferation of scientific enquiry, much of it stimulated by Europe's discovery of the wider world.

The outbreak of revolution in Paris in 1789 marked the beginning of the end for the old order of hereditary monarchy. The way was opened first for the imperial aspirations of Napoleon Bonapart until 1815 and then for the development of nationalism and democracy across Europe in the course of the nineteenth century. In Britain, by the late eighteenth century, changes were already underway which were to have an irreversible effect on European and global history. Agricultural improvements were followed, in spectacular fashion, by an industrial revolution which, in essence, adapted the power of steam to most processes of manufacture and which, by the mid nineteenth century, had transformed patterns of national and international transport by the crucial innovations of steamships and railways. Industrialisation concentrated the population into large cities, while the spread of factory production spawned a vast urban working class increasingly alienated from social and political élites. All of these forces shaped the structure of society in Europe from 1500 onwards and provided much of the dynamic for an aggressive trans-Atlantic expansion.

The arrival of the Spanish conquistadors on the shores of the New World in the sixteenth century was the harbinger of religious, cultural, and political upheavals that changed the face of the Americas forever. Swept out from under the broom of the European monarchies and the Catholic missionaries were thousands of years of indigenous civilizations, many of them quite advanced but unable to withstand the power of the newcomers. The central and southern American continents, veritable treasure troves of precious metals and resources, became the looting grounds of a race of white men who claimed the spoils in the name of the country, king, and God. Lost forever would be a harmonious co-existence with the natural landscape and ecosystems whose importance we are only realizing today.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, religious groups fleeing persecution in their native Great Britain headed for the cold and unyielding shores of eastern North America. Despite severe hardships and high death tolls, they managed to grab a toehold in their new surroundings and established colonies that eventually thrived. These groups, bringing with them concepts of individual sacrifice for the good of the community along with a rigorous belief in the power of their brand of Christianity, formed the basis of what would later become the United States.

As the eighteenth century dawned, the colonists, isolated from the mother country by an ocean, became increasingly determined to have a say in their own fate. Bitterness grew along with the rigid tax demands thrust upon them by an English crown that was being slowly bankrupted by European wars. The political ideas of the eighteenth century Enlightenment appealed to the colonists, ideas which explored and set forth the so-called natural rights of man. Concepts such as freedom, equality, and protection of property (at least amongst white men) became promulgated throughout British North America, finally reaching its zenith in mid-century when the idea of no taxation without representation became a battle cry within colonial society.

When it became clear that the British Crown had no intention of including them in the political process, the American communities revolted and ushered in a rebellion that rocked the foundation of the Old World, a revolution that held as its central tenet that every (white) man had certain inalienable rights that could not be denied by a King or Queen. The victory of the colonists in the American Revolution ushered in a new power on the American continent, the power of democratically elected republic.

The destiny of the aboriginal Indians of North America was not, however, much different than that of their counterparts to the south. As the population of the new nation swelled, a movement into the western lands began. Armed with the concept of 'manifest destiny', which held it was God's will for the United States to control the entire continent, the Americans either wiped out or herded into reservations all the native peoples with which they came into contact. There also arose the northern states' repugnance with the institution of slavery, which formed the economic and cultural backbone of the southern states. By mid-century the north had become an industrialized economy coexisting tenuously with the slave-based plantation economy of the south. This friction led to an unsolvable crisis which exploded politically in the American Civil War. From that moment on, the concept of freedom and equality for ALL peoples would

have to be balanced against the realities of a capitalist system inexorably driven toward profit and self-interest.