It is as if the English nation entered a crucible in the 1790s and emerged after the Wars in a different form.

E.P. Thompson

As the conflict ground on during the 1790s, it was slowly becoming clear that this would be no quick war. At home, Britons were engulfed in an economic and social crisis that ran deeper than the suppression of radicalism in the name of patriotism might suggest. Before the wars would end, huge political battles would result in decisive outcomes that would permanently affect the social relations of production in manufacturing.

In the aftermath of France’s failed invasion of the Austrian Netherlands in 1793, France was confronted with multiple internal rebellions, invasions by Prussia, Austria and Spain as well as a naval blockade by Britain. But by 1797, the situation was almost completely reversed. The First Coalition had dissolved and France occupied both of the Low Countries, the Rhineland and much of Italy. The turning point began in 1794 when France repelled and invaded Spain, overran Belgium and seized the Rhineland. When France overran the Netherlands in 1795 and declared the Batavian Republic, Prussia and Spain sued for peace. Naval superiority enabled Britain to win naval victories off the coast of Brest and off of Corsica, and consistently to defeat France in the colonial theatre,

seizing most French holdings in the West Indies, Pondicherry in India and Dutch territories in Ceylon and the East Indies. These successes certainly ‘served to boost waning morale, [but] they could scarcely counterbalance French domination in Europe’. 2 In 1796, Spain re-joined the war, now fighting alongside France. Advancing across Germany, the armies of Generals Jourdan and Moreau were initially repelled by Archduke Charles in 1796, but when Bonaparte’s army took Sardinia and then the Tyrol in 1797, Jourdan and Moreau advanced once again. Facing the fall of Vienna, Austria signed the Peace of Loeben in April and the Treaty of Campo Formio in October, ceding the Rhineland and much of Italy to France. The War of the First Coalition was ended and Britain now faced France alone.

‘A tribute to Welsh pluck’: invasion, rebellion and mutiny

The threat of a Jacobin insurrection at home having effectively been checked or having yet to materialise, the Hanoverian régime now faced the much more real prospect of an invasion from France. In countries and territories they occupied, French forces claimed to ‘liberate’ local populations, introducing the Napoleonic Code and abolishing the ancient privileges of the landed elites associated with feudalism. Even after Waterloo, the Code generally remained in effect where it had been established and such privileges were not restored. The clearing away of these specific forms of politically-constituted property did help prepare these parts of continental Europe for the eventual adoption of capitalism, modelled after industrial capitalism in Britain, but it is important to note that the removal of such ‘fetters’ did not simply ‘unleash’ the forces of any previously existing capitalism. The status of agrarian tenures in France and the territories it had annexed was complex by 1815, but it by no means equated to the presence of an agrarian capitalism or the complete absence of politically-constituted forms of agrarian property. Further discussion of this issue lies beyond the scope of the present work. Had France defeated Britain, however, it would undoubtedly have abolished many of the forms of politically-constituted property that remained in Britain: peerages, sinecures, tax farms and, of course, that largest of all patrimonial estates: the monarchy itself. As for abolishing the ‘feudal’ privileges of lordly estates, however, this had already been accomplished by the development of agrarian capitalism. Recognising, therefore, that in actual practice Britain was far more advanced on this score than the Continent before the French Wars began, it is important to recognise the enormous influence of English liberalism not