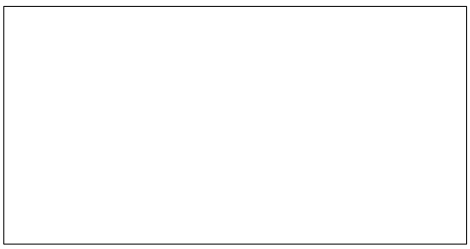

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Britain's Continental Connection and the Peace of Amiens: A Reassessment

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ABSTRACT

The Treaty of Amiens, which brought an end to almost a decade of Franco-British warfare in March 1802, has long been understood as a flawed attempt at peace making. The British government's surrender of most of its wartime colonial acquisitions, combined with a failure to push for guarantees on the Continent, has been interpreted as a meek acquiescence in France's domination over Western Europe. The recommencement of war in May 1803 simply seems to confirm the supposition that the treaty was fundamentally inadequate. This article questions that interpretation by examining Britain's relations with and policies towards Europe, and above all towards the Netherlands, during the period of negotiation and subsequent peace, 1800-3. It suggests that the British government did not conceive Amiens as the surrender of key interests, but as a base from which British influence could be reasserted. By looking at the context of Britain's historical connections to the Netherlands, their experience of previous periods of relative diplomatic isolation, and the wider framework of European treaties, it is shown that British ministers had every reason to believe that the Treaty of Amiens left Britain in a reasonably strong position to limit French dominance.

KEYWORDS

British foreign policy; Peace of Amiens; Treaty of Amiens; The Netherlands; Napoleonic wars

Introduction[1]

The Peace of Amiens, 1802-3, is generally considered as little more than a brief and unsatisfactory pause in the two-decade long conflict between Britain and republican and Napoleonic France that lasted from 1793 to 1815. The definitive peace treaty was signed in March 1802, and ruptured by Britain's declaration of war on France in May the following year. Most of those fourteen months of peace were fraught with continued and growing tensions between the two principal powers. For historians of Britain the peace has traditionally attracted little positive comment, and often provides little more than a convenient delineation between the wars of the Revolution and those of Napoleon. At best, Amiens has been viewed as a flawed attempt to conciliate a French regime whose ambitions knew few reasonable bounds, leaving Britain isolated and excluded from the Continent.[2] Even those who would argue that Amiens created a reasonable global balance of power – such as Paul Schroeder or Charles Esdaile – maintain that Britain's acceptance of continental exclusion was an integral part of both making and keeping

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the peace.[3] For many, the treaty represented weakness on the part of Britain's rulers. Henry Addington is often dismissed as a soft prime minister and Lord Hawkesbury as a weak foreign secretary, despite their later successes, and Amiens has garnered inevitable comparisons with the appeasement at Munich in 1938.[4] Despite some revisionist rehabilitations of British policy and its makers, notably in the works of Charles Fedorak, John Grainger, or Thomas Goldsmith, the negative interpretation of Amiens still holds general sway.[5]

This article will question the negative view of the treaty, and will suggest that the peace made at Amiens afforded Britain a stronger diplomatic position in continental affairs than is generally credited. While the treaty certainly reflected Britain's relative lack of success in the war compared to France by 1801, it did not represent a diplomatic surrender or, as Roger Knight would have it, 'a one-sided French diplomatic triumph'.[6] The article will demonstrate this by focusing on Britain's relations with the Netherlands – once Britain's closest friend, but by 1801 a revolutionised ally of the French Republic. It will show that although the letter of the treaty reflected a pragmatic acceptance that France could not be shifted from the Low Countries by force or negotiation, which has been interpreted as Britain abandoning the Netherlands to its fate, London actually believed that peace would assure Dutch independence, which in their view would lead to a resurgence of the natural close connection between Britain and the Netherlands severed by the recent war. In this belief the Cabinet was encouraged by the international treaties that bound France and the Netherlands together by 1801, and by the attitudes of the Dutch government both before and after the signing of the treaty. If placed in a wider context of existing treaties and Britain's recent experience of diplomatic resurgence after the American War, the Treaty of Amiens can be seen as providing a solid foundation for the reestablishment of British interests in Europe. The article will further show that the descent towards renewed conflict from November 1802 saw more overt British attempts to limit French control over the Netherlands, at once demonstrating that Britain by no means acquiesced to French hegemony in Western Europe, and that Addington's government ultimately rejected appeasement as a method of containing Napoleon.

One general criticism of the treaty is that the concessions were mostly one-sided, with Britain returning most of its colonial gains in exchange for relatively illusory guarantees on the continent.[7] Indeed, when comparing the peace agreement to the objects for which Britain ostensibly entered the war in 1793, the island nation was a clear loser. While the origins of the conflict lay largely in traditional Anglo-French rivalry and British distrust of France's new republican regime, the immediate trigger for hostilities was the French threat to the River Scheldt and to Britain's primary ally on the continent, the United Provinces of the Netherlands. The war not only led to the French conquest of the Netherlands in 1795, but saw the pro-British Stadholderate overthrown and the country revolutionised as the Batavian Republic. A major expedition to 'liberate' the Netherlands and restore the British alliance in 1799 proved an ignominious failure, crushing hopes of driving the French out of the Low Countries by force. By the time Addington's administration replaced that of William Pitt in March 1801, Britain had been compelled to abandon any hope of achieving by force the object for which it initially went to war.

The issue of the restoration of British influence in the Netherlands certainly remained a long way from the negotiating table at Amiens. Britain in fact allowed France to dodge almost all questions of the Continental settlement, instead consenting to France's desire to make peace based almost entirely on colonial and Mediterranean concerns. This has led many commentators to see Amiens as an acceptance by Britain of France's dominance over Western Europe. Schroeder, in his thought-provoking treatment of evolving European politics in the period 1763-1848, argued that 'Britain in 1800-2, would … have tacitly consented to a peaceful, non-expansionist French hegemony in Western Europe', which would have formed part of a 'real balance of power', with 'France dominant in Western Europe, Britain on the seas, and Russia in Eastern Europe'.[8] Others who might perhaps be more wary of accepting Schroeder's conception of balance nonetheless accept the premise that it signalled Britain's exclusion from the Continent. Not

only was this the case with the settlements of Italy and Switzerland – areas in which Britain was interested mostly for reasons of limiting French power – but also of the Low Countries, which had for well over a century been an area of significant strategic sensitivity and therefore great intrinsic value to Britain. This, above all, is seen as signalling Britain's exclusion from European affairs. David Gates, for example, asserted that Britain had to 'acquiesce in France's virtual control of Holland', while Paul Kennedy stated that 'London was firmly told to keep out' of Dutch and wider European affairs.[9]

It is not the intention of this article to dispute the factual accuracy of such assertions – after all, the texts of both the Preliminaries in 1801 and the definitive treaty in 1802 clearly elided questions of continental influence – but instead to question the extent to which this signalled Britain's acceptance, tacit or otherwise, of exclusion from the affairs of mainland Europe. In this, the current article differs somewhat from existing interpretations. Contrary, for example, to Esdaile's assertion that 'British interest in the Continent had been set aside' at Amiens, and that the peace gave France 'an unassailable sphere of influence in Holland, Switzerland and Italy', this article will demonstrate that London in fact had every expectation that the peace would allow Britain to begin to re-establish its continental influence, especially in the Netherlands.[10] In this it supports Goldsmith's recent contention that during both negotiations and the period of peace Britain remained firmly focused on Europe.[11] The present article will expand upon this argument by focusing specifically on Britain's relations with and attitudes towards the Netherlands during the period of negotiation and peace between 1800 and 1803. It will be argued here that the Treaty of Amiens must be understood in the context of Britain's historical connections with the Netherlands, the ingrained understandings of British politicians of those connections, and the experience of previous moments of apparent isolation, predominantly that following the Peace of Paris in 1783. In such a context, Amiens represented not the acceptance of exclusion, but a basis from which elements of British influence could be quickly and firmly rebuilt.

Amiens was therefore not, as some would suggest, feeble surrender to French dominance. Nor indeed was it appeasement of French expansionism. By 1801 it was clear that force of arms had failed to erode France's stranglehold on the continent, and that continued conflict would only serve to strengthen French influence. Each coalition brought against France had only afforded more scope for French conquest, and the ongoing war provided the justification for France's continued occupation of neighbouring states. By the Treaty of the Hague (1795) between France and the Batavian Republic, for example, French troops would be stationed in the Netherlands until the return of peace, ostensibly for protection, but in reality giving France enormous influence over the Dutch government for as long as the conflict continued. Giving peace a chance was therefore not only a way of allowing Britain a period to recover from the exertions of nearly a decade of warfare, but also presented the most realistic prospect of limiting French influence and affording Britain the opportunity to reclaim some of her former position.

A difficulty with assessing Britain's diplomacy in the period 1800-3 is the change of administration in March 1801. The influence of personality on policy has been increasingly recognised in studies of early modern diplomacy, and that influence should be acknowledged here.[12] The change of government led to some significant alterations in the approach of the prime minister and foreign secretary. Addington and Hawkesbury, who respectively replaced Pitt as prime minister and Lord William Grenville as foreign secretary, were believed to be more conciliatory, personable and even less duplicitous than their predecessors.[13] They were also perhaps less personally invested in supporting the Prince of Orange, the ousted Stadholder of the Netherlands, and certainly did not share Pitt's 'craze' for operations in that country.[14] However, there remained a high degree of continuity in the longer-term trends, principles and perceptions in British policy. Pitt and Grenville kept their successors fully informed of their earlier projects, making available not only official correspondence, but the plans and ideas that had underpinned their thinking.[15] Much of the diplomatic corps and wider Foreign Office personnel also remained in place, from undersecretary George Hammond downwards, and the advice of experienced

diplomats was readily available to the new Cabinet. Addington, for example, corresponded regularly with the Earl of Malmesbury, who was not only an elder statesman of British foreign affairs but had, as Britain's representative to the Netherlands in the 1780s, effectively masterminded a key plank of Britain's diplomatic resurgence after the American War. Hawkesbury, although young and inexperienced by comparison to Grenville, dined regularly with Pitt during his time as foreign secretary, and benefited greatly from the former prime minister's advice.[16] And above it all was George III, a moderating and stable influence, even if he was increasingly content for policy to be set and executed by his ministers. While Addington and Hawkesbury certainly placed their own stamp on events, they did so within a tried and traditional policy framework.

1

The Netherlands is a particularly pertinent subject of interest when discussing the peace making at Amiens because it was deemed so crucial to British security, prosperity and presence on the continent. In strategic terms, the deep-water ports and river estuaries of the Netherlands provided some of the few anchorages on the North Sea or Channel coast that could potentially shelter hostile battle fleets or invasion flotillas. With the Scheldt estuary sitting only 150 miles from London, the country represented a 'cocked pistol' aimed at the head of Britain.[17] Preventing the coastal littoral of the Low Countries falling into enemy hands had therefore been a crucial part of British policy throughout the eighteenth century. Moreover, the importance of the Netherlands as an entrepôt for British trade and a source of intelligence from the Continent was enormous. It is instructive that between 1786 and the French invasion of 1795, Britain spent more annually on their embassy in the Netherlands than on any other aside from France and Spain.[18] In early 1793 Lord Auckland, British ambassador in the Hague, demanded that Britain should defend the Netherlands as if it were a part of Yorkshire, to which Pitt replied that 'we consider the cause of Holland so much our own, that we are ready to fight the battle there as we should be at our own doors', before announcing in Parliament that a French threat to the Low Countries was a threat to Britain herself.[19] The French conquest of 1795 and the subsequent realignment of Dutch allegiance did little to change this view in Britain, although anxiety over French control of the Netherlands was widespread.[20] An expedition was proposed in 1796 to launch spoiling attacks against Dutch shipping to prevent it from being used as a tool of France, while Admiral Adam Duncan's victory over the Batavian battle fleet at Camperdown the following year was rapturously received across Great Britain.[21] The failure of Anglo-French peace negotiations in 1796 and 1797 came largely as a result of irreconcilable differences over French control of the Low Countries. The great invasion of the Netherlands in 1799 was intended partly to demonstrate British commitment to the Second Coalition, but mostly to remove a key strategic area from the enemy's grasp by reinstalling a friendly government or, failing that, to render it useless as a potential weapon against Britain.[22]

The failure of this expedition ended British hopes of removing French influence from the Netherlands by force of arms, and the wider collapse of the coalition meant that by the summer of 1800 the cabinet was already contemplating coming to terms with France. However, it is evident that the Netherlands was still very much on their minds. Grenville, then still foreign secretary, was keen to ensure Britain's strategic position in relation to the Low Countries, suggesting that if a suitable settlement could be reached 'we ought to give up part of our conquests in compensation of whatever security we obtain on the side of Holland'.[23] The apparent failure of Britain's negotiators to provide for this security has been central to many criticisms of Amiens. Yet it was never the case that Britain simply wanted to clear French troops from the Netherlands. Since 1795 Britain's firm aim had been the overthrow of the Dutch revolutionary regime and the re-establishment of the generally Anglophile Stadholderate under the House of Orange. This had been at the heart of all talk of 'liberating' the country, and had been seen as

the best guarantee of long-term stability. However, it was not an object for which Britain was willing to prolong the war indefinitely. The abortive peace negotiations of 1797 had seen Grenville flirt with abandoning this aim, although he had ultimately shied away from doing so.[24] As peace talks became a realistic possibility in 1800, however, a cabinet minute admitted that 'with respect to Holland, it does not appear probable, that any sacrifice we could make would induce France to restore the Stadholder, and to place the government decidedly in his hands; nor would that arrangement be secure or permanent unless the independence of … [Belgium] was satisfactorily provided for.'[25] This latter would be unlikely without a significant blow being dealt to French forces on the Continent, but Austria's recent defeat at Marengo and reluctance to continue the fray despite the British alliance made that a more remote possibility. The French victory at Hohenlinden in December 1800 and subsequent Austro-French Treaty of Lunéville left France undisputed control of Belgium, and removed any lingering hopes that pressure could be brought to bear regarding the form of Dutch government. The abandonment of any hope for or even discussion of the restoration of the Orangist regime was perhaps the real concession regarding the Netherlands at Amiens.

This does not mean, however, that Britain had abandoned hope of obtaining influence and security in the Netherlands at the peace. For Addington's cabinet, any treaty with France to end their current conflict would be only part of a mesh of international agreements that bound the conduct of the powers of Europe. As negotiations began, the British government had every reason to expect that the lack of specific clauses concerning the Batavian Republic in either the preliminaries or at Amiens would result in Franco-Dutch relations being regulated by their bilateral treaties of 1795 and 1801, which guaranteed Dutch independence and stipulated that French troops should be withdrawn once a general peace had been concluded, and by Lunéville, which provided an international guarantee of the independence of the Batavian Republic.[26] Once French troops had been removed from the Netherlands, it was assumed, the Dutch government would have much greater freedom of action both internally and externally. Moreover, the Dutch coast would appear a much less threatening place if manned by only Dutch troops and ships, partly because of the damage done to the Dutch fleets at Camperdown in 1797 and the Helder in 1799, and partly because of the apparent growing ambivalence of the Dutch government to their French connection. With no lever with which to prise French forces from the Low Countries, and no realistic prospect of gaining concessions in peace talks, leaving Franco-Dutch relations to be regulated by treaties that guaranteed Dutch independence seemed to be the best course of action.

There were, of course, many other considerations weighing on British minds in the discussions of the preliminaries and in the peace talks at Amiens that precluded further discussion of the Dutch situation. While the notion of balance of power was seemingly thrown out of the window by France's domination of Italy, Switzerland, western Germany and the Low Countries, Britain had gained an unprecedented mastery of the waves during the years of war. In Schroeder's view this effectively left French overseas possessions as vulnerable to Britain as the continent seemed vulnerable to France, and was, therefore, a genuine balance – although it should be added that this balance could only be enforced by retaliation elsewhere in the world, rather than by any system limiting expansionism in the first place.[27] Moreover, Britain's leaders seemed implicitly aware that their naval and colonial predominance would not be looked upon favourably by other powers. The northern powers' League of Armed Neutrality and the contretemps with Russia in 1801 would have brought this point home rather forcefully. Although Hawkesbury made it clear to Louis-Guillaume Otto, the French representative during talks for the preliminaries of peace, that Britain would seek compensation in the colonies in exchange for French gains on the continent, it is also apparent that the cabinet understood the necessity of returning colonial captures and of the diminution of their dominance in this sphere, as well as the need to show moderation regarding Egypt and Malta, if they wished to maintain the good opinion of

Europe.[28] There was therefore perhaps less scope for British negotiators to demand concessions than may be imagined.

There were also significant concerns in Britain about the sincerity and stability of the French government. Although some Britons exalted the First Consul as the saviour of France and the peacemaker of Europe, most from the king downwards held him in a degree of distrust. George III only grudgingly agreed to the signing of preliminaries with France in 1801, cautioning that while he would welcome peace, he could not 'place any reliance on its duration' due to the instability of French government.[29] Charles Yorke, Secretary at War under Addington, was of a similar mind to his monarch, writing that Napoleon had 'the *great qualities* of a *great villain* and successful robber, and no other; and in the present state of France, I would not give a twelve-month's purchase for any peace, however fair upon the face of it, that can be had with it.'[30] Anthony Merry, Britain's representative in Paris during the preliminaries, warned in October 1801 of the 'cunning' of the First Consul and Talleyrand, adding that any good understanding would prove difficult, as 'they think they may trample with impunity upon the whole world.'[31] There were perhaps few doubts in Britain that France meant to make peace, but significant misgivings about whether she meant to keep it. In February 1802 Hawkesbury wrote somewhat morosely to Marquess Charles Cornwallis, his chief negotiator at Amiens, that 'they have an evident policy in concluding the definitive treaty, even if they are determined to break it in the course of six months'.[32]

There was, throughout, a lack of trust between the British government and their French counterparts. French exterior minister, Charles Maurice Talleyrand, was universally despised for his supposed 'spirit of chicanery and intrigue', with Cornwallis privately dismissing him as a man 'devoid of honour and principle'.[33] Before negotiations even began Hawkesbury warned Cornwallis of the need for caution, writing that Talleyrand 'is a person who is likely to take every unfair advantage in conducting business with others', and the British delegation certainly welcomed the choice of the 'well-meaning, but not very able' Joseph Bonaparte to lead the negotiations on behalf of France.[34] Cornwallis nevertheless complained throughout about what he saw as the duplicitousness of the French negotiators, writing to Hawkesbury less than a month into talks that 'in no instance is there any show of candour in the negotiations'.[35] He felt especially aggrieved that despite receiving the personal promise of the First Consul that France would acquiesce in George III's earnest desire to secure suitable compensation for the Prince of Orange, French negotiators constantly placed obstacles in the way in order to wring greater concessions from Britain.[36] The blame for the inconstancy of French demands was ultimately laid at the feet of the First Consul. John Grainger has in fact suggested that this very inconstancy pushed Hawkesbury to seek peace on relatively narrow terms, omitting issues of some importance in order to avoid being caught up in 'Bonapartist flummery'.[37] Napoleon's fundamental lack of trustworthiness seemed to be underlined by the manoeuvring that saw him effectively seize the presidency of Italy in early 1802, even as negotiations continued at Amiens. Hawkesbury railed against 'the inordinate ambition, the gross breach of faith, and the inclination to insult Europe, manifested by the conduct of the First Consul on this occasion', but had little choice but to continue with negotiations or take the almost impossible choice of renewing the war.[38]

Britain's lack of continental leverage, acceptance of the need for colonial balance, and fundamental distrust of Napoleon and his consular regime, all contributed to the lack of any firm demands concerning the Netherlands at Amiens. This was clearly a climbdown from previous negotiating positions, and such an approach was not universally accepted. Some commentators, amongst them Louis XVI's former minister Charles de Calonne, believed that the new French regime would be willing to accept the return of the Stadholderate, and advised Addington to push for such a project.[39] Influential former ministers, including William Windham, George Canning and even Grenville himself remained wary of a peace that in their view did not provide for security, while the vocal William Cobbett would lambast Addington and Hawkesbury as the treaty was signed for having 'connived at a subjugation' of Holland.[40] However, even Pitt and

Grenville accepted the reality of French control, and were content to leave the fate of the Netherlands off the negotiating table. This did not, however, mean that they or their successors had simply accepted permanent French dominance of the Low Countries, despite the views of the treaty's contemporary detractors.

The effect of Britain's stance in the preliminaries and at Amiens was to leave the Netherlands ostensibly under French thrall, but it also ensured that Britain was not compelled to accept explicit French dominance of the country in any treaty. Indeed, the only demand that Britain made was that the Netherlands should accede to the negotiations as a full signatory power, demonstrating the country's continued independence on the world stage. This was generally consistent with the approach of 1796-7, when Britain insisted that France should not be permitted to negotiate on behalf of the Dutch government.[41] In abortive negotiations in September 1800, Grenville demanded that Spain and the Netherlands 'if regarded by France as independent, cannot be bound by her act; and must be admitted as contracting parties acceding by a regular diplomatic transaction to the terms of the armistice'.[42] The inclusion of Spain here indicates that Grenville clearly had every expectation that the countries were independent powers. Once negotiations for a definitive treaty began in late 1801, Britain again repeatedly insisted that the Netherlands must participate as an equal power, despite attempts by the French government to exclude the Dutch plenipotentiary, Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck, from talks.[43] Hawkesbury instructed Cornwallis at Amiens to base his demands on the fact that the Netherlands must agree to the cession of colonies to Britain, but it was also a clear indication that Britain had no intention of accepting the Netherlands' status as a French vassal.

The insistence on the Netherlands acting as an independent power was more than mere diplomatic form. Taking the Cabinet's instructions at face value, it may have simply been a device to ensure the legality of Britain's colonial gains. However, it also set an implicit limit on France's influence. With the Netherlands recognised as a fully independent state, enshrined in international treaty, France could have no reason for reneging on its commitments to remove its forces at the establishment of general peace. Any failure on this score could be the subject of legitimate international recrimination. Any further interference in Dutch internal affairs by France would also become a point of international concern, therefore allowing Britain to exert some moderating influence. Moreover, Britain's leaders had every expectation that peace and the removal of France's forces from the Netherlands should lead to a much closer understanding with that power, and would offer scope for patient British diplomacy to draw the country gently away from the French alliance.

This expectation came partly from the experience of the diplomatic manoeuvrings of 1785-7 that had overthrown an earlier Franco-Dutch accord and re-established British primacy, and partly from the fact that, even as peace talks progressed, the Dutch government seemed anxious to reignite friendly relations with Britain. The first of these experiences had demonstrated that a French presence in the Netherlands could be rapidly undermined by leaning on the supposedly natural Anglo-Dutch connection, and provides an instructive example of the limitations of peace treaties in determining the balance of power. It is therefore worth examining in a little more depth.

In the aftermath of the American War and subsequent peace with France, Spain, and the Netherlands (1783-4), Britain had seemed alone in Europe, and bereft of both friends and influence on the Continent. Only Denmark seemed inclined to cordial relations.[44] Of the major powers, France and Spain remained hostile, Russia uninterested, Prussia wary and more inclined to a rapprochement with France, and Austria a French ally. The Netherlands, Britain's closest friend on the continent for nigh-on a century, seemed to have abandoned their cause after being pushed into the war against Britain in 1780, and concluded a defensive alliance with France in 1785. From Britain's point of view, therefore, the immediate situation appeared dire. However, by 1788 Britain had achieved a sea change in the political face of Europe. By dint of diplomatic skill, the disbursement of secret service funds, and reliance on the supposedly

'natural' predilection of the Dutch people for a British connection, Britain's ambassador, Sir James Harris (later raised to be Earl of Malmesbury), was quickly able to build up a substantial counterweight to French influence in the Netherlands. Although this was not enough in itself to overthrow the French-backed Patriot party, his actions placed significant strain on the Franco-Dutch connection. With secret British encouragement, a number of provinces effectively withdrew their support for the French alliance, and significant portions of the army were induced to follow suit. By 1787, London had managed to draw Prussia into an accord through their mutual desire to promote the interests of the House of Orange in the Netherlands. Prussian military intervention, combined with a threat of British naval mobilisation that kept France quiescent, saw the overthrow of the pro-French party and the restoration of the pro-British Stadholder to fuller control in the autumn of that year.[45] Treaties of alliance signed with Prussia and the Netherlands in 1788 completed the diplomatic *volte face*, leaving France isolated and humiliated, and restoring to Britain a degree of continental security apparently lost in the peace making of 1783.[46]

While there is no indication that Addington's government planned to imitate 1787 in any detail – which would in any case have been precluded by changed circumstance – the example of so recent an event could hardly have been missed, and suggests that Britain's leaders would by no means have conceived Amiens as the slamming of the continental door in Britain's face. Instead, it was an opportunity to rebuild crumbling relations, especially in the Netherlands. This was even more the case as in 1802 it was believed that even many of those in the Dutch government who had supported France fifteen years earlier had abandoned that position. Although in 1787 it had ultimately taken a Prussian army to 'cut the Gordian knot' of the Anglo-French (or Orangist-Patriot) standoff in Britain's favour by removing the pro-French party from power, this was not believed to be necessary in 1802.[47] It was generally believed that the Dutch government, as much as the people, now wished for nothing more than to be rid of the French alliance. The focus on colonial and Mediterranean issues at Amiens allowed London to believe that the peacetime situation in the Low Countries would be defined by earlier treaties, which clearly stipulated the independence of the Netherlands. Britain could also hope for the good offices of the other major powers, and especially of Austria, to ensure that the provisions of Lunéville were respected and that the Netherlands was freed from French occupation. Moreover, as in 1787, Britain had an expectation that the internal instability of France would work in Britain's favour by paralysing any effective French riposte.

It is not suggested that during negotiations Britain had a master plan to launch a diplomatic counter-offensive before the ink on the treaty was dry – it did not, just as it had not after 1783 – but simply that previous experience afforded much more reason for London to retain hopes for the restoration of continental influence than most commentators on the Treaty of Amiens will credit. The belief that British influence would grow quickly once French forces were withdrawn and placed on a peace footing was based, in 1802 as much as in 1787, on the notion that the majority of people in the Netherlands favoured Britain over France. In 1787 it was widely believed that the restoration of the House of Orange showed that the majority of the Dutch population were firmly committed to Britain, as 'nothing but the great concurrence of the people' could have led to the success of the scheme.[48] The assumption that this remained the case was also crucial to Britain's understanding of the Netherlands at the time of Amiens.

Although the failure of an expected anti-French uprising in 1799 had somewhat dented British faith in Dutch Anglophilia, ministers ultimately retained their conviction that the Netherlands was a natural British ally.[49] This was bolstered by intelligence received from the Netherlands over the next two years, which painted a picture of a country thoroughly fed up with the French alliance. Even before the signing of the preliminaries in 1801 Addington and Hawkesbury received regular assurances that the Dutch despised the 'despotism and extortions' of the French forces in their country.[50] As soon as the preliminaries were signed in October 1801 the Batavian government moved to issue trading licences to British merchants in order to restore

their commercial connections, and requested that London reciprocate.[51] Once the representatives of the belligerent powers met at Amiens, the British delegates frequently received hints of significant cracks in the Franco-Dutch entente. On 20 November Edward Littlehales, Cornwallis's private secretary, wrote to inform Addington following a dinner with Schimmelpenninck that the Dutch representative 'deprecated strongly the conduct of the current rulers of France towards Holland'.[52] A month later Cornwallis reported an even more frank exchange with his Dutch counterpart. As Schimmelpenninck was still being blocked from joining the negotiations by a petty technicality on the part of the French government, he sought out Cornwallis to make direct representations to Britain on behalf of his government. After commencing with complaints about the 'humiliating situation' in which he found himself, and expressing 'confidence in the favourable disposition of the British cabinet to allow of such discussions', Schimmelpenninck offered 'some very strong invective against the French government, when he proceeded to assure me, that … there was not a man in Holland more desirous than he was of emancipating his country from the yoke of France, as well, as of forming a close connexion with Great Britain'.[53]

Such rhetoric on Schimmelpenninck's part may have been exaggerated in order to press his claim for restitution of Dutch property lost to Britain during the war, but it seems to have impressed Cornwallis. The latter certainly saw it as a friendly overture and, although coy on the restoration of property, assured Schimmelpenninck that he hoped 'that the time might still come, when, for the interests of both states, we should see Holland again independent, and her former intimate connexion with Great Britain renewed.'[54] This hope was echoed in London. In early January 1802, for example, Addington noted happily that 'the Batavian government … appears desirous of cultivating a good understanding with our own', which he hoped would be helped by a Batavian agreement to offer compensation to the deposed Prince of Orange.[55] In Cornwallis's view any lack of enthusiasm from the Dutch delegation at Amiens to grant British wishes came from their need to play a part, as 'Schimmelpenninck, whatever his private sentiments may be, can only appear at a meeting of the plenipotentiaries as an humble and dependant ally of France'.[56]

The continued friendliness of the Dutch delegation throughout the months at Amiens reinforced the impression that the restoration of the once-close Anglo-Dutch relationship would be possible, if not probable, upon the return of peace and stability. Despite Britain's insistence on retaining Dutch settlements in Ceylon and refusal to countenance returning Dutch property seized with dubious legality at the outbreak of war, Schimmelpenninck continued to show an earnest desire to place Anglo-Dutch relations back on a firm footing.[57] He seemed, said Cornwallis, 'more apprehensive of encroachments on the part of France than of England', and continually expressed the desire 'to see a perfectly good understanding re-established' between Britain and the Netherlands.[58] In late February Cornwallis, writing privately to his friend Alexander Ross, expressed his belief that the Dutch 'appear to like us much better than their allies'.[59] When the bartering between Cornwallis and Joseph Bonaparte neared an impasse in mid-March 1802, Schimmelpenninck was able to act as a go-between, ensuring an outcome acceptable to both parties and perhaps even preventing the breakdown of talks.[60] Much of the favourable impression on the British representatives could perhaps be ascribed to Schimmelpenninck's emollience and diplomatic skill, but it is clear that as quill was put to paper on the definitive treaty of peace on 25 March, Cornwallis and indeed the British government had no reason to believe that they were signing away any hope of rapidly recovering their influence in the Netherlands.

2

Further evidence that Britain had not simply waved a white flag at Amiens can be found in an examination of Britain's diplomatic relations in the unfortunately brief peace that followed. It is

clear from their actions that the British government saw the peace not as an end point leaving them cut off from Western Europe, but as an opportunity to rebuild relations severed during the years of war. The instructions to Lord Whitworth, sent to Paris as Britain's ambassador in 1802, made this clear: 'You will … state most distinctly, His Majesty's determination never to forgo his right of interfering in the affairs of the continent … This right His Majesty possesses in common with every other independent power; it rests upon general principles, and does not require the confirmation of any particular treaty.'[61] The same instructions were, however, equally adamant that the Treaty of Amiens gave that right in any case, asserting that 'the circumstances which led to the conclusion of the last peace, and the principles upon which the negotiation was conducted, would give His Majesty a special right to interfere in any case which might lead to the extension of the power and influence of France.' In the view of the cabinet, established diplomatic principles and practices gave Britain a continued right to an interest in continental Europe.[62] These principles perhaps precluded any openly expansionist acts, but it would be expected that Britain would do its utmost to reignite former friendships. Indeed, the government would have been criminally irresponsible to fail to attempt to bolster its position through peacetime diplomacy, and the re-establishment of harmonious relations with France's satellite states arguably opened more doors than it closed in this regard. Kennedy averred that the Peace of Amiens failed when it became obvious that 'France was continuing the struggle by other means', but the same could perhaps also be said for Great Britain – albeit that the British government's attempts at reinforcing their influence were conducted within their understanding of the framework of international diplomacy, whereas Napoleon's were not.[63]

The attempt to separate the Netherlands from French hegemony was a key part of these diplomatic machinations, showing that British decision makers had not resigned themselves to exclusion from continental Western Europe in 1802, and that they were not 'indifferent' to the fate of the Low Countries.[64] This is not to argue that London had a grand plan to reclaim its lost influence. The British government certainly had no strategy to coerce the Dutch into abandoning their connection with France, as to do so would have left London open to recriminations on the same principles that they would later use to accuse France of bad faith.[65] Instead, experience and expectations of Dutch character led ministers to hope for a natural and organic rapid renewal of close relations with the Netherlands. Although the overthrow of the Prince of Orange in 1795 had removed a key British supporter at the heart of the Dutch government, plenty of men supposedly favouring a British connection could still be found in high office in the Republic. It would be Britain's policy to cultivate such connections without giving any impression of partisanship, to support the Dutch case for the removal of French troops, and to re-establish the commercial links that had been so important to relations in earlier periods. Above all, Hawkesbury instructed his new Minister Plenipotentiary to the Hague in August 1802, Britain wished 'to see the Batavian Republic in fact what it is in name – independent'.[66] The effect of this, it was believed, would be to allow Britain to present itself as the protector of Dutch interests against the encroachments of France, and would wean the Netherlands slowly away from the French alliance and bring them gently back into a British orbit.

This scheme was based on the understanding that the Dutch people's natural inclination, and the Netherlands's national interests, lay with maritime Britain rather than continental France. The restoration of past good relations was at the centre of Hawkesbury's approach. The man chosen to represent Britain in the Hague, and whose influence would be crucial in securing a good understanding with the Dutch government and people, was Robert Liston, a Scottish diplomat well regarded by Hawkesbury. Moreover, Liston was a long-term acquaintance of the Dutch foreign minister, Maarten van der Goes, with whom he quickly resumed a friendly relationship.[67] In Hawkesbury's view Anglo-Dutch relations had long been based on a personal understanding between British monarchs and the House of Orange, and although that connection was now lost, he believed that there were plenty of partisans of Britain who should be persuaded to take up posts in the Dutch government. The pro-French party was now 'inconsiderable in numbers

and influence', he asserted, and so the time was ripe.[68] Hawkesbury did not, however, assume that France would look favourably on any Anglo-Dutch rapprochement. He recognised the delicacy of the task at hand, and advised 'great prudence and circumspection' on Liston's part when supporting demands for the removal of French troops from the Netherlands.[69] He also recognised that a commercial treaty may prove difficult, especially while France maintained a military presence in the Netherlands. Hawkesbury therefore suggested the practical solution of reactivating article ten of the Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1788, which had made the two countries favoured trading partners.[70] A commercial understanding would bring some economic benefit to Britain, but was much more important as a means of cementing the good opinion of the Dutch commercial classes.

Hawkesbury and Addington were encouraged in their views by the general attitude of the Dutch government during the peace, and by continued intelligence from the Netherlands. Within a couple of months of the signing of the definitive treaty, for example, the Batavian government was transacting business with Britain that it begged them to keep secret from France.[71] London's hope that adherents of the Orangist and British cause could reclaim their former influence was encouraged by the moderation shown to returning exiles such as Hendrick Fagel, the former Greffier and close advisor of the Prince of Orange.[72] Liston's despatches from the Hague certainly gave the impression that, like in 1787, French influence in the Netherlands could be undermined and the British connection re-established. On arriving in the Netherlands in September 1802, he cautioned that there remained a strong pro-French party, but that

> it is evident that the great majority of the inhabitants, though not insensible to the happiness of present peace and security, are dissatisfied with the new form of government, humiliated by the oppression and disgusted by the pretended friendships of France, and that they look forward with longing eyes to the possibility of a change that may bring back a state of friendship and union with Great Britain.[73]

He further adverted that his arrival had caused quite a stir, and that he had 'been followed by the huzzahs of the multitude'. He claimed that he had even had to check the ardour of the Anglophile Orangists lest their excitement got the better of them. His subsequent missives to Hawkesbury reinforced the impression of a country hostile to its French alliance, but fearful to show this too openly due to the continued presence of French forces. Like Cornwallis at Amiens, Liston explained any apparent reluctance on the part of the Dutch government to fall into line with Britain as the result of a need to keep up appearances, especially in light of the French ambassador's tendency to ascribe any resistance to French whim to rampant 'Anglomania'.[74]

The continued presence of French troops in the Netherlands was a major stumbling block to Britain's successful pursuit of its Dutch agenda. Despite the best efforts of the Batavian government, these troops were not removed at the conclusion of peace. As early as April 1802 Schimmelpenninck requested that the First Consul should adhere to treaty obligations and withdraw his forces, and this was followed by repeated requests from the Batavian Ministry of War.[75] All demands were ignored. When the Dutch government tried to force the issue by threatening to stop paying for French soldiers, Napoleon simply replied that he hoped that they would not be foolish enough to 'expose themselves to the danger of the disorders that might be committed by soldiers left without pay'.[76] Whitworth in Paris was instructed to remonstrate with the French government on this point, and to alert them to their obligations under the Treaties of The Hague, Lunéville, and the Franco-Dutch convention of August 1801.[77] Napoleon, however, remained unmoved. By early 1803 Liston advised Hawkesbury that van der Goes had decided to go along with French wishes to keep a garrison in the Netherlands for the time being, as to do so was preferable to perhaps provoking a change of government as had been seen in Switzerland.[78] It was clear, therefore, that Britain's hopes of wresting an independent Batavian Republic from France's grasp had been checked by Napoleon's refusal – in contravention of treaties – to allow the Netherlands to accede to *de facto* independence. This issue, along with Napoleon's treatment of Piedmont, Parma and Switzerland, quickly soured relations between the

two major powers, and the Netherlands became once more an issue of Anglo-French negotiation.[79]

That Britain had a right to intervene in continental affairs in the months after the signing of the Treaty of Amiens was, to Hawkesbury, not in doubt. Although Britain had not been a party to any of the treaties regulating Franco-Dutch relations, her government considered that the Treaty of Amiens gave tacit sanction to the status quo prevailing at the time of its conclusion.[80] Hawkesbury outlined his thinking regarding the Netherlands to Whitworth: 'His Majesty has a particular right to interfere on the present occasion, as he consented to make numerous and most important restitutions to the Batavian government in the treaty of peace, on the consideration of that government being independent and not being subject to foreign control.'[81] This was therefore not treaty revisionism, or a delayed realisation that too much had been conceded at Amiens. Rather, the British government believed that Amiens afforded continued rights and opportunities to interpose into European affairs. It was the closing down of these avenues of connection that drove Britain to a more hostile stance towards France as 1802 drew to a close.

3

The attempts to avert a return of war in early 1803 give a final demonstration of the fact that the British government had not simply surrendered its hopes of continental influence at Amiens. In response to Napoleon's refusal to withdraw from the Netherlands, and to his unilateral reorganisation of Switzerland and parts of Italy, Addington took the provocative step of ordering British forces to remain in Malta, in direct breach of the Treaty of Amiens. To the self-righteous French protests, Britain replied with a demand that France should evacuate the Netherlands and Switzerland in line with its treaty obligations, as well as giving Britain the right to retain forces in Malta for a decade as compensation for the expansion of French influence since the preliminaries. Napoleon rejected these demands more-or-less out of hand, and also made strenuous efforts to deflect criticism that he had breached the Treaties of The Hague and Lunéville by telling foreign representatives that he intended to evacuate the Netherlands, but only once Britain had adhered to the letter of the Treaty of Amiens.[82]

The rejection of Britain's proposal has been seen as an example of Napoleon's subordination of French interests to his own megalomaniac tendencies, or at the very least as an act of wanton provocation.[83] In Schroeder's view, Britain's demands would have effectively given their sanction to Napoleon's wider expansionism in Germany and Italy, and would not have compromised French political control of the Netherlands. Grainger too believed that withdrawing his forces 'would have cost Bonaparte little or nothing'.[84] However, this is perhaps to misunderstand the attitudes of both Britain and France to the Netherlands in 1803. Both the British cabinet and Napoleon believed that the removal of French troops would spell the beginning of the end for French dominance in the Netherlands. Just as London had received manifold proofs of Dutch disenchantment with France, so Napoleon's agents in the Netherlands had provided a litany of complaints of behaviour and attitudes that favoured Britain. According to French records, a majority of Dutch ministers and Councillors of State, including van der Goes, and all of the colonial governors, were seen as either staunchly anti-French or as partisans of Britain.[85] Only a few men at the top of the Dutch government, such as G.F. Pyman and Willem Six, could be relied upon to support a continued French alliance. This is not to suggest that the Batavian government did seek a British connection; the internal correspondence and instructions to Dutch representatives abroad shows that they remained wary of Britain, and sought only neutrality and continued continental peace that would allow the re-establishment of prosperity.[86] However, this was not the perception of either of the Netherlands' neighbours. In this context, the insistence on the removal of French troops would have been interpreted by Napoleon as Britain flexing its diplomatic muscles. His refusal to withdraw from the Netherlands was therefore based at least

partly on strategic principle of containing Britain, rather than simply because of an incorrigibly aggressive and expansionist nature.[87]

The fact that Britain made explicit demands for Dutch independence and the withdrawal of French troops in 1802-3, when she had not done so at Amiens, was not down to any change in policy or sudden desire to right the wrongs of a flawed peace. Rather, it was a pragmatic response to the failure of their post-treaty diplomacy. At Amiens, as has been argued above, the British government was content to leave the question of the status of the Netherlands to be implicitly regulated by previous Franco-Dutch treaties, which clearly provided for Dutch independence and the removal of French troops. This would provide the basis for Britain's policy of pursuing renewed continental connections. Napoleon's refusal to adhere to these accords meant that British diplomacy was left largely impotent, and left London needing to tie the First Consul into a much stronger commitment to respect Dutch independence, or at least to force his hand in acknowledging his breach of faith. Although the method of execution differed significantly, Britain's policy remained consistent.

Whether London genuinely believed that Napoleon might agree to their demands at this stage is a moot point. A number of historians, Schroeder and Esdaile amongst them, have concluded that Napoleon lacked the temperament to accept limitations on his ambition, and that his inability to show restraint and integrity meant that other powers would frequently feel that there was no option other than conflict to try to limit his expansionism.[88] Hawkesbury was not necessarily confident in the prospect of continued peace, writing to Liston in March 1803 that 'considering the character of the person we have to deal with, it is extremely difficult to calculate with precision, the probability of the renewal of hostilities'.[89] What is clear, however, is that by May 1803 both Britain and France were using the French military presence in the Netherlands as a bargaining chip in their negotiations. For Britain, the removal of French troops was a precondition to any further concessions. For France, the evacuation of the Netherlands was contingent on Britain upholding the stipulations of the Treaty of Amiens – although whether Napoleon would have consented to remove his troops even then is debatable.[90] The positions were irreconcilable. From Britain's point of view Napoleon's actions in Italy, Switzerland and Germany could not be permitted without suitable balancing compensation, while Napoleon wished to use the current crisis to force Britain to accept exclusion from continental affairs. Britain's tacit acceptance of the continental settlement in 1802 was predicated on the idea that there remained room for British influence to operate in French satellite states, notably the Netherlands. Napoleon did not understand this traditional interpretation of international diplomatic norms, and his refusal to allow the full independence of his allies meant that in 1803 Britain had to demand more explicit concessions or face a renewal of war.

The declaration of war by Britain on France on 18 May 1803 signalled, of course, the failure of the Peace of Amiens. But it did not necessarily mean that the thinking behind the peace had been fundamentally flawed. While Britain had made significant concessions, it had also expected to be able to make significant diplomatic advances once a treaty was in place. Regarding the Netherlands, Britain had believed that in normal diplomatic intercourse, she could get more from peace than from continuing the war. The renewal of hostilities was therefore a recognition not of a fatally unstable treaty, but of the fact that in French-dominated Europe normal diplomatic intercourse had become almost impossible. The refusal to accept peace on these terms can be understood as the rejection of appeasement of Napoleon's expansionism, but it does not mean that Amiens had been a misbegotten attempt to appease.

Even when committed to a renewed war, Britain did make one final effort to separate the Netherlands from Napoleon's grasp. The Batavian Republic was omitted from the declaration of war in May 1803, and Britain let it be known that it would accept Dutch neutrality in the coming conflict if France withdrew its troops and respected Dutch independence. In these desires they were heartily seconded by the Dutch government, who begged the First Consul to allow them to remain aloof from the Anglo-French contretemps.[91] Their pleas were refused. For the next

decade, the Netherlands would be forced fight a war in which she had no interest, as an increasingly reluctant French confederate.

Conclusion

This article has offered a reassessment of the Treaty of Amiens, and has suggested that despite the apparent one-sidedness of the terms, it did not represent the exclusion of Britain from continental Europe. By examining Britain's relations with the Netherlands, it can be seen that the treaty provided an opportunity for Britain to achieve by diplomacy that which she had failed to attain by force of arms. Amiens was not a moment of appeasement; it was, instead, a pragmatic acceptance of the futility of continuing an increasingly counterproductive conflict. It neither sanctioned future French expansion, nor accepted eternal French dominance over its allies. By understanding Amiens in the context of other treaties such as The Hague and Lunéville, it can be seen that Britain expected peace to bring the genuine independence of France's satellite states, above all the Netherlands. By understanding Britain's historical connections to the Netherlands – both the experience of expelling French influence in 1787, and the assumption that the Dutch remained at core natural friends to Britain – it can be seen that London was justified in expecting Dutch independence to lead gradually but naturally to a closer Anglo-Dutch understanding. While the actual clauses of the Treaty of Amiens offered thin fare to Britain, London's belief that she could reverse some of France's dominance through diplomacy once good relations had been re-established places a different complexion on the peace. When Napoleon shattered the illusion that he would allow his allies genuine independence and it became clear that revision through diplomacy was impossible, Britain fell reluctantly back into war. To have failed to do so would indeed have been appeasement.

This article is not meant as an apologia for British ministers, or to suggest that their conduct made the best of their situation. Despite the foregoing, it is clear that in 1801-3 Addington, Hawkesbury and the wider cabinet badly misjudged the situation, and that their desperation for peace made them wilfully blind to the significance of changing circumstances between the signing of the preliminaries and the final treaty. Although they mistrusted Napoleon, they continued to treat him as a rational and even traditional diplomatic actor until it was too late. They, and indeed Pitt and Grenville in 1800, also failed to concert adequately with other powers, notably Austria, in both making peace and binding France to her treaty obligations. All of these charges, and perhaps more, can be laid at their doors. Yet to accuse them of either ignoring Britain's security, as some contemporaries did, or of abandoning hopes of British influence in Western Europe in 1801-2 would be to misread the diplomatic possibilities that the Treaty of Amiens ultimately afforded.

Notes

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