TENANTS AT WILL:
The country-house ethos as a unifying motif in works that deal with both personal retreat and national expansion in early eighteenth-century English literature, 1680-1750

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SUMMARY

This study explores the themes of individual retreat and national expansion where they occur in the same work. The two themes are frequently linked and their apparently contradictory moods are so nearly juxtaposed in carefully constructed poems like Windor Forest and The Seasons that there seems to be a case for investigating the relationship between them. The terms for these themes are rather vague and need to be defined. Individual retreat is used to classify all kinds of withdrawal from the world of affairs into some form of personal self-sufficiency; sometimes this is merely as the solitary observer of the passing world but more often it is retirement to some kind of Horatian refuge in the country. National expansion is an even vaguer term because it covers both the personal and the national urge to extend the sphere of influence or experience beyond the confines of Europe. In the individual this may be expressed in exploration, travel, commerce or migration, while the nation is conceived as enlarging its influence by commerce and the planting of colonies.

Common assumptions about the proper use of man's spiritual and material inheritance can be identified as shaping literary attitudes to these themes. Since similar views about society are explicitly recorded in the group of country-house poems written just before the Civil War these provide a concise point of reference. This is especially relevant as the period under consideration begins with the year 1633 when, the constitutional upheaval having been settled, the full force of the economic and social changes that had been the fuel of the explosion demanded that intellectual movements should reaffirm the essential continuity of experience. Moreover, this was set against the background of a rising volume of trade that revealed, through the very materials of everyday life, the wider frame of reference within which man must now live.
Whether the country-house ethos ever governed the behaviour of more than a handful of landlords is very doubtful, and it is certain that when Ben Jonson wrote 'To Penshurst' he was already memorializing a golden age. The concrete image of the lord's traditional manorial housekeeping was, however, a powerful conservative symbol through which to interpret the new age. Its use as an image, or allusion to the constellation of images that constitute this conservative ideal of society, persists well into the later eighteenth century, but this study is confined to the years 1688 to 1750 when the model can easily be seen responding to social, political and economic changes. Up to about 1714 the lines are not clearly drawn but retreat is obviously a reaction, a withdrawal from the city and all that it stands for; awe before the possibilities for power opened up by the use of the world's riches through commerce is the dominant literary response to expansion. Works for this section are numerous and mainly either minor or fragmentary but they include Addison's and Steele's essays and Pope's early poems as well as Mandeville, Prior, Ambrose Philips, Diaper and Lady Winchilsea. The publication of Robinson Crusoe introduces a succession of much more complex treatments of the two themes. Throughout the twenties, the solitary wanderer searches for a way to interpret his role as tenant of the earth in Defoe's novels and Gulliver's Travels, as well as in minor works; even in The Seasons Thomson's persona is a kind of wanderer. The subjectivity of the twenties is followed, however, by the acute social conscience of the next two decades. Thomson's changes to The Seasons reflect this shift, and both Liberty and The Castle of Indolence are the result of his interest in public affairs as a member of Bolingbroke's opposition coterie. This is also the period of Pope's satires and the Essay on Man.

Inevitably, this study is related to interpretations of political, economic and social events in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its intention is to consider the nuances of the literature that evolved from the tension between the two themes and their ground in reality.