

George II, King and Elector

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A detailed biography of George II in English has been needed for some time. His is one of the longer reigns of an early modern British monarch (1727–60), encompassing both the final military defeat of the Stuart cause in 1745, and the high point of the first British Empire. To Whig historians it was the apogee of the Whig supremacy: The History of Parliament Trust's *House of Commons 1715–54* was published as long ago as 1970, while important work on popular politics came out in the 1990s.⁽¹⁾ Yet despite Jonathan Clark's challenge to consider the whole post-1688 settlement in Britain as a form of *ancien régime* and confessional state, little attention had been paid to the institution of monarchy and to George II in particular. This has been like trying to understand the planetary system without first fully understanding the role of the sun, or even accepting that it was a heliocentric system in the first place.

Historians of the Hanoverian era had Ragnhild Hatton's 1978 biography of George I, but since Aubrey Newman's work on the Leicester House was not followed up, as anticipated, by a study of George II, the lacuna on George II remained. Meanwhile the profession became more intrigued by the Jacobite cause than that of the loyalist mainstream, and more sympathetic to popular politics than the aristocratic elite and their clients. For decades there remained only Chenevix Trench's 1973 biography and an important essay by J. B. Owen from the same year.⁽²⁾

When Jeremy Black contributed his interpretative monograph in 2007, published while Thompson's work was still in progress, and acknowledging the latter's comments on drafts of his book, he noted there were three new frame works through which to study George II: Hannah Smith's study of early Hanoverian loyalism; the rise of court studies; and fresh attention to the Hanoverian dimension to the British monarchy, exemplified by the edited collection of Brendan Smith and Torsten Riotte, to which Black, Thompson and

the present reviewer all contributed.⁽³⁾

Thompson's penetrating and detailed biography puts the central figure of the reign back into play, and greatly clarifies and enriches our understanding of these vital 33 years. It makes a major contribution to understanding the character of Hanoverian political culture, the relationship between monarch and ministers, the role of the royal court, and the workings of the Hanoverian Personal Union. Primarily it is an account of a working monarch. We see the day to day operation of the 'king's business', and the corresponding relationships with British and German ministers entailed in accomplishing this business. It therefore enables us to study the early Hanoverian state from the angle of its key decision maker.

Although it is not a history of the Hanoverian electorate, Thompson shows George II conducting this business while he was visiting his patrimony there, which he described to an opposition politician as his equivalent to their country seats (p. 158). As accomplished in his deployment of German historiography as he is of British, Thompson takes as an important means of analysis the former's stress on the primacy of foreign policy. His previous book *Britain, Hanover and the Protestant interest, 1688–1756*, provided a spring-board for this biography; also influential has been Simms' magisterial *Three Victories and a Defeat*.⁽⁴⁾ Thompson has researched the archival sources in Hanover extensively, drawing on official records and personal papers, as well as the British Royal Archives, National Archives, the British Library, and the Lincolnshire RO.

The biography shows George as a dynastic ruler, like most 18th-century European rulers, who had diverse territories to govern, and a variety of dynastic linkages to deploy, especially when his children were old enough to marry. 'George's perspective and outlook were European and he thought in terms of his domains and territories, rather than about national boundaries. This is the primary lens through which his life should be viewed' (p. 9). It is a pity, though, that Yale University Press did not provide the book with a map of the Hanoverian possessions – the one in Hatton's biography would have been suitable – to help readers unfamiliar with 18th-century political geography orient themselves among George's German domains, and to follow discussions of military manoeuvres.

Of necessity Thompson has to start his biography by explaining who the Hanoverians were and how it was they came to inherit the British throne: this he does very efficiently. George II was dynastically Protestant and therefore a key figure in the *Corpus Evangelicorum* within the Holy Roman Empire: Thompson rightly insists this is more significant in following his political strategy than in probing what his personal piety may or may not have been. He underlines that what mattered to the British in 1688 and again in 1714 was safeguarding the Protestant character of the monarchy – a corrective to the Whig view that parliamentary scrutiny of royal policy was the principal objective. Thus George I's reputation as 'Hanover Brave' who had his horse shot from beneath him during the battle of Oudenarde in 1708, in contrast to James Stuart's position on the sidelines, served the king in good stead in establishing him as a soldier-monarch and Protestant champion (pp. 33–5, 107).

Once his subject succeeds to the throne, Thompson exhibits a healthy scepticism over the received narrative that it was Queen Caroline's support which secured Robert Walpole's continuation in the Treasury, preferring the view of the then Lord Chancellor, Peter King, that it was consequent on Walpole's immensely hard work and constant attendance on the king. This discussion inaugurates a main theme of the biography, which is that the king was neither the puppet of the politicians nor subservient to petticoat government – whether these petticoats were worn by Queen Caroline, Henrietta Howard, or the Countess of Yarmouth (the Hanoverian born Anne Sophie von Wallmoden, his last mistress). Caroline he sees as a valued partner rather than a controller, though she only lived for ten years after his accession, while he considers Henrietta Howard's biographer Tracy Borman as a dependable interpreter. Yarmouth has been glimpsed intermittently in previous accounts; but it is Thompson's systematic tracing of her role that finally clarifies her importance. Though an established route of access to the king and influential in moderating George's irritation with his son Frederick, she could make little headway on foreign policy (pp. 190–1).

Thompson is also sceptical about how far George was dominated by his ministers. The main crises are in

1742 and 1744, when first Walpole and then Carteret are forced to resign, and in 1745–6 when after reconstructing his ministry to include the Pelham brothers, he entertained hopes of dismissing them and restoring Carteret. Thompson contends persuasively that Owen's 1957 formula, that it was important to have a 'Minister for the King in the House of Commons' and a 'Minister for the House of Commons in the closet', while important, is not sufficient. To leave it there is to concede too much to the Whiggish teleology that the story of the rise of the House of Commons is what matters. Thompson argues that the clincher is having the king's confidence in the closet – that is in personal discussions with him; and further, that ministers needed this to be demonstrable to others – for example, by the appointment or dismissal of ministerial or court appointments. Yet George, Thompson shows, often held his own in these contests. In foreign affairs he most definitely held the Whip hand over his ministers, even while being constrained over what was politically acceptable to parliamentary and popular public opinion, especially if there was a need for Parliament to vote subsidies to allies (pp. 135, 139). In 1740, with Frederick II of Prussia (his nephew) on the warpath, George II kept his cards close to his chest in negotiating a neutrality agreement to protect Hanover. Thompson quotes Newcastle's verdict, that whatever his English ministers might think about neutrality for Hanover or ponder whether it might apply to Britain as well, '“the king, if he has a mind to do it, will do it, without us”' (p. 141).

Was, then, Walpole's resignation in 1742 a victory for the opposition and a sign that George II was cowed by his ministers? Thompson argues against this. George still liked Walpole and rewarded him with a peerage, but recognised he had lost the confidence of the House of Commons. On the other hand, ministerial revival began, aided by the king's reconciliation with Frederick after Walpole's resignation. The king had had moments of intense frustration, but 'Although Walpole had gone, George had neither to admit significant numbers of the opposition into positions of power nor submit to all of his son's demands'. Furthermore, 'He was still able to rely on the fact that there was a deep ambivalence even among opposition MPs about forcing him to do anything against his will because of the continuing ambiguities of where opposition stopped and lese-majesty began' (p. 144).

Again, in 1746, after failing to bring back Carteret, George had to restructure the Pelhamite ministry, but he was able to refuse the idea of William Pitt as Secretary at War, sending him instead to Ireland as Vice-Treasurer, and insisted to Newcastle he would retain the brothers Edward and William Finch as respectively his Vice-Chamberlain and Groom of the Bedchamber. Both were Hanover Tories who had benefitted from Carteret's patronage, so keeping them frustrated the Pelhams' aim that Carteret's beneficiaries should be turned out as a sign of the king's confidence in them. Consequently the Pelhams couldn't stop Carteret remaining in touch with the court via Edward Finch, whose attendance on George included playing cards in the evenings with him.

Thompson interprets the comment George made to Hardwicke, 'ministers are kings in this country' as a dry joke in response to the latter's plea for more visible signs of his support for the Pelhamites (p. 162). Furthermore, better relations with Newcastle after 1746 resulted from their rapport over supporting Maria Theresa of Austria, not the younger brother's expertise in securing finance from the House of Commons. George remained adamant that even if the First Lord of the Treasury was the main avenue for channelling patronage requests to the monarch, the former should not meddle with the composition of the Bedchamber, 'which is the personal Service about my Self, & I won't suffer any body to meddle in' (pp. 171–2).

A by-product of Thompson's thorough re-examination of George's relationships with all his ministers is not only a revised view of who held the balance of power, but a fresh look at ministers who have received less attention than the often-discussed Walpole or the Pelhams. Lord Chesterfield, for instance, is shown to have had a remarkably varied career 'from loyal household servant as prince of Wales through opposition in the 1730s, disputes over his wife's inheritance to cheerleader for anti-Hanoverianism in the early 1740s' (p. 175). His return to office in 1746 was clearly made conditional on his assuring the king he now supported the war with France. Nor was the dispute over his wife's inheritance exactly trivial: she was George's half-sister, Petronella Melusina von der Schulenberg, daughter of George I by the duchess of Kendal (though baptised as her niece).

Thompson advances an important argument over the emergence of cabinet government. He contends that the king's regular sojourns in Hanover required a more formal structure for governing Britain when he was absent, accompanied by only one of the two secretaries of state. This challenges the Whig view that internal developments are responsible for growth of the cabinet; Thompson emphasises that it resulted from 'the need to formulate coherent foreign political policies' when the king was away (p. 215). 'The inability of those left behind to make representations to the king personally meant that they became more concerned about reaching a collective view that could be formulated ... in the hope that a united front might have more impact upon George' (p. 217). This cabinet growth did not mean the king's power was declining – to the contrary, as there was so much foreign business to deal with, it remained constant, defence and foreign affairs being the chief *métier* of monarchy. Cabinet differences with the king might well centre on a 'London view' because there was often worry that the needs of Hanover became disproportionate. Thompson agrees that the financial dimension to policy did require careful attention to Parliament, but emphasises it was a means not an end.

If the logic of this interpretation is that the king's power was not in decline, a corollary is that the court was not a declining institution either, and Thompson offers plenty of fresh evidence for this revisionist view. As the Finch brothers show, proximity to the king could be achieved through their mix of diplomatic experience, family connection and a Household appointment, and not by ministerial politics. For others there was no hard and fast line between accepting political or court office, providing it smoothed the path of preferment. In reshuffling his ministries, bestowing honours or titles or a court position could often placate the disappointed (pp. 230–1). The monarch was still the fount of patronage, although ministers were starting to have more influence over clerical advancement, but less so over military promotion – always important for a soldier king (p. 105–6). Thompson's work on the court is an invaluable foundation for the further research that is needed to understand the range of courtier types, their families' previous court service and career strategy, and the kinship and patronage networks drawn into serving the royal households.

It is telling that the king got on so well with his Lord Chamberlain, Charles Fitzroy, 2nd duke of Grafton, Charles II's grandson. George and he were cousins once removed, both being descendants of James I. Unlike the descendants of Louis XIV's mistresses, those of Charles II were not considered princes of the blood, only significant noblemen and women. The court has an under-investigated function of integrating the descendants of Charles II and James II, William's Dutch favourites, Tories and ex-Jacobites, as well as ambitious Whigs, while geographically it includes office holders from most counties. Now that we have such a rich portrait of the central sun, much more effective work can be done on the planets, moons and meteors that circled around him, or flashed briefly across the horizon.

Another way in which the British court has been underplayed stems from John Brewer's argument that its cultural leadership had been displaced by the growth of the commercial sector. Thompson counters this, again persuasively, by suggesting that entrepreneurs benefitted from trading on their royal connections, so 'the court and the emergent commercial sphere can be seen as both more interconnected and more interdependent than might initially appear' (p. 191). Furthermore he shows how cultural competition in London was often a dimension to the dysfunctional squabbles within the royal family, with George, Frederick and Anne sponsoring rival opera companies. Due weight is given to Handel's contribution to royal religious and secular ceremony, but William Kent, who succeeded in working for George Caroline and Frederick quite amicably, is a trifle underplayed: Thompson overlooks the point that Kent designed the Horse Guards Parade for George – a fitting commission from a soldier king. Thompson also offers a very full account of the financing, social composition, ceremonial function and material culture of the court at Hanover, showing how it worked in George II's absences as well as during his visits.

Constraints of space mean other strengths must be mentioned briefly and selectively. The biography amplifies George's role as dynast in making the marriages of his daughters Louisa, Anne and Mary, and explains their international context: accounts of summer court life and the lavish marriage festivities for the latter in Hanover enable him to portray George II in late middle age, in his element as an Hanoverian Elector (pp. 136–7). More might have been said about Augusta Princess of Wales' Saxe-Gotha background. The

duchy was a significant cultural centre, considered to rank immediately after the court at Dresden among the various Saxon rulers, with an important library and court theatre. Due justice though is given to the widowed Augusta's determined politicking over the household of the future George III in 1756.

Thompson's achievement in several chapters, (e.g. four, eight and nine), is to provide a detailed exposition of the interplay between domestic politics, continental diplomacy and military strategy, moving seamlessly between them. He is always master of complex, multi-faceted situations yet never lets his reader lose the wood for the trees. The sections on the Austrian Succession War and Jacobite rebellion make one marvel at the extraordinary stamina and concentration displayed by a 60-year-old monarch in all these dimensions. Small wonder he was occasionally ill-tempered, and habitually preferred a hasty annotation of a letter to composing a full reply. The difficulties of his dual role prompted fresh consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of separating electorate and crown.

While George II left little personal material behind Thompson finds enough to provide glimpses of the person as well as the monarch, especially when he reacts to the deaths of his wife and his daughter Louisa. As an author Thompson consistently keeps the attention of his reader and the pace never flags. Repeated readings reveal more layers of expert distillation and historical perspective, but given his book is part of the Yale British monarchs series, Thompson also pulls off the tricky task of providing a brisk narrative accessible to a perceptive general reader. His exposition for both audiences is always judicious and economical, seasoned with dry wit. Historians will be drawing on his very considerable achievement for some time to come.

Notes

1. E.g. K. Wilson, *A Sense of the People* (Cambridge, 1995); N. Rogers, *Crowds Culture and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford, 1998).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. C. C. Trench, *George II* (London, 1973); J. B. Owen, 'George II reconsidered', in *Statesmen, Scholars and Merchants. Essays in Eighteenth Century Monarchy presented to Dame Lucy Sutherland*, ed. A. Whiteman, J. S. Bromley and P. G. M. Dickson (Oxford, 1973).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. J. Black, *George II, Puppet of the Politicians?* (Exeter, 2007); H. Smith, *The Georgian Monarchy, Politics and Culture 1714–1760* (Cambridge, 2006); *The Hanoverian Dimension in British History, 1714–1837*, ed. B. Simms and T. Riotte (Cambridge, 2007); Clarissa Campbell Orr, *Queenship in Europe 1660–1815: The Role of the Consort* (Cambridge, 2004) and idem, *Queenship in Britain 1660–1837: Royal Patronage, Court Culture and Dynastic Politics* (Manchester, 2002).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. A. C. Thompson, *Britain, Hanover and the Protestant Interest, 1688–1756* (Woodbridge, 2007); B. Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat* (London, 2007).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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