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The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III

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Author:

Lewis Namier

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Peter Thomas

The publication of what is often known simply as *The Structure of Politics* transformed the perceived political landscape of eighteenth-century Britain. Prior to 1929 British political history from 1688 was broadly conceived of as a two-party rivalry of Whig and Tory, underpinning a constitutional monarchy and a modern cabinet system based on a party majority in the House of Commons. That was the classic 'Whig interpretation' of history for the period, embodied in the scholarly work of Lord Macaulay, W.E.H. Lecky, G.O. Trevelyan and G.M. Trevelyan, and popularised in Sir Charles Grant Robertson's textbook *England under the Hanoverians*, reprinted sixteen times since 1911. What Namier did was to cut a cross-section through the British political system in the middle of the eighteenth century and demonstrate that no such parties existed. It was as if a zoologist had dissected a creature previously thought to have been vertebrate and shown it to be boneless. Namier, instead of viewing political history as the deeds of great men, concerned himself with the behaviour of ordinary MPs, revealing a political system of infinite subtlety, with the great majority of MPs simultaneously seeking favours from government and professing their independence, varying permutations of these two attitudes constituting political reality. Apart from the use of techniques such as prosopography, the study of social and family connections, what distinguished Namier's work was meticulous attention to detail and emphasis on original sources. Namierisation, a word coined in his lifetime, was essentially a substitution of accurate detail for the generalisations that had contented earlier historians. Namier went to the grass-roots of politics. He asked such questions as : what determined the conduct of individual MPs? Why did men go into politics? What did they get out of it?

This might now seem unremarkable, and Namier was not, of course, the first historian to concentrate his attention on manuscript evidence, but his much-publicised 'paper-chases', as he called them, made such

endeavours henceforth mandatory for serious scholars. Present-day historians, familiar with modern techniques far more sophisticated than Namier's cruder methods, might well wonder what all the fuss was about. The initial reception of the book provides part of the answer.

In the *English Historical Review* D.A. Winstanley, himself the author of two monographs on the 1760s, graciously acknowledged the significance of Namier's book:

No previous writer has ever made so thorough and gallant an attempt to discover the actual workings of the political system of the eighteenth century The result is a very notable contribution to the study of eighteenth-century politics. He has shown us that the lucidity we thought we possessed was delusive, and only obtained by an artificial simplification of an extremely involved system. ... We have thought of Parliament, and in a lesser degree, of the country as being neatly divided up into Whigs and Tories.

Winstanley, however, was not entirely convinced, and queried Namier's preface flourish that 'the political life of the period could be fully described without ever using a party denomination'. This claim Winstanley described as 'a point of view of great interest', and more generally he pronounced that 'though some of us may not be prepared to accept without further question all of Mr. Namier's conclusions and implications, there is no doubt that all of us will be compelled to revise and modify many of our previous conceptions'.

Such appreciation of the significance of Namier's findings was not the norm. The review in *History* by diplomatic historian Sir Richard Lodge was a put-down. 'The title *Structure of Politics* is perhaps too ambitious.' Lodge placed the book on a level with the descriptive *Unreformed House of Commons* by E. and A.G. Porritt published in 1903, and implied that it would be of interest to local rather than general historians. Robertson, in a new 1930 edition of his *England under the Hanoverians* commented that 'there has been a tendency to exaggerate the extent and novelty of Mr. Namier's conclusions', and left the old interpretation intact in his text, relegating his garbled summary of Namier's book to Appendix XXI.

Doubtless in part because of the Second World War, a major distraction from scholarship, it took some time for Namier's work to undermine the entrenched orthodoxy; but by the 1950s the implications of his research were being adopted in political analyses of eighteenth-century Britain. Hanoverian politics were now portrayed in terms not of a party conflict of Whig and Tory, but of an alignment between 'Court' and 'Country', government and opposition. Three types of MPs were analytically portrayed : a minority of active politicians who headed both administration and opposition; another minority of office-holders who invariably supported government; and a majority of independents, divided between the two political sides. Changes of ministry merely involved reshuffles among the politicians, acting either as individuals or as members of loose groupings centred around a leader. Since all active politicians claimed to be Whigs, the political game was conducted virtually without reference to party terminology. Namier's views were now the new orthodoxy. In 1962 Dorothy Marshall avowedly wrote her university text-book *Eighteenth Century England*, covering the period 1714 to 1784, on Namierite lines, adopting 'the new interpretations' as she termed them; and other general surveys by J.S. Watson, J.B. Owen, W.A. Speck and I.R. Christie followed the same approach. The implications of Namier's book, both in methodology and conclusions, extended chronologically before and after his own period of research, into the writing of British history in the seventeenth, early eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. For the reign of George III studies by John Brooke and Ian Christie confirmed the Namierite political analysis for the periods 1766-68 and 1780-82 respectively. But there was no further need to demonstrate its validity, and Namier's grand design for a series of such volumes never got off the ground.

That such structural analysis seemed to be all that was being written under Namier's aegis led to the complaint that he had 'taken the mind out of history', and Sir Herbert Butterfield launched a famous

historical controversy of the 1950s by accusing Namier and his alleged 'school' of removing the ideological content from political history. This attack often confused aims and methods, and lacked logic, as one Namierite John Owen pointed out in reply. 'The counting of heads does not necessarily mean the discounting of ideas.' The charge against Namier himself was particularly unfair, for it overlooked the circumstance that his own original intention had been a study of the coming of the American Revolution, an aim he was diverted from when he perceived the error of conventional historical interpretations of the politics of the period. Namier never returned to his first aim, but subsequent historians have demonstrated that a Namierite political framework is no barrier to the discussion of policies and principles.

Criticism of Namier swelled after his death in 1960. In the felicitous phrase of his biographer Linda Colley, 'the former cult figure was transmuted into a bogeyman'. Whereas few had the courage of Butterfield to attack the great man openly to his face, others now did so when he was safely in his coffin. Some bravely pursued a posthumous vendetta, from real or imagined grievances. Others genuinely disagreed with Namier's methods and conclusions. But there were broader reasons for this widespread reaction than motives of personal malice or academic revenge. The study of ruling elites became unfashionable. The trend, indeed, was away from political history altogether, towards social history; and by this was meant the lives of ordinary folk, not Namier's landed oligarchy. The history of ideas came back into favour, and Namier was thought to be the arch-enemy of the roles of logic and principle in human behaviour.

It is an irony of historical scholarship that the ongoing revival of interest in political history has produced the situation that, while the examination of principles and politics has largely been carried out within the Namierite framework, there has been a simultaneous attempt to reclaim the Hanoverian period for traditional party history. Some historians have discovered a Tory party in existence until the 1750s. Frank O'Gorman has linked the Whig governing party of the first two Georges with the Whig party of the early nineteenth century. Scholarly challenges have thus sought to limit the significance of Namier's research to the middle decades of the eighteenth century. In many respects this controversy is more apparent than real. The Tory party of the earlier Hanoverian period is not portrayed as the sole opposition to Whig ministers, and can be accommodated among the 'independent MPs' identified by Namierite scholarship. Likewise the Whig party of George III's reign can be placed among the 'politicians' of the Namierite analysis, and are not depicted as opposing 'Tory' ministers in Lord North and the Younger Pitt, both of whom themselves came from Whig backgrounds.

That the Namier Revolution is an enduring achievement of historical scholarship can be demonstrated by comparison of G.M. Trevelyan's three-volume *England under Queen Anne* (1930-1934). with Geoffrey Holmes's *Politics in the Age of Anne* (1967). This book, often deemed second only to Namier's *Structure of Politics* in modern scholarship on eighteenth-century politics, was avowedly written to counter a Namierite interpretation of that period by R. Walcott. Yet even this revisionist work on 'the first age of party' is cast in the Namierite mould of categorising MPs as members of political groups, office-holders and independents, albeit divided broadly into Whigs and Tories. Destroyed for ever is the notion of 'The Two-Party System in English Political History' summarised and publicised by G.M. Trevelyan in his 1926 Romanes Lecture of that title, delivered only three years before the publication of *The Structure of Politics*.

Notes:

1. *English Historical Review*, 44 (1929), 657-60
2. *History*, 14 (1929-1940), 269-70. The *Cambridge Historical Journal* did not review books at the time.
3. J.S. Watson, *The Reign of George III, 1760-1815* (Oxford, 1960). J.B. Owen, *The Eighteenth Century, 1714-1815* (Nelson, 1974). W.A. Speck, *Stability and Strife: England 1714-1760* (Arnold, 1977). I.R. Christie, *Wars and Revolutions: Britain 1760-1815* (Arnold, 1982).
4. D. Brunton and D.H. Pennington, *Members of the Long Parliament* (1954). R.R. Walcott, *English Politics in the Early Eighteenth Century* (1956). G. Nash, *Politics in the Age of Peel* (1953). H.J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management in the Age of Gladstone and Disraeli* (1959).
5. J. Brooke, *The Chatham Administration, 1766-1768* (1956). I.R. Christie, *The End of North's Ministry, 1780-1782* (1958).

6. Especially in *George III and the Historians* (1957).
7. J.B. Owen, 'Professor Butterfield and the Namier School', *The Cambridge Review*, 79 (10th May 1958), 528-31
8. H.V. Bowen, *Revenue and Reform. The Indian Problem in British Politics 1757-1773* (1991); I.R. Christie, *Wilkes, Wyvill and Reform, 1760-1785* (1962); P. Langford, *The First Rockingham Administration 1765-1766* (1973); L.S. Sutherland, *The East India Company in Eighteenth-Century Politics* (1952); P.D.G. Thomas, *British Politics and the Stamp Act Crisis 1763-1767* (1975); id., *The Townshend Duties Crisis 1767-1773* (1987); id., *Tea Party to Independence 1773-1776* (1991).
9. Linda Colley, *Lewis Namier* (1989), p.94
10. Linda Colley, *In Defiance of Oligarchy: The Tory Party 1714-60* (1982). E. Cruickshanks, *Political Untouchables; the Tories and the '45* (1979). J.C.D.Clark, *The Dynamics of Change: The Crisis of the 1750s and English Party Systems* (1982).
11. F. O'Gorman, *The Rise of Party in England: The Rockingham Whigs 1760-1782* (1975); id., *The Whig Party and the French Revolution* (1967); id., *The Emergence of the British Two-Party System 1760-1832* (1982).
12. R.R. Walcott, *English Politics in the Early Eighteenth Century* (1956).
13. The lecture may be found in G.M. Trevelyan, *An Autobiography and other Essays* (1949), pp. 183-99. For broader appraisals of Namier's work see John Cannon 'Lewis Bernstein Namier' in *The Historian at Work*, edited by John Cannon (Allen and Unwin, 1980), pp. 136-153, and Linda Colley, *Namier* (Historians on Historians, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989). Both have guides for further reading.

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