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George II: Puppet of the Politicians?

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If there is a popular image of George II, it derives from the Whig historians of the 19th century, who established him as the counterpoint to their chief subject of 18th-century interest, his grandson and successor, George III. Claims that George III from 1760 wilfully disrupted a working two-party system, and unconstitutionally attempted to resurrect an older, Stuart-style personal rule, were made to seem plausible by comparing his actions with those of his immediate predecessor. George II, by contrast with George III, appeared as a king thoroughly controlled by the leading politicians of the day, as a captive of the Old Corps Whigs and who might complain bitterly that 'ministers were kings in this country', but buckled down to perform his duty as a proper constitutionally limited monarch.

Recent historiography has done much to correct this crude caricature. George III is now recognised to have been operating in a political environment in which the two-party polarity of earlier decades had all but disappeared. He did not abolish the distinction between Whig and Tory; that distinction had lost nearly all of its meaning before he ascended to the throne. The manifest decline of the Stuart alternative to the Hanoverians from the time of Culloden (1746) meant that the Tories - for long suspected of residual loyalty to the Pretender - were able to appear more respectable and less dangerous. William Pitt had effectively ended the party conflict during the Seven Years War, when his coalition government allowed Tories back into office to promote national unity and thereby denied them the final cohesion provided by a sense of

exclusion and persecution. From that point onwards, politics became more factionalised, and could not be comprehended by the simple (and outdated) labels of Whig and Tory. The new king's room for manoeuvre was accordingly much greater than under his Hanoverian predecessors. The kingly powers are also now seen to have remained significant; George III was not seeking a return to Stuart despotism, but merely using the prerogative authority left intact by the Revolution Settlement of 1689-1701.

George II has been reassessed too. John Owen began the process in an important essay published in 1973. (1) George was depicted by Owen as a more active monarch than the traditional Whig historiography acknowledged, and as constrained more by political circumstances than by a lack of determination to assert his kingly authority. Aubrey Newman continued the theme in an inaugural lecture at the University of Leicester, published in 1988 as *The World Turned Inside Out: New Views on George II*. German scholars have also brought George more clearly into view, exploring his role as elector of Hanover as well as king of Great Britain and Ireland. Perhaps the most notable contribution has been by Uriel Dann, in his *Hannover und England 1740-60* (1986), which was translated into English in 1991.

The German context is now beginning to interest British historians. The popular appeal of both George I and George II as Protestant warrior kings has been emphasised by Hannah Smith in an important monograph based on her doctoral dissertation, *Georgian Monarchy: Politics and Culture, 1714-60* (2006). Andrew Thompson, meanwhile, has highlighted the Protestantism of the Hanoverian monarchs in his excellent *Britain, Hanover and the Protestant Interest* (2006). Nick Harding, for his part, has examined in detail the relationship between Britain and Hanover over the whole of the personal union in *Hanover and the British Empire 1700-1837* (2007). A stimulating collection of essays edited by Brendan Simms and Torsten Riotte, *The Hanoverian Dimension in British History, 1714-1837* (2007) provides further context for understanding George II and the other Hanoverian monarchs, while Simms's monumental (and beautifully written) *Three Victories and a Defeat: The Rise and Fall of the First British Empire, 1714-83* (2007) sets out the case for the centrality of Hanover and Germany generally in British strategic thinking in the 18th century.

With recent scholarly attention turning to the Hanoverians and the Hanoverian connection, Jeremy Black's new biography of George II is timely, for if the context of George's reign is now more fully understood, there has been no recent study of the life of the king himself. Black is, of course, immensely well qualified for the role of biographer of this particular monarch. He has already produced a study of *George III: America's Last King* (2006) and so is well placed to continue the process of correcting some of the flawed assumptions that persist long after the Whig historiography that created them has gone out of fashion. Black is also very well acquainted with the diplomacy of the 18th century, having published extensively on the subject over the last two decades. For the first half of the century, in particular, he must be the most well-informed and knowledgeable scholar of British foreign policy. He is, furthermore, especially strong on the German politics in which George II himself was steeped. Among his many publications in the field, Black's important study of *The Continental Commitment: Britain, Hanover, and Interventionism, 1714-93* (2005), is here distinctly relevant, exploring thoroughly, as it does, the influence of Hanover in British foreign policy and war-making.

There is, it must be said, a distinguishing feature of Black's work that sets it apart from most of the recent historiography on the Hanoverian connection. Whereas the bulk of the work on British-Hanoverian links either seeks to understand the importance of the connection without assessing its value, or suggests its benefits for Britain, Black has presented the Hanoverian dynasty, at least until George II's death in 1760, as at best a very mixed blessing. He has been openly sceptical about the value of the German connection, depicting it as a severe limitation on British foreign policy, and even as a millstone round the national neck. The ability of the French, in particular, to threaten Hanover at times of European tension has been highlighted in Black's works as a major weakness in Britain's position on the international stage.

Given his views on Hanover and British politics, it might be supposed that Black's biography of George II would paint an unfavourable picture. But this is not the case. He produces a rounded and well-balanced account. His opening chapter explores the role of monarchy in 18th-century Britain, establishing clearly its continuing importance, despite the Revolution Settlement. He then goes on to look at the Hanoverian

succession, and George's role as Prince of Wales. The tradition of Hanoverian monarchs falling out with their heirs, as Black demonstrates, began in George I's reign; the relationship between Prince George and his father was frosty at best and at times marked by bitter hostility on both sides. The next chapter attempts to paint a picture of George's realm on his ascending to the throne in 1727. The book then begins a chronological progress through the reign, breaking the narrative to consider George's character and preoccupations (chapter five), and rounding off with a look at the king's reputation among historians. In successive chapters, then, we are taken through the early years of the king's reign; his relationship with Sir Robert Walpole, first minister when George came to the throne, who eventually fell in February 1742, despite the king's wish to keep him in office; the crisis years of the War of the Austrian Succession, the Forty-Five Rebellion, and the ministerial instability of 1742-6; the dominance of the Pelhams; and George's old age, coinciding with the outbreak of a new Anglo-French conflict and involving the French invasion of Hanover. The influential role of George's wife Queen Caroline, who died in 1737, is well brought out, and there is helpful and clear coverage of the key episodes of ministerial conflict, particularly when George failed to block Pitt's entry into office, was defeated when he tried to retain the services of Carteret, and was then forced to return to the Pelham brothers after trying briefly to sustain an alternative administration in power. Yet, for all the limitations on George's freedom to choose whomsoever he wanted as ministers, it remains clear that the king was more than a puppet, to use the phrase in Black's subtitle. The views of the monarch still mattered, as witness the efforts made by his ministers to secure and retain his support, and the way in which opponents of the ministry of the day tended to look to the heir to the throne for sponsorship and support, whether that was George's son Frederick in the 1740s, or his grandson George in the late 1750s.

George II's Hanoverian predilections are fully acknowledged, though Black reflects (as he has done elsewhere) that the connection was not simply of doubtful value for Britain, but damaging for Hanover, which was exposed to attack and occupation by Britain's European enemies. The importance of the international 'Protestant Interest' to George is well established (building on the foundations provided by Andrew Thompson); George took seriously the idea of a confessional bond between Protestants in his British kingdoms and Protestants throughout Europe, especially in his native Germany. Even so, Protestant solidarity did not dictate British foreign policy and the forging of alliances. For much of his reign, George remained committed to the Catholic Habsburgs, and deeply reluctant to ally with Protestant Prussia. The military cast of George's mind is discussed at some length. He was seemingly never happier than when reviewing troops - British or Hanoverian - and took special care to make sure that their uniforms and equipment were as they should be. George was also, and hardly surprisingly, proud of his own experiences in the field, as a young man with the Hanoverian army at Oudenaarde in 1708, where he had displayed personal bravery, and as king at Dettingen in 1743, when he was present but not actively engaged. He was also a stickler for military duty. When, in 1757, his son William, duke of Cumberland, failed to defend Hanover from the French, George had no hesitation in publicly humiliating him, obliging the duke to resign his military commands.

If I may venture a criticism it is that the chapter on George's new realm works rather less well than the others. Perhaps inevitably, it consists of a rather disjointed and impressionistic tour of the British inheritance of the king, touching upon issues of interest but not expanding on them. One is left with the feeling that the chapter would have been better if it had been longer and more reflective, or had been omitted altogether. The reason for its inclusion, I suspect, has much to do with Black's target readership - or the readership that the publishers envisage. A chapter briefly sketching George's kingdom, including its cultural highlights, was presumably thought necessary to provide the background for the general reader, whom Black makes considerable efforts throughout this book to help. Terms that are familiar to specialists in the field are defined in parenthesis, making the work accessible to anyone with an interest in the subject, even if they come to it with little prior knowledge or understanding of the period.

To write a book that engages with recent scholarship, fills a gap in the literature, and yet is likely to appeal to a general readership is no mean achievement. To base it not simply on secondary and printed primary material, but also on a vast range of archival resources held in this country, Germany, Austria, France, Italy and the United States, is characteristic of Black's approach to the writing of 18th-century history. Over the

years, he has worked in countless archives across Europe and the United States, public and private, and in the process accumulated a vast treasure store of insights and fascinating details. In his commitment to the use of manuscripts, no-one, surely, can surpass him.

Professor Black is very grateful to Professor Conway for his thoughtful and interesting review of his book, and he feels that his review is absolutely fine.

Notes

1. J. Owen 'George II Reconsidered', in *Statesmen, Scholars and Merchants: Essays in 18th-Century History Presented to Dame Lucy Sutherland*, ed. A. Whiteman, J. S. Bromley and P. G. M. Dickson (Oxford, 1973). Back to (1)

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