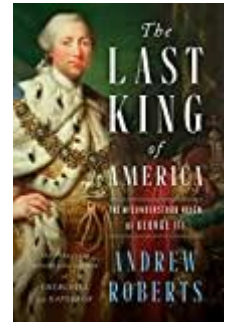


Andrew Roberts. *The Last King of America: The Misunderstood Reign of George III.*
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Few historical figures are more categorically reviled by Americans than their last monarch, King George III. His villainization in 1776 by Thomas Paine in *Common Sense* as a “royal brute” and by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence as “a prince whose character ... may define a tyrant” has lasted into the present. As Roberts points out in the introduction, even a cursory sampling of recent American media, from newspapers to the musical *Hamilton*, reveals a collective conception of George III as a despotic, bloodthirsty, dim-witted lunatic. This image stands in stark contrast to current British perceptions of the last king of America, which, since the 1972 publication of John Brooke’s *King George III*, have been largely positive. Indeed, one suspects, given its title and sympathetic treatment of the monarch, that this work is aimed especially at changing the jaundiced minds of its American readers. In that, it may well succeed. Based on an extensive source base, including nearly two hundred thousand pages of previously unpublished Georgian Papers, this monograph provides the most com-

prehensive picture of the much-maligned monarch to date, and a persuasive case for why his reign is the most misunderstood in British history.

George III, as is made convincingly clear by Roberts, was no tyrant. Neither his mother, Queen Augusta, nor his mentor, the Earl of Bute, tried to mold him into an absolutist. His own early writings on political theory reveal that his monarchic role model was William III, not Charles I. In his reign, he sought to protect the balanced government secured in the Glorious Revolution and aspired to rule as a Bolingbrokean “patriot king” guided by honor, not party. The suggestion that he sat at the head of a royal conspiracy against the ancient constitution is, in a word, “fallacious” (p. 209). Far from a supercilious brute in his royal demeanor, he displayed tremendous compassion toward his subjects, even those who tried to assassinate him. He clearly enjoyed mingling incognito with his people and took great pleasure in opportunities to be an anonymous benefactor to them.

In addition to rehabilitating George III's political character, Roberts is keen to disprove prior assertions of the king's meager intellectual abilities. He did not struggle with literacy, as is often claimed, for his exercise books demonstrate command of multiple languages by age twelve. He has been derided as a dilettante agriculturalist but was actually a very knowledgeable and successful commercial farmer. He was every bit the enlightened monarch: he acquired scientific devices for his subjects' use; patronized intellectuals such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, David Hume, and Edward Jenner; assisted in establishing the Royal Academy, and personally contributed £4,000 to the first Cook expedition to the South Pacific. Far from the dullard regularly portrayed in print and film, George III in fact possessed an inquisitive mind, with interests spanning from astronomy to agriculture.

This work's greatest strength is the moving portrait it paints of its subject. In addition to losing America, George III was a devoted son, husband, and father who experienced great personal hardship and tragedy. At twelve, he was thrust into the center of British politics at his father's unexpected death. Prince George was subsequently abused by his grandfather, George II, who obviously disliked his new heir. The current king, for example, heartlessly waited three days to prepare his deceased son's body for burial, during which time the future king was forced to smell his father's decomposing corpse. George III had to bear endless slurs on his beloved mother's character for an affair that she never had with the Earl of Bute. He married Princess Charlotte out of a sense of duty, and unlike the other Hanoverians, never took a mistress during their long marriage, which was happy until mental illness struck. He struggled to be a good father to his fifteen children, even his profligate heir, Prince George, who amassed staggering levels of debt that he routinely paid off. In 1765, George III experienced the first bout of what was later dubbed "the King's Malady," an affliction that would eventually rob him of his mental fac-

ulties. Much ink has been spilled speculating on what caused the "madness of King George." Since the late 1960s consensus has held that he suffered from porphyria. However, Roberts cites recent medical studies from 2010 and 2012 which conclude that the recorded symptoms are indicative of bipolar disorder, and his argument on this point is convincing. The relation of the king's mental decline provided here is deeply affecting. It is frankly hard not to feel sympathy for the beleaguered monarch "who knew that he was not behaving normally, and yet could not prevent it; from the very outset he was a confused and helpless spectator at his own catastrophic degeneration" (p. 505).

The one weak point of this work is in its treatment of the American Revolution. Although it is a thoroughgoing refutation of the Whig historians' estimation of George III, it thoroughly embraces their interpretation of the American Revolution as an inevitable coming-of-age event. Ignored is the recent historiography positing either institutional, ideological, or economic causes for independence, in favor of older arguments associated with salutary neglect. Many historians of early America will certainly take note of bold but unsourced statements such as "by the time of the Peace of Paris of 1763 ... some [Americans] were ready for full statehood" or that "many Patriots had indeed long wanted the thirteen colonies to become an independent nation" (pp. 107, 286). Who were these shadowy American revolutionaries quietly waiting (for decades it seems) for an opportunity to break from Britain? None are ever identified. When evaluating the colonists' motives for independence, the interpretative slant becomes downright American Tory in its cynicism. Objections to "taxation without representation" were merely disingenuous "proxy protests against British political control by a people who sensed they could now thrive as an independent country," we are told, while the Declaration's content is summarily dismissed as "simultaneously grotesquely hypocritical, illogical, mendacious and sublime" (pp.

113, 306). Nonetheless, it is hard to disagree with the conclusion that it was “partly because George was not a tyrant” that Britain lost the War of American Independence (p. 309). Perhaps if he had been willing to play the despot and pursue a ruthless scorched-earth campaign against his rebellious subjects, their revolt would not have succeeded.

Overall, this is a meaty tome worth devouring. It otherwise masterfully handles the complicated

topic of eighteenth-century British politics while brilliantly situating George III within that milieu. It is splendidly composed and deeply researched, scholarly yet accessible to a general audience, and packed with illuminating examples deftly culled from a variety of sources. In sum, readers will be hard-pressed to leave this work unconvinced of Robert’s position that George III is the most unfairly traduced sovereign in British history.

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