Kings and Aristocrats in the Age of Revolutions

When widespread food rioting broke out in central and southern England in the late summer of 1766, George III issued a royal proclamation prohibiting corn exports until Parliament had met. Although the measure gained the new king some popularity, and eased some of the distress of the sufferers, the legality of this move was questionable. The Bill of Rights forbade the enacting of law by royal authority, and all through the subsequent Parliament, MPs questioned or defended the move. For Peter Thomas, the episode reveals George III as an active monarch, extending his own royal authority for the benefit of the realm. The king’s adroitness in handling the crisis through the Privy Council alone also reflected a larger problem faced by George, continually forced to seek stability in this troublesome decade. Yet ministerial faction carried a hidden blessing: the political squabbles that George III so much detested actually seem to have given the crown extra leverage against unsteady governments. The aura of crown tyranny in the early 1760s, Thomas implies, may partially have been the inevitable result of a repeated vacuums in government.

As the final research student of Louis Namier, Thomas explores the first decade of George III’s monarchy largely through Namier’s well-known framework. Factions within court and parliament during George III’s reign reflected patronage issues, personal rivalries and loyalties, and narrowly defined constituent interests rather than deep cleavages over “party” ideas. George III: King and Politicians, 1760-1770 situates the king at the epicenter of a decade that has often been defined by either parliamentary and ministerial conflict, or by the expansion of an alternative, popular structure of politics.

The book moves through separate chapters devoted to each successive, short-lived government. The decade began with a need for George III to reign in political instability that had begun several years previously, in 1754 with the death of Henry Pelham. It ended with public furore over the agitator John Wilkes, and the rise to prime minister of the political survivor Lord North. With North’s appointment, a decade of administrative chaos (no government between 1760 and 1770 lasted much beyond two years) was replaced by one of relative stability. From 1770, the government could focus on policy-making rather than surviving; North would remain prime minister until the spring of 1782.

Thomas’s scholarly framework results in a finely detailed, internal analysis of the calculus of court, cabinet,
and parliamentary maneuvers. The author is reluctant to give causal force to ideas, but his evidence often bears out a central claim: George III was determined to "appoint ministers in disregard of the political connections in Parliament" (p. 233). Thomas shows, for example, that the king’s differences with William Pitt (the Elder) reflected, in large measure, Pitt’s own duplicity with regard to ministerial appointments. On July 7, 1766, the king met with Pitt about forming a new government to replace the Rockinghamites. Those around the king noted that both were in agreement: Pitt wanted a ministry as "the King would choose" (p. 148). The ensuing Chatham ministry has often been written about as if it actually were some meaningful attempt at non-party government, or in Edmund Burke’s less charitable terms, "a tessellated pavement without cement … utterly unsafe to touch and unsure to stand on."[1] Thomas, with his sharp sense of faction in this decade, destroys the notion that this was an experiment in factionless ministry. Pitt’s government, far from being non-party, was "nothing of the kind" (p. 148). Pitt made no significant overtures to the other factions in Parliament, beyond a small rump of Rockingham’s followers.

In some ways, the structure of the book detracts from the claim about George III’s activism. Most discussions of George III’s political efforts occur in a paragraph or two at the beginning and end of each chapter, after which each ministry is treated with relatively little reference to George III’s subsequent involvement with it. In part, this reflects the author’s assertion that it was "never his [the king’s] intention to impose measures as well as men" (p. 4). With regard to the first part of the book’s thesis, that high politics in the 1760s was driven by shifting faction rather than party ideas, Thomas succeeds very well. But with regard to the second part of the thesis, that faction gave George increased room for actual power, the book is less convincing. In much of the book, George III is a curiously ephemeral figure. He has even disappeared from the index. Missing, too, is a contextualization of government within the broader realm of politics that has received so much attention since John Brewer’s Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III, almost three decades ago, or more recent work by scholars such as Nicholas Rogers.[2] Thomas very briefly discusses that work in chapter 1, "The Parameters of Politics," before dismissing its possible impact on high politics: "Popular politics was the politics of impotence" (p. 21). This concentration on inner dynamics is, of course, part of the Namierite emphasis: the wide net is traded for a microscope. The book is a masterful explanation of the shifts in ministerial strength during the 1760s. The wealth of archival material brought to bear here goes far beyond older accounts such as that by Richard Pares. Moreover, within his purposefully adopted analytical restrictions, Thomas has written a very deeply researched (if internal) account of parliamentary faction in the 1760s, and to a slightly lesser extent, royal involvement in government.[3]

If political ideology was of minor influence in the 1760s, by the 1790s that was no longer the case. David Wilkinson’s fine study of the Duke of Portland bears this out, even if Portland is a curious figure behind which to make such a claim: he was so notoriously noncommittal at times that one historian wrote that his "natural response to crisis … was to hope that if he did nothing it would go away."[4] Often, he did just that.

But Portland certainly merits a book. He was twice prime minister, in 1783, and then again from 1807-09. Portland was also—briefly—Lord Lieutenant of Ireland (1782), as well as Home Secretary for much of the 1790s. Despite Portland’s near-continual holding of high office, he only rarely made speeches. He was often a literal reactionary, frequently exerting influence only in reaction to the prior maneuvers of others. A necessarily public figure, he had a profound aversion to publicity. In the early 1790s, when he finked out of a much-anticipated speech in Lords, a contemporary complained that Portland froze up "as fixed as the lady in Comus," and afterwards looked "like [our son] Johnny when he has has an accident in his breeches" (p. 29). This reticence may explain why Portland has had no modern biography. His diffidence has been infectious.

The book’s major contribution lies in its treatment of Portland’s role as Home Secretary from 1794 until 1801. The Duke played a key role in the diminution of the Whigs. By the end of 1792, he felt strongly enough about domestic security to actually stand up in Lords and throw support to the government over the controversial Alien Bill—a program that would ratchet up domestic espionage. (Unlike Burke in Commons, Portland did not brandish and hurl a dagger to drive his point home—even to contemplate such a performance would likely have frozen his blood.)[5] But Portland was also characteristically ambivalent, or, in this context, careful. He reminded all that his support was no measure of general confidence in the ministry. Over the course of the next year, he tried on several occasions, through conferences, personal appeals, and political pressure, to find ways to mitigate the fragmentation of the Whigs. It was only after the exe-
cution of Louis Capet and the ensuing, worsening, military conflict throughout the summer and fall of 1793 that Portland came to view the splitting of the Whigs as unavoidable. He broke publicly from Charles James Fox in January 1794; in mid-May he joined the Committee of Secrecy in Lords to review collected evidence against the recently arrested “British Jacobins.” By mid-July, Portland had joined what Pitt called “one great family ... for the suppression of Jacobinism” (p. 105).

As Home Secretary, Portland was the main voice of the government in communicating with local elites and officials. In office, Portland was a transformed and energetic figure, and he transformed the office as well: “memoranda in his own hand occur frequently on incoming correspondence, and the Duke rarely complained about his workload” (p. 108). That workload was substantial, in volume and in stakes. The backdrop was, of course, the French Revolution, the war, the economy, and the anxiety over domestic political activity. Wilkinson’s insightful discussion of Portland’s response to the grain crises of 1795-96 and 1800-01 should thus be read by anyone interested in the British state’s response to dearth. For example, the author convincingly teases out the economic arguments in Portland’s communications to various provincial elites, and how such theories were invoked to justify the repression of unrest. Portland’s communiqués to local elites were hardly intellectually innovative. For the most part they reflected a liberal faith in the market, a paternalist emphasis on private charity, and an unbending refusal to tolerate occasions when crowd behavior revealed the paucity and ineffectiveness of such practices. In short, Portland’s attitude towards public provision was “soup kitchens and cavalry” (p. 113). Despite the lack of political imagination Portland revealed in dealing with relief, this section of the book gives the reader real insight into Portland’s actual ideas—a good thing, considering how few he publicly announced.

During such shortages, the government and very many local elites feared that the popular classes would join their immediate grievances over subsistence with the political ones being espoused by British radicals and on-again/off-again by some within the Fox camp, such as Charles Grey, Thomas Sheridan, or sometimes Fox himself. British radicals were cannily aware of this fear, and played a dangerous game in seeking to use it to advance their own political causes. The Duke had joined the government as ministers began to assess how to contain “democratic treason,” as members of the popular classes espoused ideas of popular sovereignty that were antithetical to George III’s own sovereignty. Wilkinson’s discussion of Portland’s dealings with domestic and Irish sedition are thus of considerable interest. As Home Secretary, Portland was at the center of the state’s apprehension of political unrest. Particularly valuable is the new and needed material Wilkinson brings into the discussion of the British state’s internal espionage mechanisms. Portland had supported the establishment of the Alien Office, and as Home Secretary, he oversaw its expansion. By the late 1790s, the office was the main clearinghouse for the collection of domestic intelligence. Beginning in 1797, in the context of naval mutinies at Nore and Spithead, and then the Irish Rebellion the following year, the Alien Office was re-organized and its budget tripled.

Between domestic agitation in Ireland and Scotland, as well as in England, and war with a foreign republican foe that made economic distress almost endemic at times, the late 1790s were a period of acute governmental anxiety about revolution. A political chameleon for much of his career, often a reactionary in terms of his personal initiative, war and fear of the popular classes increasingly made Portland a reactionary in the usual sense of the term, embracing Toryism “in all but name” (p. 170). This was a common philosophical trajectory for many Britons during the age of revolutions, but some people’s political education mattered more than others. Wilkinson’s book makes clear that Portland played “an important role in the survival of the unreformed British system” (p. 136).

Portland died on October 30, 1809, shortly after a disastrous second tenure as prime minister. By the time of his death, Portland’s guiding principles, as Wilkinson relates, were “loyalty to the crown and resistance to reform” (p. 170). The previous day at Windsor, the royal object of this affection made one of his own final public appearances in what was the beginning of the fiftieth year of his reign. The Jubilee year was marked by a wealth of projects and proclamations, including a massive equestrian George—320 feet by 280 feet—carved into the white chalk above the resort at Weymouth.

A large figure. Historians know a lot about George III. But as G. M. Ditchfield notes, previous works have marginalized the king as a player in wider European politics, and have treated only in a minor way his role as head of the Church of England. Since significant, recent academic work has emphasized the importance of religion and the European continental role of eighteenth-century Britain, Ditchfield argues that the time is right for a reassessment of George III that takes those interpretive developments on board. It is a convincing position. The six chapters of George III: An Essay in Monarchy dis-
cuss the historical reputation of the king from 1760 to the present, his impact on European affairs, his involvement in domestic high politics, his religious ideas and actions as head of the state church, his changing views of empire, and the crown’s role in managing the public image of the king.

Ditchfield’s chapters on George III and high politics map out a position widely similar to that of Peter Thomas: George’s direct interventions in decision-making were less instances of some overall program to advance a stronger crown, and more contingent reactions to developments, driven by a personal sense of the monarch’s right and duty to intervene. Moreover, Ditchfield makes the unsurprising, but critical, point that those who stress the crown’s activism from the accession of George III have often neglected evidence that points in the other direction. George III “had no military or diplomatic experience, possessed no linguistic skills superior to those of his ministers, was (in 1760) ill-informed about and unsympathetic towards the electorate of Hanover and lacked George II’s authority over conduct of foreign policy, and, at least to begin with, favoured a withdrawal from, rather than a deeper engagement with, the politics of continental Europe” (p. 53). Any one of these factors would have resulted in a diminution of the crown’s authority; together, they added up to a significant reduction in the relative power of crown versus parliament. Overall, in keeping with revisionist interpretations of eighteenth-century Britain, Ditchfield argues for a greater degree of continuity with previous reigns than has been the case.

Although he came to power rather weak in some areas, George III underwent considerable changes during his reign. In a judicious chapter on George III as a European monarch, Ditchfield notes that George III’s attitude towards the Hanoverian territories shifted over time, in part due to the loss of the American colonies, and in part due to the very usefulness the territories gave him as a German ruler treating with other German rulers. When George III supported a German league to counter Austrian ambitions and yet insisted that this did not mean an anti-Austrian policy by Britain, this revealed the king’s independent stance as a continental sovereign. Although the F-rstenbund effort surprised servants and advisors of George III in showing that the king had quite distinct policy conceptions of his domestic and continental roles, that awareness itself marks a continuity with George III’s predecessors.

The continuity interpretation informs the most important chapter in the book, one discussing George III’s religious notions. Ditchfield argues that despite his opposition to emancipation in 1800, the king was far less a hothead with regards to Catholicism than the majority of his subjects. While the king was a staunch Anglican, his position with regard to Catholicism was probably shaded by a growing awareness that from 1745, Catholics no longer posed a serious threat to the settlement of 1689 or to the state itself. He accepted measures passed during the American Revolution that were favorable to Catholics, such as limited Relief Acts in Ireland and England during the 1770s that removed some property-owning and education restrictions. George III also supported Hobart’s Act, passed by the Irish Parliament in 1793, which gave the vote to some Catholic freeholders. However, George’s approach to Protestant Dissent was more circumspect. From the 1780s, and increasingly in the 1790s, Dissent more and more intertwined with the political anathema of Parliamentary reform. Many Dissenters had shown considerable sympathy to the American cause during that revolution. During the French Revolution, the king was unsupportive of efforts to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts. In a statement that could be applied to political as well as religious rights, Ditchfield writes that George III “regarded religious toleration as a privilege worthy of gratitude on the part of its recipients, rather than a right to be demanded” (p. 107)—an Anglican “via media” that also reflects the influence of recent revisionist interpretations of the confessional state, while not going as far as they in announcing a British ancien régime.

The end of the old regime in France encouraged new cultural emphases in the portrayal of the monarchy.[7] By the first decades of the nineteenth century, the crown itself had undergone a cultural transformation. With the mass politicization of the popular classes occasioned by both radicals and conservatives during the pamphlet wars of the 1790s, the crown increasingly became a locus of popular identity and attachment to the British state.[8] The jacket of Ditchfield’s book registers this political mobilization of the king’s image. A Gillray cartoon from 1803 shows a tiny Napoleon—his own head afire with invasive zeal—standing on the head of a rouged Marianne, as she wades onto the British shore, her liberty bonnet in hand. But sturdy giant King George waits, with his candle-snuffer (labeled “The British Constitution”) at the ready. No need to fear.

Ditchfield’s final chapter examines the place of George’s own actions in this image-making project. Was the shift to a popular symbol a conscious effort, or more the effect of broader developments? Ditchfield agrees
with Marilyn Morris that they resulted from changes in political culture in Britain and Europe rather than some masterful organization of popular sentiment. The social and political tumult of the Revolution in France made the order and apparent strength of Britain’s social and political mechanism deeply attractive, particularly to those who stood to lose the most in a revolution—the owners of property and holders of privilege. George III, by the 1790s already in a long reign, himself pious in a not especially reflective way, formed a perfect symbolic mirror-image of French “disorder.”

By now, this is not an especially new argument, but Ditchfield has given it added armor by going through the king’s own response to the changing political contexts that elevated him to an archetype. Ditchfield is aware of the dangers of assuming a monolithic quality to this popularity. His discussions of popular disaffection, while brief, are models of incisive and careful explanation. Ditchfield could address more fully how, in instances such as the attack on the king in the fall of 1795, such disaffection was tied to the king’s limited attention to death.[10] But overall, the chapter, like much of the book, is an incisive and judicious intervention in the nature of the pre-reform British state, one that helps move that debate beyond an artificial revisionist/antirevisionist polarity.

Notes


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