PATRIOTISM AND POETRY
IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

The poetry of the mid and late eighteenth century has long been regarded as primarily private and apolitical; in this wide-ranging study, Dustin Griffin argues that in fact the poets of the period were addressing the great issues of national life – rebellion at home, imperial wars abroad, an expanding commercial empire, an emerging new “British” national identity. Taking up the topic of patriotic verse, Griffin shows that the poets, like many contemporary essayists, sermon writers, and political journalists, were engaged in the century-long debate about the nature of “true patriotism.” Griffin argues that canonical figures – James Thomson, William Collins, Thomas Gray, Christopher Smart, Oliver Goldsmith, William Cowper – along with less canonical writers such as Mark Akenside, John Dyer, and Ann Yearsley ask how poets might serve and even save their country, and take their place in a broader tradition of patriotic verse.

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DUSTIN GRIFFIN
To the memory of my father
W. L. Hadley Griffin (1918–1997),
who served his country and his city
Of thee more worthy were the task, to raise
A lasting Column to thy Country’s praise;
To sing the land, which yet alone can boast
That Liberty corrupted Rome has lost.

George Lord Lyttelton, *Epistle to Mr. Pope* (1730)

Lo! patriots, heroes, sages crowd to birth:
And bards to sing them in immortal verse!

James Thomson, from *Alfred. A Masque* (1740)

me, with Britains Glory fir’d,
Me, far from meaner Care or meaner Song,
Snatch to the Holy Hill of Spotless Bay,
My Countrys Poet, to record her Fame.

Alexander Pope, “Fragment of Brutus, an Epic” (1743)
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Acknowledgments

For reading chapters of this book in draft, I thank Linda Colley, Robin Dix, Roger Lonsdale, James Sambrook, Mary Waldron, Richard Wendorf, and especially Betty Rizzo. The two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press made very helpful comments, both large and small. For listening to a paper drawn from chapter 2, thanks to the Eighteenth Century Club in the Department of English at New York University. For generously replying to inquiries, I thank Rob Hume and Kit Hume, Michael Schwartz, and Diane Dugaw, and especially Susan Goulding. For bibliographical suggestions, thanks to Manuel Schonhorn.

I also thank the staffs of the several research libraries in which I have worked: the New York Public Library, the British Library, Bobst Library at New York University, and Butler Library at Columbia University. Illustrations are reproduced with the permission of the British Library, the British Museum, and the Pierpont Morgan Library.
Abbreviations

BL  British Library
BM  British Museum
DNB  Dictionary of National Biography
ECS  Eighteenth Century Studies
ELH  English Literary History
JEGP  Journal of English and Germanic Philology
OED  Oxford English Dictionary
PMLA  Publications of the Modern Language Association
SEL  Studies in English Literature