INTRODUCTION

The Regency Crisis of 1788 is frequently regarded as a barren and futile episode in party warfare, complicated perhaps by wearisome discussions on constitutional technicalities, but essentially sterile nevertheless. Yet, over twenty years later, the precedents of 1788 were followed when George III went mad for the last time, and it is reasonable to suggest that whatever the political situation a genuine predicament was created by the incapacity of the King. Although Pitt is often depicted as the defender of Parliamentary privilege, and Fox as the apologist of hereditary right, these attitudes were adopted only after a prolonged period of uncertainty on both sides. Amongst the Opposition there was never general agreement, either on the constitutional significance of the crisis, or on the political tactics most appropriate in a confused and perplexing situation. So much turned on the condition of the King, that the opinions of the doctors were throughout a major factor governing political conduct. The mingling of constitutional interpretations and party motives forms one of the most fascinating aspects of the contest between Pitt and Fox, and, if Lecky could speak in terms of the inversion of roles by Tory and Whig in 1788, that inversion was characterised by doubts, differences of opinion and changes of plan, abortive negotiations and daily anxiety. With the exception of Thurlow, the Cabinet presents a united front, at least from the beginning of December 1788, but the devious twists of policy on the part of the Opposition, heightened as they were by personal feuds, thwarted ambitions, and critical differences of opinion between Fox and Burke, Loughborough and Sheridan, foreshadow the break-up of the party in the 1790’s. To follow the conduct of the Opposition from day to day, in the light of popular
rumour, Parliamentary debate, and schemes of negotiation, is to experience something of the uncertainty, excitement, and tension, which, for Government and Opposition alike, made the winter of 1788–9 a time of scarcely relieved and almost unbearable strain. Until a very late stage in the crisis expectations were high, and yet subject to constant fluctuation as the latest bulletins arrived from Kew.

Much of the controversy seems petty, distressingly capricious, and irritatingly wilful, but few courtesies can be expected in a struggle for power. Both Pitt and Fox knew they were fighting for their future; and for the Whig party, living as they were on myths and memories from the past, it seemed as if their very existence as a party was at stake. In circumstances of peculiar difficulty they sought to recover their cohesion and sense of purpose, and if they failed in this task they did so because the outcome of the contest depended on technicalities of constitutional law and practice which, with two notable exceptions, they underestimated and misunderstood throughout the crisis. The poverty of their ideas intensified their constant and embarrassing contradictions in debate, their suspicion of each other’s motives, their neurotic preoccupation with the satisfaction of their own desires and private ambitions. They were unprepared for the demands which the King’s illness laid upon them, and it was no accident that confident hopes and gleeful anticipations of office should wither—that they should be replaced by recrimination, bitterness, and distrust.

It is possible, therefore, to see the crisis of 1788 principally in terms of the decline of the Whig party; a party which even in its moments of degradation appealed to memories of Rockingham and the American War—to an era which became progressively more glorious as the present became more frustrating. It was cruelly ironic that no one anticipated, when the disturbing rumours of the King’s behaviour at Windsor inspired amateur prophets to discern the signs of the times, that the result of
INTRODUCTION

George III’s lunacy would be the discomfort rather than the triumph of the Whigs. And, since the King’s illness thrust both the Ministry and the Opposition into a situation fraught with dilemmas and bristling with problems, it is necessary to give some account of the onset and course of the indisposition of the King.
CHAPTER I

THE KING’S ILLNESS AND THE CRISIS TO 10 DECEMBER

(i)

In the autumn of 1788 the health of King George III was the subject for persistent speculation on the part of the public. Curiosity was heightened by uncertainty, and when, on the last day of October, the King failed to come to town as expected, gossip gave way to anxiety, despite assurances that the King’s disorder, which was said to be of a dropsical tendency, was ‘by no means of the alarming kind’. Soon it became impossible to disguise the unpleasant facts any longer, even if a combination of discretion and ignorance distorted them in confusion and contradiction. Some called the royal malady water on the brain; others an ossification of the membrane; but by 7 November it was common knowledge that the King was dangerously ill, and Mr Crawford, writing to the Duchess of Devonshire, told her of his own suspicions: ‘My opinion, from all the different accounts I have heard, is that the humour to which his whole family is subject has fallen upon his brain, and that nothing will save him except an eruption upon his skin.’

On the same day Payne asked Lord Loughborough for advice, on behalf of the Prince of Wales, describing the situation at Windsor as ‘very alarming’, and holding out the most gloomy prospect for the King:

. . . I fear his dissolution is almost the best that can be hoped. He has at present, with a more considerable degree of wandering, a most violent heat, accompanied at the same time with a great chillness: every moment we fear something dreadful. The next day the illness was diagnosed as an ‘absolute mania, distinct from and wholly unconnected with fever’, and for several
THE KING'S ILLNESS

days the city was full of rumours that the King was dead or dying, the stocks falling by two per cent as a result.¹ These fears were finally dispelled, but the ugly truth could not be denied. The King was mad, and a mad King meant a Regency:

The malady with which his Majesty is afflicted is of such a nature—that the Medical Gentlemen have their doubts as to future consequences, and if the King continues a few days longer in his present Situation a Regency will be appointed; at the head of which will be his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.²

The King had foreseen the onset of his illness. On 3 November he had confessed his fears to the Duke of York, exclaiming 'I wish to God I might die, for I am going to be mad!', and within the next few days his behaviour became more disturbing, confirming his premonitions. He complained of being 'all at once' an old man, and on another occasion attacked the Prince of Wales without provocation, battering his head against the wall. It was said that he had descended from his coach in Windsor Great Park, only to shake hands with an oak tree, under the delusion that he was addressing the King of Prussia.³ His sleep was disturbed and he suffered from intermittent fever. He had little thirst and no appetite, and complained of giddiness and confused vision. Even when his fever abated he remained in a state of mental incoherence. Sometimes he talked quietly to himself in an apparently contented fashion; at other times he was abusive and violent. Though he was capable of acuteness and precision, for the most part he babbled away to his pages in vigorous confusion, and on most occasions his conversation was desultory.⁴

Contemporaries were shocked and surprised, but the catastrophe had been approaching throughout the summer. The King had suffered from persistent bilious attacks from the middle of June, and, whilst taking the waters at Cheltenham, he had dieted on mutton, potatoes, and port, as well as going out riding for exercise. Some improvement had resulted, but distressing symptoms reappeared in October. On the 20th, George wrote to Pitt,
THE REGENCY CRISIS AND THE WHIGS

excusing his delay in answering correspondence on grounds of poor health, and confessing that he was ‘not quite in a situation to write at present’. He meandered on about the American War—‘that most justifiable war any country ever waged’—and mingled references to Don Quixote and his early life with miscellaneous political reflections.¹ His letter bore clear indications of his disturbed state. Sir George Baker, his physician, attended him daily, and the King complained to him of acute pains in the pit of his stomach. He was also troubled with rheumatism in his limbs, and cramp in the muscles of his legs. On successive days both his feet were swollen, and he had also been afflicted with a rash.² When these symptoms eased others took their place. It was necessary to give the King doses of purgative, and when Baker visited his patient on the afternoon of 22 October, he was received ‘in a most unusual manner’:

The look of his eyes, the tone of his voice, every gesture and his whole deportment represented a person in the most furious passion of anger. ‘One medicine had been too powerful; another had only teased him without effect. The importation of Senna ought to be prohibited, and he would give orders that in future it shall never be given to any of the royal family.’³ Baker was detained for three and a half hours by the frequent repetition of similar language, and on his return to London he wrote a hasty note to Pitt, telling him that he had left the King in a condition ‘nearly bordering on delirium’. In the evening Pitt called on Baker and received a full description of the King’s condition.⁴

During the following two days there was some improvement. The King seemed calm, composed, and free from fever, and though he slept badly on the night of 23 October his pulse remained quiet. He was, however, languid, weak, slightly lame, and troubled at the thought of the levee at St James’s on 24 October; yet, with characteristic courage and devotion to what he considered his duty, he attended the function, in an attempt, so he told Pitt, ‘to stop further lies and any fall of the stocks’.⁵ But
THE KING’S ILLNESS

his appearance only heightened the rumours. Sir Gilbert Elliot told his wife that the King was ‘certainly in a bad state of health’, though he himself did not think it anything ‘material’.¹ No one really knew what the trouble was. It had been suggested that the King was suffering from unformed gout, but on 29 October Burke revealed to Elliot that he had been in extreme danger during his illness, spasms in his stomach being of so violent a nature as to leave him speechless for an hour and a half. He also claimed that the secrecy which had surrounded the King’s retreat to Cheltenham during the summer confirmed that the illness had been much more serious than had been disclosed. Although he neglected to give Elliot the authority on which he had his information, Burke left him under no doubt of his own conviction that it was authentic.²

What transformed a series of bilious and muscular disorders into madness remains a mystery. Contemporaries sought an explanation for the King’s collapse in chills, carelessness, and an unfortunate combination of minor ailments. He had committed the ‘great imprudence’ of remaining for a whole day in wet stockings. By drinking cold water and eating a pear he had accentuated his indigestion, driving the humour which had first showed itself in his legs into his bowels. The necessary medicines had expelled the disorder into the King’s brain and the doctors were later to attempt to lure the humour back into his legs by the use of warm baths and the application of poultices. Other suggestions were that the King’s breakdown had been precipitated by his annoyance at the endeavour of the Duke of York to introduce Turkish instruments into the Band of Guards, and by a discussion over the dinner table on 5 November on the subject of murder.³ All this seems inadequate.

In his life George III was attacked by insanity on five occasions—in 1765, 1788, 1801, 1804, and 1810—and it is possible to discern a weakness in his heredity on his mother’s side. An uncle was suspected of suicide, and two cousins were probably
schizophrenic. George himself was a manic-depressive, a form of madness which, though primarily a disturbance in mood rather than mentation, has a strong tendency to recur. The constant changes in temper which were so characteristic of the King’s illness, and which puzzled his doctors and baffled his contemporaries, would seem to indicate that form of insanity. At times the King was sunk in listless depression, only to exchange that attitude for excited vehemence. Although he could display sound sense and wit, as when he reminded Willis that if Christ went about healing the sick he did not get £700 a year for doing so, there were other days when the King was incapable of focusing his thoughts, when he imagined that London was under water, and when he busied himself with writing letters to foreign courts on fictitious issues. Stories were told of him showing his backside to his attendants to prove that he was not suffering from gout; of him pulling off Baker’s wig, and thrusting the doctor to his knees to look at the stars. It was even claimed that the King had hoodwinked Baker into releasing him from his strait-jacket, only to fell him with a savage buffet on the ear, the contents of the royal chamber pot being emptied over the prostrate physician. Other accounts had George lavishing dignities on pages and gentlemen of the bedchamber, neglecting to shave, and raving against the Queen. Alleged incidents at Cheltenham were cited as evidence of the approaching breakdown: the King had run a race with a horse, and had asked a Mr Clements if he was the man who ran away with Lady Sarah Bunbury when he was in love with her.¹

Disillusionment and overwork also helped to bring about the King’s collapse. George III was an intensely conscientious monarch, applying himself to his duties with unrelenting diligence. By toil and application he had made himself master of the intricacies of government, and conscious as he was of the immense responsibilities laid upon him by Providence, and of his own unworthiness to bear them, he strove to supply through
THE KING’S ILLNESS

painstaking and devoted labour what he lacked in genius and imagination. But the years had taken their toll. Filled with a high conviction of his calling, and inspired by lofty ideals concerning the privileges and duties of kingship, he had seen his dreams shattered and his ideals mutilated in the cruel world of politics. Deficient in human sympathy and understanding, and seeing the world exclusively in terms of his own fervently held values, his disillusionment was all the more bitter and hard to sustain. Honest, industrious, and upright, but narrow and self-righteous, he blamed others for the inner frustration which clouded his life. He came to pride himself on his virtues, thanking heaven that his morals and way of life ‘but little resembled those too prevalent in the present age’.

The age was profligate, depraved, characterised by knavery, indolence, and cowardice. And, as his children grew up, their conduct added the raw pangs of paternal disappointment to the anxieties of public life. George had sought to make his children useful examples, ‘worthy of imitation’, but, whilst his daughters were (in their father’s phrase) ‘all Cordelias’, his sons were selfish, ungrateful, extravagant in their disobedience, and ostentatious in the irresponsible expression of their whims. The Prince of Wales led a life of elegant dissipation, and by his devotion to Charles James Fox he shocked his father’s sense of morality and provoked his deepest political prejudices. Horror at his son’s private life was mingled with abhorrence of his political conduct, and Fox became doubly hateful, as the malignant seducer of the Prince, as well as an unscrupulous and ambitious politician. When the Duke of York, the King’s favourite son, returned from the Continent in 1787 his father saw his adored Frederick submit to the contagious charms of Carlton House, and in his ravings the cruel agony inflicted by the Duke’s desertion found its outlet. As a father the King had been well-meaning but rigid, a perplexing mixture of affection and severity, and he felt his family disappointments keenly. The stresses on his mind were great, and in the absence of any acute
THE REGENCY CRISIS AND THE WHIGS

political crisis in the autumn of 1788 the behaviour of his sons must be considered one of the decisive factors in precipitating his mental collapse.

Other elements in George’s private life were seized on by the public. He had always been frugal, dieting carefully and exercising regularly in an effort to escape the hereditary corpulence which he had seen swamp his uncle, the Duke of Cumberland. One newspaper declared that the King’s diet and ferocious devotion to exercise were the real causes of the trouble:

The abstemious system which his Majesty has invariably pursued, is thought to have occasioned his present complaint. Opposite causes sometimes produce a similar effect; and living too freely is not more prejudicial to health than too abstemious. The King throughout his whole life has used a great deal of exercise both on foot and horseback; but he did not proportion the use of wine to his exercise, which when used to a great degree, must exhaust Nature instead of refreshing her.¹

(ii)

Bewilderment over the King’s illness was paralleled by uncertainty as to its political implications. A mad King posed new problems, and, in English history, regencies were associated with strife, instability, and the worst excesses of faction. The fate of Edward II, the Wars of the Roses, the reigns of Edward V and Edward VI, did not constitute a happy list of precedents, and more recently the inveterate jealousy between Hanoverian father and son had contributed to the distaste which was felt for princely ambition and impatience, except amongst those politicians who saw in the heir to the throne the best hope for their advancement. More serious still the legal position was obscure. Was madness equivalent to any other temporary incapacity? Or to the absence of a monarch? Or to a minority, or even to a demise of the Crown? These difficult and tangled issues were not to be settled in an atmosphere of legal calm and precision. Political interests, long frustrated hopes, repressed ambitions,