This book is the first to look at the aristocratic adoption of Roman ideals in eighteenth-century English culture and thought. Philip Ayres shows how, in the century following the Revolution of 1688, the ruling class promoted – by way of its patronage – a classical frame of mind embracing all the arts, on the foundations of ‘liberty’ and ‘civic virtue’. The historical fact of a Roman Britain lent the endeavour an added authenticity, and it was partly out of an attachment to that past that a new ‘Roman’ present was constructed by Lord Burlington and his circle. Ayres’s study shows that the propensity to adopt the self-image of virtuous Romans was the attempt of a newly empowered oligarchy to dignify and vindicate itself by association with an idealised image of republican Rome. This sense of affinity with the ideals of the free Roman Republic gave British classicism an authenticity impossible under the various versions of absolutism on the continent. Its discourse precluded any more thorough-going revolution by suggesting that Britain’s liberty had been won by an ‘oligarchy of virtue’ which now defended, defined and emblematised the nation.
CLASSICAL CULTURE AND THE IDEA OF ROME IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND
CLASSICAL CULTURE
AND THE IDEA OF ROME
IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

Philip Ayres
For Martin Battestin
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Preface

This study examines the propensity of the English aristocracy and gentry to image themselves as virtuous Romans in the century following the Revolution settlement of 1688–9. It interprets this activity as the conscious effort of a newly empowered oligarchy to dignify and thereby vindicate itself and the recently established principles of constitutional liberty through association with an idealised image of republican Rome. Of course English liberty also had a strong Gothic heritage which many preferred to emphasise and play off against the classical, and which it is not my concern to discount. It is simply not the focus of this book, which is about the use of classical and particularly Roman models, the manner of that use and the reasons for it. It is addressed to history-of-ideas and cultural history scholars in the eighteenth-century area, but I hope it will also be of interest to specialists in the categories it brings within its synthesis.

In the opening chapters the increased use of Roman analogies after 1688 is explained in terms of historical process and political self-interest, including the need to close off, rhetorically and iconographically, the possibility of any more thorough-going revolution. The book thus proposes a strong motivation for the phenomenon it analyses. It brings together for the first time a wide range of material (some of it, within particular categories like the fine arts, previously subjected to analysis by others, though not from this point of view), and reveals its inter-relatedness as a collaborative discourse of philosophy, aesthetics, archaeology, architecture, literature and politics, all referred back to the principles of the Revolution and the self-interest of the oligarchy – an ‘oligarchy of virtue’.
The most cursory examination of the material reveals the depth of the British aristocracy’s attachment to the values of classical antiquity and especially the pre-Augustan Roman polity (I avoid the contentious term ‘Augustan England’). This attachment was not uncritical, and as recent studies have shown, a growing British nationalism liked to stress the superiority of the present political order to that of classical precedents. At the same time, the sense of considerable political affinity with the ideals of the free Roman Republic gives British classicism a cultural authenticity impossible under any of the continental absolutisms – for example in Bourbon France.

It was the aristocracy, Whig and Tory alike, and to a lesser extent the gentry, who were the chief beneficiaries of 1688. As the monarchy’s powers and privileges were diminished, theirs proportionately grew. Anxious for legitimacy, they assumed for themselves the defining and safe-keeping of the principles of political liberty and civic virtue more or less as these had been understood by the Roman-republican senatorial oligarchy. In so doing, they clearly distinguished themselves from the more obviously self-indulgent and less self-consciously virtuous aristocracy under Charles II and James II. This entailed a switch in mores as dramatic as that from Regency to Victorian. The British aristocracy of the eighteenth century proclaimed the classical principles of liberty and virtue in their demeanour, their speeches, their busts and statues, houses and gardens. Even Horace Walpole is not altogether immune from the tendency, though he resisted classical analogies and did so much to revive the Gothic.

Nostalgia for antiquity is inseparable from a sense of estrangement from it, and the eighteenth century’s identification with the past is subtle and complex in consequence. Moreover we are dealing here not so much with cultural genuflexion as with self-interest. The settlement of 1688 had to be secured from the possibility of a more thorough-going revolution and from Jacobite attempts to restore the old Stuart order. Both were at least rhetorically foreclosed by the claim that the liberty of the entire nation had already been won by those, Whig or Tory, Government or Parliamentary Opposition, who now defended, defined and emblematised the free state – and castigated each other in its name. On the founda-
tion of 'liberty' and 'civic virtue' this class, by way of its patronage, promoted a discourse embracing all the arts. The historical fact of a Roman Britain lent that discourse added authenticity, and it was in large part out of an attachment to Britain's Roman past that a new Roman present was physically constructed by Burlington and his circle. A small minority among the cultural elite came to believe they shared more ground with philosophers like Cicero than with the credal variety of Christianity. Classical nostalgia (supplemented in Shaftesbury by a strong dose of cultural anti-semitism) is the neglected core of English freethinking.

A cynic might see this 'civic' classicism as merely extravagance with a good conscience and on a scale never before witnessed in England, the enjoyment of a social and intellectual exclusivity tighter than ever, all reinforced by an esoteric and privileging frame of mind. It would not be difficult to show that old-fashioned 'hospitality' and mutual-dependency relations, celebrated in seventeenth-century country-house poems like Jonson's or Marvell's, were less evident in eighteenth-century Palladian villas and verse-celebrations of them. In their tighter exclusivity the new villas were akin to their Roman antecedents. Tenants were turned out and villages demolished to create the English landscape garden. The only limits to self-indulgence were those imposed by a very expensive rule of taste which Shaftesbury, in proposing it, had specifically identified with the antique, with political liberty and civic virtue, and necessarily with the rich. What justified 'civic' classicism was its success in anchoring the principle of political liberty deep within the nation's culture and, by way of the plastic arts, in giving civic values visible form.

In its structure the present work follows a logical order. The first chapter describes the historical and political context for Roman self-imaging in eighteenth-century England (some attention is also given here and subsequently to Scotland), underlines the motive of self-interest in the oligarchy as defenders of classically referred liberty and civic virtue, and offers a wide range of examples of the vogue as well as studies in the uses of relevant classical personae in Pope, Swift, Johnson, Fielding and, at greater length, in Thomson and Burke. The second chapter then looks at the ways in which the concepts of liberty and civic virtue, classically referred, were given visible form. The third explores the golden age of
Romano-British archaeology and locates this in relation to the themes of the first two chapters. It is the central chapter because the archaeologists turned illusion into reality by uncovering and describing a tangible Roman Britain to complement and ‘verify’ the frame of mind the book has previously described and analysed. The fourth chapter logically follows from the third, showing how a new ‘Roman Britain’ was constructed by the oligarchy alongside the remains of the old. The final chapter demonstrates the effect of classical sensibility on freethinking, and it should be stressed that the examples lie beyond the mainstream.

In the course of this study I have enjoyed the help of a variety of individuals and institutions. His Grace the Duke of Devonshire kindly permitted me to consult Burlington’s important collection of archaeological works, as well as the rest of the Chiswick Library, in the Library at Chatsworth. I am also grateful to the Keeper of Collections there, Mr Peter Day, for his valued assistance. Giles Worsley encouraged my interest in tracing connections between neo-Palladianism and Romano-British archaeology and shared unpublished insights with me. I owe particularly strong debts to Colin Horne, Harold Love, Clive Probyn, Robert D. Hume and Martin Battestin, all of whom were generous with their deep and extensive knowledge of the period, each reading the manuscript with care and providing many valuable criticisms, as well as factual details I would otherwise have missed. In a work as extensive in focus as this, expertise is something one frequently relies on friends and colleagues to supplement, and I have no doubt many readers will detect what seem to them significant gaps. Each sub-topic is inevitably compromised to some extent by its synthesis within the wider frame, by a finite manuscript and finite time. I am not an art historian and I regret that I met Sir Joseph Burke so late in his life; by the time I began this study he was no longer well enough to discuss it with me, and it would have benefited from his intimate knowledge of eighteenth-century English art.

I am grateful to the Australian Research Council for a grant which enabled me to travel to England to work on Burlington; to the various libraries which provided me with microfilm and photocopies of manuscript materials; to Monash University for periods of leave which enabled me to carry out my research for this book; and to Vassar College, where I
began the writing-up during my term as Visiting Professor in 1993. My most recent debts are to Josie Dixon and Leigh Mueller at Cambridge University Press for their help in the production process. In regard to the plates, I acknowledge the kind assistance of J. Douglas Stewart, and the various institutions which provided me with the photographs.
Abbreviations

AA Archaeologia Aeliana
AH Architectural History
AJ Antiquaries Journal
BAR British Archaeological Reports
BM British Museum
Bodl. Bodleian Library
Burl. Mag. Burlington Magazine
CJ Classical Journal
CL Country Life
ECS Eighteenth-Century Studies
ES English Studies
Gunnis Rupert Gunnis, A Dictionary of British Sculptors 1660–1851 (London, 1933)
HLQ Huntington Library Quarterly
JEGP Journal of English and Germanic Philology
JHI Journal of the History of Ideas

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

JWCI  Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes
MP  Modern Philology
N&Q  Notes and Queries
( Oxford, 1933)
PBA  Proceedings of the British Academy
PMLA  Publications of the Modern Language Association
PQ  Philological Quarterly
RES  Review of English Studies
RIBA Journal  Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects
SB  Studies in Bibliography
SEL  Studies in English Literature 1500–1900
TSL  Texas Studies in Literature and Language
Wal. Soc.  Annual Volumes of the Walpole Society, 1912–