Introduction: or ‘When George in pudding time came o’er’

For almost three centuries now, Doggett’s Coat and Badge Race has been rowed annually on the Thames from London Bridge upstream to Chelsea. Six young scullers compete in a test which requires considerable physical endurance over a four mile and five furlong course and great subtlety of skill in navigating the currents and tides of the Thames. The antiquity of the Coat and Badge race, and the levels of strength and expertise it requires, make it no ordinary race, but it is also remarkable for another reason – how it came to be founded. For the motives behind its inauguration circa 1716 reflect the personality of its founder, an Irish comedian from Dublin named Thomas Doggett, and the strife-ridden politics of his time.

Shortly after the ‘Glorious Revolution’, Doggett travelled to London to seek his fortune and in this ambition he was highly successful. Within a few years, he had established himself as the leading comic actor of his generation, his speciality being ‘Characters of lower Life’.1 But although Doggett satirised London’s ‘lower Life’, it did not lack his sympathy either. Indeed, it was for a notoriously tough and colourful profession, drawn from exactly this social category – the London watermen – that Doggett set up his annual boat race. Why he decided to found a boat race for the watermen who, for centuries, had ferried Londoners across the capital's central thoroughfare, remains a mystery. Less mysterious, however, were his broader motives for doing so – to celebrate a character placed at the very inverse of the social hierarchy of the competitors – King George I.

Doggett’s race is now rowed in July, but this was not Doggett’s intention. In fact he had laid down that the race was to be held on 1 August, a specification that was driven by his politics. For Doggett was a Whig, a resolute supporter of George I’s claim to the British crown, and the Coat and Badge Race was conceived as a novel way of marking the day of ‘his Majesty King

George’s Happy Accession to the British Throne’, which had taken place on 1 August 1714. Doggett blazoned his loyalist intentions with the silver badge which gave the race its name and was part of the prize: it was fashioned to represent ‘Liberty’, a benefit believed by Whigs to have been secured by George’s accession.2

Doggett’s Coat and Badge Race is unique in the history of the British monarchy. But what makes it of particular interest – and significance – is the fact that it was founded in honour of a foreign king, a man who, it has been widely argued, inspired little popular support or enthusiasm, and whose reign saw but slight evidence of any cult of kingship or culture of monarchy. This book will argue to the contrary. It contends that there existed a flourishing, dynamic, and variegated culture of monarchy which endorsed and promoted the rule of George I (1714–27), and his son, George II (1727–60). And it maintains that recognising this dimension to eighteenth-century society is a point of no minor importance to our understanding of the period. Indeed, the existence and the functioning of such a culture requires us to reconsider – even rethink – the dynamics of politics and society in early Georgian Britain.

The succession of George Ludwig, Elector of Hanover in 1714 was unprecedented in the history of the British Isles. In hereditary terms, his right to the throne was slight and there were, famously, over fifty others who had a better dynastic claim than he, but who had been passed over because they were Catholics. George I, however, was a Protestant and this made him an eligible candidate for the crown, in accordance with the Acts of Parliament passed, respectively, in England and Scotland after 1689. The 1707 Act of Union which joined together England and Scotland in effect confirmed these arrangements for the succession.

George I, then, owed his crown to Parliament rather than gaining it through the traditional route of dynastic inheritance. Moreover, he was a foreigner, from the north German state of Hanover, who spoke no English upon his arrival. These were difficulties indeed for the new monarch, but there were others too. George arrived in London with two middle-aged women, both of whom were reputed to be his mistresses, but without his wife, Sophia Dorothea of Celle, from whom he had been divorced two decades earlier after she had tried to elope with an (inevitably raffish) army officer. (She remained under house arrest in the Elector’s German territories until her death in 1726.) Family troubles did not stop there. George was also at odds with

2 Guildhall Library, London (GL), Guildhall Library Ms 7269, Doggett Papers, fos. 7, 9, 81; Public Record Office (PRO), PROB 11/581/388, Will of Thomas Doggett.
with his only son, George Augustus, the new Prince of Wales, who, during his reign, was to be at odds with his own eldest son, Frederick. It might be expected that all these factors would create problems, and so they did. George I met opposition from those who objected to the legitimacy of his parliamentary title, his ‘foreignness’, his clear preference for his old home in Hanover, his Lutheranism, his ugly mistresses, his Hanoverian entourage (who were viewed as draining the nation’s treasury), his firm endorsement of the Whigs, his proscription of the Tories, and his distant hereditary connection to the Stuart dynasty. Many of these issues remained highly contentious long into his son’s reign.

Certainly it was very difficult to warm to a royal family that was, arguably, the most dysfunctional since the time of Henry VIII. This would have been bad enough if there had been no rival claimant for George I’s or George II’s throne. But, of course, there was, in the figure of the Catholic Prince James Francis Edward Stuart. James was the son of the exiled King James VII and II. He was thus a direct descendant in the male line of the Stuart kings who had ruled Scotland since 1371 and England and Ireland since 1603. Moreover, James had been recognised as ‘King James III’ by his supporters, the Jacobites. James and his eldest son, Charles Edward, actively and aggressively contested George I’s and George II’s claim to the throne. Consequently, the reigns of both Georges were marked by a succession of Jacobite plots, several projected invasion attempts, and two military rebellions, with pitched battles being fought between government and Jacobite forces in Britain in 1715 and 1745–6. No wonder, then, that historians – past and present – have given little consideration to the idea that there existed any enthusiasm, real or expedient, for the early Georgian monarchy.

The formation of historical reputations is an intricate process and the case of George I and George II is no exception, belying, as in some ways it does, the axiom that history is written by the victors. Actually, in this instance it was mainly written by the Victorians, although the groundwork for this transformation had been laid during the late eighteenth century. This period saw the gradual weakening – although not annihilation – of the vehement anti-popery which had characterised English and Scottish mentalities since the late sixteenth century. It also saw the deaths of ‘James III’s’ sons, Charles Edward and Henry Benedict, without legitimate heirs. Jacobitism was now, in its original militant form, a cause ‘as dead as Queen Anne’ (to use a proverbial phrase), but in dying, it had been transformed into something else. Although the Jacobites had lost the past, in historiographical terms they were well on the way to winning the future.

When searching for the heroic, the tragic, the sentimental, the emotive (and quite often the Scottish), nineteenth-century writers turned to find it in the
history of the Stuarts and Jacobite movement. In the first half of the century, however, they tended to temper their admiration for the Jacobite cause, and in this respect they can be seen as operating in a long established tradition.3 Sympathetic as they were to the Jacobites, novelists such as Sir Walter Scott (knighted by George I's great-great grandson) and, later, W. M. Thackeray, presented Jacobitism as a youthful folly. Maturity (and a certain happiness) was only reached by their heroes after they accepted the Hanoverian succession. Consequently Scott and Thackeray attempted to give a balanced verdict on the early Georgian kings. Scott's stance has been attributed to his commitment, as a Scot, to the Union of 1707 and the concept of the kingdom of Britain.4 Thackeray, Calcutta-born but English bred, can also be viewed as following a patriotic commitment, as a Protestant Englishman – a commitment which Thackeray's historical writings of 1855–7 also make abundantly clear. Thus George I served our turn; we laughed at his uncouth German ways, and sneered at him. He took our loyalty for what it was worth; laid hands on what money he could; kept us assuredly from Popery and wooden shoes. I, for one, would have been on his side in those days. Cynical, and selfish, as he was, he was better than a king out of St. Germans, with the French king's orders in his pocket, and a swarm of Jesuits in his train.5

Here Thackeray echoes the verdict of Lord Mahon, whose history of the period 1713 to 1783 was the standard work during the mid- and late nineteenth century. Mahon managed to discern some virtues in the characters of both Georges, and although he lamented the arrival of a foreign dynasty on the throne, he declared that

On the enthronement of that family depended, I most firmly believe, the security of our laws, of our properties, of our religion, of everything that we either cherish or revere . . . the cause of Hanover was undoubtedly the cause of liberty, and the cause of the Stuarts the cause of despotism.6

Mahon conceded that George I was unpopular but, in a curious historiographical deployment of the idea that the king could do no evil, Mahon explained that this was owing to the ‘extreme rapacity and venality of his foreign attendants’ rather than to the actions and personal qualities of the king himself.7

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7 Ibid., p. 212.
One link between the historians of Mahon’s generation and those who succeeded them was the idea that the period before the reforms of the 1820s and 1830s had been characterised by an unparalleled venality in church and state. The great Macaulay did not survive long enough to write, as he had hoped, the history of the Georges in his *History of England* (‘I now look forward to the accession of the house of Hanover as my extreme goal’ he informed a correspondent, as any notorious Whig might, two years before his death). But what remarks he did leave about the period suggest that the projected continuation of the *History* would dwell heavily on the degeneracy of politics in the age of Walpole. While Macaulay and later historians, such as W. E. H. Lecky and C. G. Robertson, disliked the political corruption of the ancient regime, their criticism was directed more at the system rather than the ruling elite as a caste. Nevertheless, this allocation of blame was in the process of shifting, and by the beginning of the twentieth century a revised verdict on old corruption was starting to be propounded in certain quarters in England, a process which in Scotland had begun somewhat earlier.

The after-life of Jacobitism in Scotland has been explored by Murray Pittock, who argues that ‘Jacobitism’ began to take two separate paths in the early nineteenth century. The high road was occupied by a sentimentalised Jacobitism that focused upon a picturesque, Gaelic and tartaned past, of the type depicted by Scott, and patronised, legitimised and popularised by Queen Victoria. It was devoid of political criticism or aggressive Scottish nationalism, but did, on one level, accommodate those Scots (and their monarch) who wished to have a sense of being both ‘Scottish’ and ‘British’. It is this version that we are most familiar with today. However, a more radical form of Jacobitism also existed, taking, as it were, the low road. It was a strand which became more pronounced as the Clearances irrevocably changed Highland society, resulting in the emigration of thousands of Scots to the Americas and the Antipodes. This form of Jacobitism was stridently nationalist and anti-Unionist in tone, and the Stuarts (and Prince Charles Edward in particular) were viewed as the champions of Scottish liberties. From this perspective the ’45 Rebellion and the battle of Culloden had been a fight for Scottish independence. Defeat had brought economic ruin in its wake, and the destruction of ‘traditional’ Scottish society.

This sort of thinking was not just a Scottish phenomenon. In the early twentieth century a similar type of idea was gaining ground in radical circles
on the other side of the border. Its advocates argued that ‘traditional’ English society, with its attendant spiritual and communitarian values, had been sacrificed to Mammon from the time of the Reformation onwards. While they mostly acknowledged that the rot had cankered ‘Merry England’ prior to 1688, they maintained that the Revolution and the Hanoverian succession had accelerated decay. These two events were not victories for Englishmen but for the English aristocracy who, with the sanction of King and Parliament, were now able to exploit and enslave the common people. Aristocratic oligarchy, and its attendant corruption, brought about an increasingly harsh penal code, the enclosure movement, and, finally, industrialisation. From this standpoint, the Georgian monarchy was not only repulsive; it was also wrong. Such a view was propounded particularly by historians of ‘the people’, such as the Webbs, the Hammonds, and later by E. P. Thompson, most notably in his study of the Black Act. But it can also be found in the work of the early twentieth-century Catholic ‘radical conservatives’ Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton.

Chesterton’s immensely popular *Short History of England* was especially vituperative in its portrait of George I, infused as it was by the author’s anti-German, anti-Protestant, and anti-modernist beliefs. For Chesterton, the Hanoverian succession was a cynical manoeuvre by the aristocracy who deliberately called in ‘a weak man who would allow them to help themselves’. George I was ‘simply something stuffed into a hole in the wall by English aristocrats, who practically admitted that they were simply stopping it with rubbish’. ‘With George there entered England something that had scarcely been seen there before . . . the barbarian from beyond the Rhine’, added Chesterton, giving his argument an exceptionally savage anti-German twist.

George I’s German background had always had a bearing on the negative perceptions of him, both during his reign and afterwards. Eighteenth-century Jacobites drew upon national stereotypes to caricature him as an impoverished, petty German prince, a laughable figure whose poverty was such that he was, degradingly, found hoeing turnips when the news arrived of his succession to the British crown. Stereotypes of Germans did not improve in the course of the century. ‘Sauer-kraut and sausages have ever been ridiculous objects’ to the English, wrote Thackeray in the mid-1850s when musing over the issue. But English views of ‘Germany’ were to alter in the wake of German unification. By Chesterton’s day, and particularly in the circle in which Chesterton moved, Germans (or ‘Prussians’) were not so much seen as
ridiculous, grasping beggars – as they had been in the eighteenth- and early
nineteenth-centuries. Rather they were viewed as the members of a powerful
nation that was out to destroy Britain and the civilized world, and who
could be found not only in Germany, but also in important positions within
the English establishment.\textsuperscript{16} That ‘Merry England’ was finally destroyed by
a Protestant stooge from Germany seemed to Chesterton as being supremely
telling.

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century histories of the early Georgian
kings were, then, generally unflattering and their stance was partly dictated
by how they viewed the eighteenth century itself. Moreover, few authors
could find much to admire in George I and George II personally. Conse-
quently, they tended to presume that enthusiasm for the dynasty was either
non-existent or a manifestation of calculating expediency. These narratives
were very much informed by the political preoccupations and concerns of the
time in which they were written. However, we also need to acknowledge that
these interpretations were shaped by the evidence that their authors used.

It is, of course, something of a saw to say that historians are prisoners
of their sources, but, in this case, the adage is pertinent. When nineteenth-
century historians came to write about the early Georgian royal family, they
drew heavily upon first-hand accounts that had been recently printed, such
as those of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Henrietta Howard, Countess of
Suffolk, Philip Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield and, above all, the writings of
John, Lord Hervey and Horace Walpole. Hervey and Walpole were espe-
cially appealing for reasons aside from availability. They were insiders at the
Georgian court, Hervey a courtier and politician, Walpole the son of ‘the
first prime minister’ Sir Robert Walpole himself. Furthermore, they were
both lively writers, alert to vices and absurdities, and masters of the art of
polite sniping (George II comes under particular fire from them both). They
painted a vivid picture of their world. As Thackeray wrote, rapturously, of
Walpole’s ‘charming volumes’: ‘fiddles sing all through them: wax-lights, fine
dresses, fine jokes, fine equipages, glitter and sparkle there: never
was such a brilliant, jigging, smirking Vanity Fair as that through which he
leads us’.\textsuperscript{17} In short, these accounts were highly quotable. But they were also highly biased (and, in the
case of Hervey’s \textit{Memoirs}, a tricky text too). Yet these sources appeared to be
the only ones available to historians when they came to assessing the early
Georgian monarchy. Historians such as Mahon turned to William Coxe’s

\textsuperscript{16} Jay P. Corrin, \textit{G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc: the Battle Against Modernity} (Athens,

\textsuperscript{17} Thackeray, \textit{Four Georges}, pp. 48–9.
editions of the papers of Walpole and Marlborough to provide material for their narratives of political events, but there was no equivalent for the early Georgian kings, who had, anyway, left very few literary remains.

This situation improved over the course of the twentieth century, with the opening of a number of archives which shed light on the day-to-day business of the Crown. Lewis Namier's work was particularly valuable here. Although his historical preoccupations were overwhelmingly parliamentary – the closest Namier seems to have got to mentioning the court in the *Structure of Politics* was in reference to George II's 'German court prejudices' in the index – he flagged, fleetingly, George II's personal interest in elections. He dismissed the idea that George II was not bothered by the mechanics of parliamentary life as an 'untenable story'. In this assertion, he was followed by John Owen. George I found a similar champion in John M. Beattie, who emphasised how George I's court still functioned as a location for political activity, and that the king had a committed interest in British political life.

Most important of all was Ragnhild Hatton's revisionist biography of George I, which, while supporting this emerging argument, took a slightly different course. Unlike most historians of the eighteenth century, Hatton was neither English born nor was she a scholar of eighteenth-century English political history (her chair was in International History, she worked principally on Sweden and France). It was this pan-European perspective that made her study of George I so striking. She was not the first to place George I in a more Europeanised context. This had been undertaken to a certain extent by the early twentieth-century German historian, Wolfgang Michael, who had used Prussian and Imperial diplomatic archives when he came to write his history of George I's reign (though he also relied on the writings of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Walpole). However, Hatton did not employ official archives alone to reconsider George I's life and reign in England. She also drew upon unexplored private archives in England and Germany, and was scrupulous in her use of the better known eighteenth-century accounts of the king. Because of this, she reached a very different conclusion to Michael who was scathing about George I's character and abilities.
Hatton’s George I was far from the monster and fool of some earlier histories. She depicted him as an intelligent ruler, with a passing interest in the intellectual concerns of the period, and as a man of feeling, devoted to his sole (and long-standing) mistress and their daughters, and to some extent as much the victim of a marriage of convenience as his wife. That Hatton was overly sympathetic in her portrayal of George I is a charge which can be readily levelled. Nevertheless, making George I human is, arguably, one of the greatest achievements of Hatton’s book. For, by bringing a new depth to the first Hanoverian monarch, Hatton enhanced our perception of the monarchy itself. If George I was a complex creature whom we should take seriously, then we also need to take seriously the eighteenth-century monarchy. Yet, despite Hatton’s revisionist endeavours, undertaken over a quarter of a century ago, her lead was not followed. For although the study of eighteenth-century history underwent something of a revolution – some might say counter-revolution – in the 1980s and 1990s, regarding the early Georgian monarchy it was very much a case of plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.

REVISING THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Whereas historians as diverse as Lewis Namier and J. H. Plumb had principally viewed the eighteenth century in terms of Parliament and its attendant processes and personnel, from the 1980s onwards a number of scholars looked beyond this rather narrow compass. They sought to chart Britain’s journey into modernity through an understanding of how Britain was able to become a fiscal-military state, a nation, or, indeed, a ‘polite and commercial people’. The eighteenth century which emerges from their labours appears as an increasingly bourgeois, secularising society where property and consumerism, patriotism and constitutionalism seem to be major preoccupations, and where the state was an efficient organisation which was gaining major fiscal powers. The leading players in these dramas are not the old cast of Whig aristocrats and armigerous Tories, but ‘the people’, usually in the form of the ‘middling sort’, although artisan groups also frequently march across this stage.23 Taking a cue from Jürgen Habermas, an underlying theme to many of these histories is the concept of the public sphere, the

development of which had major consequences for intellectual and cultural life, and thus for political life too. It was now the paying public who, as a body, patronised cultural initiatives and promoted intellectual ideas, and who were sponsors of the burgeoning English Enlightenment that Voltaire so admired. Thus, the theatre of eighteenth-century life was set upon the streets, shops, clubs, assemblies, spas, and public gardens of London and Westminster, and the regional urban centres, such as Norwich, Bath, and Bristol, rather than in Parliament or in the Palladian mansions of the elite.

And this all had an impact on the power and influence of the early Georgian monarchy. It has been argued that the rise of the public sphere saw the decline of the court as the focus for elite sociability, particularly since the amusements offered by the early Georgian courts were generally mundane. Commercial entrepreneurs offered the type of sophisticated entertainment which the Georgian courts failed to supply, such as theatrical and musical performances and masquerade balls, and the commercial sector, therefore, became the main provider of this form of leisure activity – for the king as well as for his subjects. Moreover, the early Georgian kings failed to convincingly sponsor the arts and so the shaping of a national artistic culture was left to private individuals and public bodies. By failing to provide both cultural leadership and largesse, it has been posited that the early Georgian kings threw away a valuable opportunity to use the arts as a way of legitimising their rule and promoting the institution of monarchy. In essence, they lost the social and cultural lead that the monarchy once had and they also failed to take control of newly emerging initiatives.

One work has been especially influential in advocating this particular thesis – Linda Colley’s *Britons*. Here Colley maintains that the monarchy came to play an important part in creating a sense of national unity and identity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and that integral to this was the general popularity which George III particularly enjoyed from the 1780s onwards, and especially after the French Revolution. Such popularity was fired by two developments. Celebrations marking royal occasions became both more splendid and more inclusive, endowing the monarchy with majesty and ‘a newly invented royal magic’. And there was, maintains Colley, more to get excited about with regard to the person of the king himself, who was happily married, pious, and passionately British. He also took a keen interest in promoting the arts and sciences.

All this was in striking contrast to the early Georgian kings, Colley argued, whose courts were too shabby and too small to impress their subjects or to...