

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84222-8 - The Hanoverian Dimension in British History, 1714-1837

Edited by Brendan Simms and Torsten Rott

Excerpt

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1 Introduction. Hanover: the missing dimension

Brendan Simms

When Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837, the resulting end of the Personal Union with Hanover occasioned little comment. The fact that Britain had been linked to a continental European state for over 120 years was easily forgotten in a nineteenth-century world whose horizons were now very much global, imperial and naval. If the centenary of the Personal Union in August 1814 had been marked by royal celebrations, by the time of the bicentenary, the mid-Victorian fascination with German culture had been replaced by industrial and commercial competition. In August 1914, in any case, Britain's leaders had other things on their minds. An era during which the royal family felt obliged to change its name from 'Saxe-Coburg-Gotha' to the anodyne confection of 'House of Windsor' was perhaps not best suited to an understanding of Britain's German heritage and continental links. The British story was, after all, an 'island story'.¹

It has remained one, more or less, ever since. The importance, and sometimes the centrality, of the Hanoverian context to British history is still not fully recognised. For example, J. C. D. Clark, himself an exponent of viewing eighteenth-century Britain in the framework of the European 'ancien régime', wrote nearly 600 pages on the 1750s without giving due attention to the fact that one of his major protagonists, the duke of Newcastle, was both a defender of the Hanoverian preoccupations of the crown and the most prominent exponent of engagement in Europe.² Similarly, Kathleen Wilson and Linda Colley, despite their

¹ Thus the title of H. E. Marshall's hugely influential *Our island story* (1905), which was reprinted by the think-tank Civitas in 2005.

² J. C. D. Clark, *The dynamics of change. The crisis of the 1750s and English party systems* (Cambridge, 1982). For the *ancien régime* debate see J. C. D. Clark, *English society 1688–1832. Ideology, social structure and political practice during the ancien régime* (Cambridge, 1985); and Joanna Innes, 'Jonathan Clark, social history and England's "ancien régime"', *Past and Present*, 115 (1987), 165–200. Later Clark – reflecting the early work of Jeremy Black – did address the Hanoverian dimension briefly in *Revolution and rebellion. State and society in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 77–82.

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interest in Toryism and Whig radicalism critiques, and in colonial and popular issues, make virtually no reference to Europe, in Wilson's case, or Hanover, in both instances.³ Likewise, John Brooke's as yet unsurpassed biography of George III passes over the fact that his subject was also the ruler of a German state, and at times a very committed one.⁴ On the other side of the Atlantic, both Theodore Draper and Fred Anderson tend to caricature the Hanoverian connection and its role in British grand strategy.⁵ None of David Armitage's various discussions of the British problem and composite monarchies, which stress the need to consider Scottish, Irish and imperial contexts, take the Hanoverian dimension into account.⁶

There are exceptions. Foreign policy was not his forte, but J. H. Plumb's unfinished study of Walpole was seized of the importance of the international and particularly the Hanoverian dimension to early eighteenth-century British politics.⁷ More recently, both Julian Hoppit and Paul Langford – who wrote an excellent though now inevitably dated textbook on eighteenth-century British foreign policy – give some prominence to the Hanoverian dimension.⁸ There are also the general syntheses of Jeremy Black, who has contributed so much to our understanding of foreign policy and the role of Hanover in British politics before 1760.⁹

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There is, of course, a considerable and growing specialist literature on British foreign policy and the role of the Hanoverian Electorate. Ragnhild Hatton's biography of George I – revealingly subtitled 'Elector and king' – remains the standard work. Graham Gibbs has explored the role

³ Kathleen Wilson, *Politics, culture and imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995); Wilson, *The island race. Englishness, empire and gender in the eighteenth century* (London, 2002); and Linda Colley, *In defiance of oligarchy. The Tory party 1714–1760* (Cambridge, 1982). See also, most recently, Kathleen Wilson, ed., *A new imperial history: culture, identity and modernity in Britain and the empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge, 2004).

⁴ J. B. Brooke, *George III* (London, 1972).

⁵ Theodore Draper, *A struggle for power. The American Revolution* (New York, 1996); Fred Anderson, *Crucible of war: the Seven Years War and the fate of empire in British North America, 1754–1766* (New York, 2000).

⁶ E.g. David Armitage, 'Greater Britain: a useful category of historical analysis?', *American Historical Review*, 104, 2, (April 1999), 427–45.

⁷ See for example J. H. Plumb, *Sir Robert Walpole. The king's minister* (London, 1960), pp. 116–54 *et passim*.

⁸ See Julian Hoppit, *A land of liberty? England 1689–1727* (Oxford, 2000); Paul Langford, *A polite and commercial people, England 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989); Paul Langford, *Modern British foreign policy: the eighteenth century, 1688–1815* (London, 1976).

⁹ E.g. Jeremy Black, *The politics of Britain, 1688–1800* (Manchester, 1993); and Black, *Walpole in power* (Sutton, 2001).

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of the Hanoverian connection in parliament for the first decade after 1714. Uriel Dann has looked closely at the Personal Union during the wars of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years War (1740–60). The implications of the Hanoverian connection for British ‘high politics’ have been explored for the early eighteenth century by J. M. Beattie, J. J. Murray and – rather obscurely – H. J. Finke. More generally, the period before 1760 has been covered in numerous articles and books by Jeremy Black, while British foreign policy in the era of the American Revolution has received masterful treatment from Hamish Scott. Finally, T. C. W. Blanning has highlighted the importance of Hanover during the *Fürstenbund* and Regency crises of the 1780s.¹⁰

More recently, there has been a modest increase of interest in the Hanoverian connection led by younger scholars such as Andrew Thompson, Nick Harding, and the editors, all of whom have contributed to this volume.¹¹ Andrew Thompson’s work on the early eighteenth

¹⁰ See J. M. Beattie, *The English court in the reign of George I* (Cambridge, 1967); J. J. Murray, *George I, the Baltic and the Whig Split of 1717. A study in diplomacy and propaganda* (London, 1969); Hans-Joachim Finke, ‘The Hanoverian Junta, 1714–1719’, (DPhil dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1970); Ragnhild Hatton, *George I. Elector and king* (London, 1978); Ragnhild Hatton, *The Anglo-Hanoverian connection, 1714–1760* (London, 1982); G. C. Gibbs, ‘English attitudes towards Hanover and the Hanoverian succession in the first half of the eighteenth century’, in Adolf Birke and Kurt Kluxen, eds., *England und Hannover. England and Hanover* (Munich, 1986), pp. 33–50; Uta Richter-Uhlig, *Hof und Politik unter den Bedingungen der Personalunion zwischen Hannover und England* (Hanover, 1992); Walther Mediger, *Mecklenburg, Russland und England-Hannover* (2 vols., Hildesheim, 1967); Uriel Dann, *Hanover and Great Britain, 1740–1760* (Leicester, 1991); Jeremy Black, ‘British foreign policy in the eighteenth century: a survey’, *Journal of British Studies* 26 (1987), 26–53; Jeremy Black, ‘The British state and foreign policy in the eighteenth century’, *Trivium* 23 (1988), 127–48; and the relevant sections on Hanover in Jeremy Black, *British foreign policy in the age of Walpole* (Edinburgh, 1985); and Black, *A system of ambition? British foreign policy, 1660–1793* (London and New York, 1991), pp. 31–42; Black, ‘The crown, Hanover and the shift in British foreign policy in the 1760s’, in: Jeremy Black, ed., *Knights Errant and true Englishmen. British foreign policy, 1600–1800* (Edinburgh, 1989), pp. 113–34; H. M. Scott, *British foreign policy in the age of the American Revolution* (Oxford, 1990); T. C. W. Blanning, ‘“That horrid Electorate” or “Ma patrie Germanique”? George III, Hanover and the Fürstenbund of 1785’, *Historical Journal*, 20 (1977), 311–44; and T. C. W. Blanning and Carl Haase, ‘Kurhannover, der Kaiser und die Regency Crisis von 1788/89’, *Blätter für Landesgeschichte* 113 (1979), 432–49.

¹¹ Andrew Thompson, *Britain, Hanover and the protestant interest, 1688–1756* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2006); Nicholas B. Harding, ‘North African piracy, the Hanoverian carrying trade, and the British state, 1728–1828’, *Historical Journal*, 43, (2002), 25–47; and Harding, ‘Dynastic union in British and Hanoverian ideology’ (unpublished PhD dissertation, Columbia, 2001); Brendan Simms, ‘“An odd question enough.” Charles James Fox, the crown and British policy during the Hanoverian crisis of 1806’, *Historical Journal*, 38 (1995), 567–96 and Fox, *The impact of Napoleon. Prussian high politics, foreign policy, and the crisis of the executive, 1797–1806* (Cambridge, 1997), especially pp. 201–18; and Torsten Riotte, *Hannover in der britischen Politik*

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century shows just how central the confessional argument was, not just in British domestic politics, but also in the diplomatic posture which Britain-Hanover adopted in Europe, particularly the Holy Roman Empire. Nicholas Harding has written a systematic study of the role which the Personal Union played in eighteenth-century British political thought and discourse. Brendan Simms drew attention to the periodic centrality of Hanover in British strategy, and the importance of a Hanoverian faction in British high politics, during the crisis of 1806. Torsten Rlotte has just published the first comprehensive study of the role of Hanover in British policy throughout the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period.

The Hanoverian dimension brings together the work of these and other scholars working on the Personal Union or related fields and integrates their findings into the history of eighteenth-century Britain as a whole. It draws upon material – much of it never before used in this context – from both British and German archives. The volume is structured in such a way as to allow both chronological and thematic access. Chapters 2 to 5 will cover the entire period from 1714 to 1837, but they are also intended to allow authors to organise the narrative around a particular individual or theme, such as Walpole, the elder Pitt, the French Revolutionary Wars and Napoleon, and the final stages of the Personal Union. The more thematic chapters are designed to cover the full length of the Personal Union, but generally contain a specific narrative ‘spine’.

In putting the Hanoverian dimension back into British history, this collection attempts two things. First of all, by filling in many gaps in our knowledge of the Personal Union, it makes an ‘additive’ contribution to the secondary literature. For example, the chapter by Torsten Rlotte on George III and Hanover after 1760; Hamish Scott’s systematic analysis of the role of Hanover in French strategy; Thomas Biskup’s discussion of the intellectual legacy; Nicholas Harding’s dissection of the role of Hanover in the development of British republicanism; Clarissa Campbell Orr’s investigation of the dynastic ramifications; and Christopher Thompson on the Personal Union after 1815, all put the spotlight on neglected areas. Secondly, this volume is the first step in a collective ‘substitutive’ project to persuade eighteenth-century British

(1792–1815). *Dynastische Verbindung als Element außenpolitischer Entscheidungsprozesse* (Münster, 2005). Jeremy Black has also kept up his interest in the area. Recent publications include: ‘International relations in the eighteenth century: Britain and Poland compared’, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 13 (2002), 83–112; Black, ‘Hanover and British foreign policy 1714–1760’, *English Historical Review*, 120 (2005), 303–39; and Black, ‘“George II and all that stuff.” On the value of the neglected’, *Albion*, 4 (2004), 581–607.

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historiography to take more account of the Hanoverian dimension in general.

In the first chapter, Jeremy Black highlights the controversial nature of the Hanoverian succession in 1714. He reminds us that although Britain's links to the continent long predated the Personal Union, the Hanoverian connection was a major high-political and foreign-political bone of contention during the twenty-year ascendancy of Robert Walpole. It was, moreover, an issue 'in the context not of an established constitution with clear conventions but of the testing out of new arrangements'. Hanover became a focal point around which the 'national interest' could be articulated. As Bob Harris shows, this had profound impact on the development of the British 'public sphere', particularly in the absence of other issues around which opinion could polarise. There was a huge outpouring of anti-Hanoverian pamphlets, prints, ballads centred on but not confined to London. The quality of the material varied, but some of it was very sophisticated. Harris notes that 'Europe and European power politics [were] at the very centre of public attention' in the period before 1760, and in this context the question of Hanover gained particular popular salience. Indeed, Harris writes that at times 'the issue of Hanover and its influence dominated press and political debate, for long periods completely overshadowing consideration of other political issues'. Attacks on the Hanoverian connection not only served to highlight the corrupt and foreign nature of the Walpolean oligarchy, but also enabled opposition writers to burnish their own patriotic credentials.

Alongside, this 'low' debate, there was also a vibrant and no less impassioned 'high' debate in the sphere of political thought. Nicholas Harding's chapter documents how attacks on the Personal Union were driven by a British republicanism of both ancient and recent provenance. Here the Hanoverian link was seen as a continental absolutist Trojan Horse, designed to smother English liberties with the help of a standing army and German mercenaries. In some cases, such as that of Bolingbroke, this camp shaded into that of Jacobitism; but it also embraced many radical Whigs.

In the republican critique, the Lutheranism of the Hanoverians was akin to popery and thus of no comfort. Yet as Andrew Thompson stresses in his chapter on confessional dimensions, the Protestantism of the Hanoverians was what made them attractive to the political nation: contemporaries, after all, spoke of the 'protestant' not the Hanoverian succession. Religious solidarity with the victims of popish aggression was also an important part of British foreign policy, particularly in the 1720s; Thompson sees this as an example of British 'soft power' in the eighteenth

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century. The Hanoverian link was thus a central plank in the defence both of British domestic liberties and the European balance of power against attempts to erect a universal monarchy. Here Thompson adds a new spin to the debate on the British 'confessional state', initiated by Jonathan Clark some twenty years ago.

The eighteenth century also saw the emergence of strong intellectual ties. Hanover, as Thomas Biskup shows in his chapter, played a central role in the growth of British involvement in the 'international republic of letters', by producing a 'unique framework for scholarly curiosity' focused on the new electoral university of Göttingen. This compensated for the weaknesses of British academic institutions particularly in the fields of natural sciences, oriental studies and philology. Interestingly, it was the British who were the mere 'collectors' and 'gatherers' while the Hanoverians concentrated on analysis. In this way, as Biskup puts it, 'Göttingen . . . helped England to make sense of her own imperial experiences'. Here the Hanoverian connection and the imperial project were not contradictory but complementary.

This theme is picked up by Brendan Simms. He shows that the Elder Pitt's relationship to Hanover provides a valuable prism through which to view his political career and strategic vision. A complex, sometimes paradoxical and yet essentially coherent picture emerges. Pitt undoubtedly used the Hanoverian stick to beat his political rivals and to massage his 'popular' constituency; this stance earned him the hatred of George II and nearly cost him high office. And yet it was the very fact that Pitt – as Newcastle so starkly put it – could 'do the King's business' over Hanover that finally speeded his rise. At the same time, Pitt's commitment to the defence of Hanover in the Seven Years War should not be seen as an opportunistic sop to George, but as part of an integrated 'continental' strategy against France, which was intended to secure British colonial and naval dominance through the diversion of French resources.

For, as the naval historian Richard Harding explains, the European and maritime theatres of war should not – *pace* much of the anti-Hanoverian critique – be seen as distinct and separate, but rather as two sides of the same coin. 'Flanders and Hanover', he writes, 'could not be divorced from a maritime policy. They were parts of the same policy.' It is true that in the early years of George I's reign, the Royal Navy was used to further Hanoverian interests in the Baltic. But by the mid-eighteenth century, Harding identifies 'an essential link' between the defence of Hanover, which tied down French forces, and 'aggressive action in the Americas'. 'Britain's essential European interests, including Hanover', he reminds us, came first; the shift to maritime and colonial priorities only came after 1760.

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Throughout the first fifty years or so of the Personal Union, therefore, British strategy was obsessed with the protection of Hanover against first Russian, then Austrian, periodically Prussian and then French attack. The fear was that the king would be made, as George II put it, as ‘Hanoverian Elector . . . [to] pay for the King of England’. British ministries, in turn, feared that Britain would have to pay for the elector of Hanover at the peace agreement. It is certainly true that at key moments in the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years War, French strategists regarded the Electorate as a hostage to be traded for losses overseas.

Yet as Hamish Scott shows in a highly original analysis, ‘the direct military threat which France posed was consistently exaggerated by British statesmen’. Large French formations had never before operated so far from their bases and the logistical obstacles were considerable. If one also takes into account the political costs of violating the constitution of the Holy Roman Empire, French willingness to countenance the neutralisation of Hanover rather than its straightforward occupation becomes more understandable. Scott concludes that practical considerations prevented the French from applying more than temporary military pressure for most of the eighteenth century. It was only the revolutionary transformation in warfare after 1792 which changed this calculus and cleared the way for longer-term occupations under Napoleon.

The accession of George III in 1760 is often taken to mark the beginning of a completely new phase in which the importance of the Personal Union was played down by a monarch who ‘gloried in the name of Britain [sic]’. It is certainly true that George III broke with the tradition of royal visits to Germany; and the Hanoverian issue lost much of the political currency it had enjoyed for more than four decades since 1714. Yet, as Torsten Riotte shows, George III took a keen interest in the welfare of the Electorate. In some ways, George was more of a German prince than his grandfather: he sought to protect Hanover not so much by British-sponsored great-power alliances as through the institutions of the Holy Roman Empire. Riotte’s George III is therefore much more ‘German’ than the conventional picture allows.

The German interests and identity of the royal family are the theme of Clarissa Campbell Orr’s chapter on the dynastic context. She adopts a broad – ‘polycentric’ – approach which looks not just at the ruler but also at the consort, siblings, offspring, their respective marriage partners and the sometimes competing strategies of the elder branch of the Guelph family. This enables her not only to stress the very contingent nature of dynastic permutations, but also to bring out the existence of a coherent Hanoverian dynastic strategy designed to promote British interests and

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enhance the security of the Electorate. Yet if George II – who married his daughters off to actual or prospective British allies – was relatively successful in this regard, Campbell Orr shows George III to have been a dynastic failure. He proved unable to marry off his thirteen unruly offspring in any systematic way. All the same, George retained a keen interest in the German dynastic scene. This was reinforced by the activities of his own consort, Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, whom Campbell Orr shows to have been a quietly determined ‘lobbyist’ during the War of the Bavarian Succession.

Nor did royal interest in the Personal Union die with George III in 1820. The Prince Regent and later King George IV was in close physical and political touch with the Hanoverian envoy in London, Count Münster, as the chapter by Mijndert Bertram shows. Both shared a firmly conservative outlook. At the same time, with the dispatch of the duke of Cambridge as governor general, the monarchy was represented in person in Hanover for the first time since the recall of the Prince of Wales in 1728, albeit by a cipher since Münster continued to pull all the strings from London. The links were more than just political: Bertram reminds us that Hanover functioned as a ‘bridgehead for British trade in Germany’, which received preferential, though unreciprocated, tariff treatment.

Moreover, as Christopher Thompson shows, Hanover ‘remained a significant foreign policy factor’ in Britain after the Napoleonic War, and thus also played a major role in high politics. George IV was able to use his Hanoverian diplomatic and intelligence service – which by all accounts was far superior to the British one – to support British strategy and to bypass the hated Canning. Moreover, as Christopher Thompson adds as a parting shot, the Personal Union enjoyed a controversial after-life in nineteenth-century Britain: so long as Queen Victoria remained childless, there was every prospect that her sybaritic and (allegedly) despotic uncle, the king of Hanover, would renew the Personal Union on her death.

The emerging picture is of an eighteenth-century Britain which was very much a European state, strategically, dynastically, confessionally, intellectually linked to the continent. The German connection also profoundly influenced many spheres of what one might otherwise regard as purely domestic politics. Hanoverians were powerful players in British high politics not just in the early eighteenth century but, periodically, during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period and, as the case of Münster shows, well into the second decade of the nineteenth century as well. We are also left with a strong sense of the contingency of British history. As Jeremy Black points out, it was the dynastic accident of a

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regular supply of legitimate protestant male heirs from the Hanoverians, which spared Britain a return to the travails of the seventeenth century, and indeed the eighteenth-century wars of succession. The Personal Union, Clarissa Campbell Orr reminds us, ‘began partly and ended solely for dynastic purposes’. Had it not so concluded, Mijndert Bertram muses, the history of nineteenth-century Germany would have looked very different. For in 1866, Bismarck would have come up not only against the king of Hanover, who proved intractable enough, but also against the king of Great Britain (as he would have been).

Of course, this volume can only be a first step and it is by no means comprehensive. Ideally, it should have included a systematic discussion of the Hanoverian faction at court; of the role of Hanover in the formation of British identity; and the ramifications of the Personal Union within the framework of composite statehood. These themes could only be hinted at: they require further investigation and elaboration. All this volume can hope to do is to remind historians of the importance of the Hanoverian dimension and to suggest an agenda for further research.

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2 Hanoverian nexus: Walpole and the Electorate

Jeremy Black

Much of the problem in assessing the implications of the Hanoverian relationship comes from the tension between considering short periods and, on the other hand, assessing the relationship over the longer term. The former appears the most desirable approach, because it restricts coverage to a period for which it is simpler to carry out the necessary archival research. It is also flawed, however, both because it limits the experience of contemporaries and because it removes the comparative element, which is valuable for scholarly analysis, just as it was useful for contemporary debate about foreign policy. 'Walpole and Hanover' as a topic provides a good instance of this. While it focuses attention on the failure in existing treatments of Walpole to devote much attention to Hanover, this approach underrates the importance of considering Walpole at least in part in the light of developments after his fall from office in 1742. Not only did Walpole, from then 1st earl of Orford, maintain links with George II and also continue to influence the Pelham brothers until his death in 1745, but, in order to assess Walpole it is necessary to consider his policies in the light of the events of subsequent years as they provide a way of probing the alternatives. Hence this chapter closes in 1760. The accession of George III led, at least in the short term, to a different degree of royal commitment to the Electorate, and, certainly, to the cause of its aggrandisement, while the political parameters within which Walpole had operated – the relatively assured ascendancy of the Old Corps Whigs – came to a close. The period can therefore be seen as a unity, but it is one in which the role of Hanover has not received systematic treatment, a task that this volume valuably sets out to attempt.¹

¹ For earlier discussion, G. C. Gibbs, 'English attitudes towards Hanover and the Hanoverian succession in the first half of the eighteenth century', in: A. M. Birke and K. Kluxen, eds., *England und Hannover* (Munich, 1986), pp. 33–51; J. M. Black, 'Hanover and British foreign policy 1714–60', *English Historical Review*, 120 (2005), 303–39; and Black, *Continental commitment. Britain, Hanover and interventionism 1714–1793* (London, 2005).