

## Herbert Butterfield

# George III and the Namier School

### *Tory versus Whig Interpretations*

THE earliest serious historical reconstruction of the opening years of George III's reign was a Tory one, the work of a man who later prided himself on always having been in agreement with Lord Eldon. He was John Adolphus, and he produced in 1802 the classical defence of the young George III—one which that king himself commended, but which also pleased the Whig critic on the *Edinburgh Review* who had been predisposed to find fault with it. Adolphus based his version on avowals made at the time by men who were in the circle of Bute, avowals which had appeared also in the propaganda published on behalf of the court. He argued that George III rightly set out to vindicate monarchical authority against the corrupt, oligarchical Whigs, who had kept his grandfather in leading strings.

It would seem that, after George's death in 1820, it was possible to treat his personality with less reserve. Old controversies concerning his education were revived by the publication of memoirs which revealed his less attractive side. Between the 1830's and the 1850's there appeared a mass of predominantly hostile evidence—the published writings of Bedford, Chatham, Burke, Horace Walpole, Rockingham, George Grenville, and Charles James Fox. The new witnesses suffered a devastating cross-examination, however, at the hands of Macaulay's great enemy, John Wilson Croker.

Lord Mahon argued that when George III, like the Elder Pitt, gave promotion to Tories, he outraged the Whigs, who thought that office and emolument ought to belong to them as a kind of "heirloom." It was claimed that George III's new system was successful, and Mahon asserted that venality soon began to diminish. The *Quarterly Review* said that by about 1772 "the Walpolean system of management was at an end."

The establishment of a new interpretation—a counter-system to that of Adolphus—comes in the 1860's, particularly in the early pages of Erskine May's *Constitutional History*. The old Whig charges against George III—the party attacks, recently renewed by Lord John Russell—were now transmuted into a form of academic orthodoxy. Up to this time, men like Croker had had their roots sufficiently far back in the *ancien régime* to save them from serious misconceptions about the 18th century. There now occurred that effective lapse of memory or break in tradition which made it easy to fall into anachronisms. It became possible to imagine that, prior to 1760, there had flourished a regularly established system of ministerial and parliamentary government, and that George III had wickedly set out to secure its overthrow. Lecky, far from being the chief offender in this, said that the Victorian constitution ought not to be read back into the 18th century, and produced further evidence in support of Adolphus. Lecky, in fact, provides the mathematical formula for a less

rigid kind of "Whig interpretation." George III was wrong, he said, because, throughout his reign, he opposed all those movements which were to turn the constitution of 1760 into that of 1860.

Although in text-books and popular literature George III was henceforward depicted as a man who had set out to overthrow an established constitution, this was not the view which prevailed at the higher levels of scholarship after the first decade of the 20th century. In the 1890's the remarkable development of English historiography had already led in many fields to the undermining of the Whig interpretation. Foreign scholars had played a part in this development, and Petit-Dutaillis claimed to have provoked the reconsideration of *Magna Carta*. Early in the new century, von Ruville, in a life of the Elder Pitt, analysed the whole "Whig" tendency in English historical writing, attacking particularly its application to the reign of George III. Then D. A. Winstanley, of Cambridge, took the lead in this field of scholarship, and adopted the basic argument and the general framework of Adolphus. From 1910 he was arguing that "it was no mere selfish lust for power that impelled George III to wage war on the men who had enslaved his grandfather." In fact, during most of both the 19th and the 20th centuries it is this Tory thesis of Adolphus which dominates the serious historiography of this subject.

### *The Structure of Politics*

**B**EFORE the end of the 17th century a profounder kind of history had already been foreshadowed. The Whig interpretation had then been menaced for a moment by the demand that *Magna Carta* should be interpreted by reference to its context in feudal society. Since 1890, much of our European history has had to be reshaped because it has been realised that a knowledge of social structure alters the bearings of a piece of narrative. If an extravagantly Whig-Protestant version of the French Wars of Religion or the Revolt of the Netherlands has been superseded, this is because we have learned to take account of structure—to see the narrative "in depth."

Yet it was the Whigs and the radicals who introduced the device of interpreting the parliamentary history of George III's reign by reference to the "structure of politics." Here was one of the favourite weapons of those reformers who wanted to expose the perversity of 18th century voting and the irrationality of the whole electoral system. While George III was still alive, they went through the constituencies one by one in order to show the workings of patronage and influence; and they produced such compilations as the *History Personal and Political of the Boroughs of England* (1794). This form of study may even now provide the basis for a more formidable Whig interpretation of history; for it is wrong to assume (as some people seem to do) that the historian who recovers the ancient structure must necessarily defend it, condemning those contemporaries who desired something more rational. These and other more analytical forms of enquiry (the history of parliamentary elections, for example) led in 1903 to Edward Porritt's massive work on *The Unreformed House of Commons*.

During the first half of the present century the available sources were greatly multiplied and the evidence of the supposed culprits was recovered—the long-lost correspondence of George III and the papers of Bute, for example. Methods of research were considerably refined, and in general the work of the historian came to be conducted with bigger microscopes and more delicate instruments. The relations between politics and society came to be more profoundly appreciated in one field of study after another. So far as the reign of George III is concerned, Professor (now Sir Lewis) Namier has long been playing a most important part in these developments. His *Structure of Politics* (1929) not only enriched this side of the study with new techniques, but attained results of remarkable precision, results that are a solid contribution to scholarship. The methods employed have been followed also by later historians. They have been transposed for use in work on other periods of English parliamentary history.

We must not exaggerate the revolution produced by such methods. Some of the good things which we are now told about the workings of 18th century politics were available to discerning politicians who were living at the time. Such things had leaked into the literary evidence, and they had passed into historiography by another route. The further plan of compiling the lives of all members of parliament is going to provide historians with a piece of apparatus that will be invaluable. But whether scientific methods (statistical procedures and devices of correlation) can be applied to the resulting materials—whether these will produce more valuable conclusions about the politics of a period than were available to a contemporary statesman with a good nose—is not yet very clear. It is necessary that we should not magnify too greatly even the importance of the study of “structure.” It still has to be admitted that through a sense of responsibility or an attachment to principle—through the effects of a parliamentary debate or of popular passion or of a national crisis—men in the 18th century might forget party fidelity or immediate personal interest, and vote in a manner that could not be predicted from their status, their political connections, or their previous conduct. In such cases, which by their nature are likely to be significant, the politics of George III’s reign could not be regarded as responding to structure or as explicable solely in terms of structure. We are in an analogous position when we are told that the French Revolution cannot be explained merely by general causes, and that it emerges from the clash of personalities, the play of fear and passion, the confusion of cross-purposes, and the operation of sheer mischance. Here the analysis of mere conditions loses its unique importance. For the sake of historical explanation itself, we must resort to history in its narrative form.

### *Structural Analysis and Narrative History*

ALL this should be considered in its bearings on the conception of an overall history of the reign of George III. The older writers, who are now taunted and condemned, were above all things narrative his-

torians; so that it is relevant to ask how the new kind of analysis affects the shape of the previously accepted story. It is not permissible to imagine that the England of 1760 is unique in the sense that just here the study of “structure” must replace other forms of history—just here the “narrative” method has been rendered obsolete. We cannot afford to sacrifice the kind of history which broadened a man’s political outlook—the history which dealt with politics and statesmanship and the march of great events. It is curious that there has never been a more desperate cry from the teaching world than the demand in recent years for light and help in respect of the interpretation of the reign of George III. The ideal thing would be to have the whole story retold “in depth”—structure and narrative combined—in a way that has been achieved on occasion in other regions of history.

Sir Lewis Namier does indeed tell us that *England in the Age of the American Revolution* sets out to provide “the chronological narrative of political events.” But in his own original volume, as well as in the recent addition to the series by Mr. Brooke, it seems to be assumed that such narrative need be little more than the “structure of politics” extended in time and turned into a sequence. We are given a story which becomes silent or curiously neglectful as it touches the very things that governments and parliaments exist to do. The work of ministers in their departments, the springs of official policy, the overt controversies, the stuff of actual political debate—it is just these that are being elbowed out of the picture. Within the field that might be regarded as its own, the anatomising method may have its defects, unless it is complemented by the activity of a sympathetic—even a synthesising—mind. It would seem that the new form of structural analysis is capable of producing in the practitioners of the craft its own kind of occupational disease.

There may appear to be something unanswerable in the thesis that the Labour Party opposed the Suez adventure because it was their business to defeat the Conservatives. And some people feel that it would be too much of a coincidence if we accepted the

members of that party as also sincerely attached to the ideals of the United Nations. Egotisms and higher purposes, however, do find complicated forms of combination in political history, though the mode in which they combine may be different in every period. The Whig historians followed too easy a policy when they measured the Rockinghamites by their ideals and the followers of Lord North by their interests; and the situation is not improved if one merely reverses this formula. Opposing political parties must be examined from both points of view; and it is not clear that the Namier method possesses the kind of receiving-set that is capable of catching all the relevant wavelengths. Because the Whig historians took ideological pretensions too much at their face value, the new school tends to drain the intellectual content out of the things that politicians do. The *dramatis personæ* are portrayed without that outer framework of ideas and purposes which affects political conduct and which statesmen and monarchs—even a George III—could scarcely unload from their minds if they tried. This framework of ideas and conscious purposes may appear only in partial glimpses—though it does appear—in the correspondence of political personages, who generally write to one another rather to discuss detailed decisions and day-to-day moves. But it is this which gives some coherence to political history and rescues it from mere atomisation; and one may despise it overmuch if one is too intent on delving into structure and self-interests, or even into the darkness of man's unconscious mind. There is danger that the study of the underside of the piece of embroidery will be puffed and exalted, and turned into an end in itself. Even UNO today would provide a sorry picture if we examined it from the point of view of the "structure of politics," leaving the other dimensions of the story out of account.

### *The Outlook of George III*

GEORGE III is the first to suffer from the new method, and he suffers particularly at the point where Sir Lewis

Namier, playing down the rôle of "conscious will and purpose," emphasises the irony of circumstance, "the deeper irrelevancies and incoherence of human actions." Certainly there is always some truth in this view of history. Winstanley, nearly fifty years ago, showed that the resignation of Pitt in 1761 had not been "part of the original programme of the court," and that "events had shaped themselves in a way that had not been foreseen." We can cover Sir Lewis Namier's case by saying that all political narrative becomes more complicated—more trickily entangled with chance and change—when seen under the microscope. Young research students are even apt to be too disillusioned when they study the policy of a masterly statesman at close quarters, so that the thing which had seemed a mighty act of volition is broken into little pieces. But the political practitioner, even if he is only a George III, does possess a framework of ideas and purposes. And these affect his actions and modify the course of things, however much they may seem to be checked, side-tracked, and even contradicted in the man's day-to-day conduct of business.

One of the important issues which the new teaching presents to us is the question of the framework of ideas and purposes held by George III at the beginning of his reign. It is hardly denied that the new king longed to get rid of the Duke of Newcastle and place the Earl of Bute at the head of the government, though at one moment he might see the necessity of asking the old minister to stay on, and at another moment—when the change had actually been effected—he might even feel forced to invite the man to return to office. We know from George's own words that, till he felt compelled to accept Henry Fox as his political manager, he cherished the dream of destroying corruption—"then," as he wrote later to Bute, "when we were both dead our memories would have been respected and esteemed till the end of time." Some years later, he put it on to paper that, when he came to the throne, he set out to destroy the "unhappy distinctions" of Whig and Tory, and that he regarded this as a new departure. It has been known for at least a

century that the Elder Pitt claimed the priority in this policy; but if it could be proved that Pitt promoted more Tories before 1760 than George III himself in the subsequent years, this touches on just the kind of issue that we must never try to settle by the mere counting of heads. A piece of policy that is unimportant when measured in material terms may gain great significance through the context in which it occurs, the ideas with which it has been associated, the kind of pronouncements made about it to the public, and the political controversy that it may have provoked on some particular occasion. Horace Walpole made the point that the Elder Pitt's policy meant something different in the hands of George III, and that in any case it was turned into something different by the conduct of the Tories themselves. Also, he said, before Bute ever dared to make a change in the ministry, there had been an alarming alteration in the language of the court.

It might seem that George III, with his talk of destroying "corruption" and annihilating the distinction between "Whig" and "Tory," had not sufficiently soaked himself in Namier. If he was wrong, perhaps he erred along with some of that Leicester House circle whose influence upon his mind Sir Lewis Namier at times seems to assume but at times seems strenuously to deny. Passages which Sir Lewis Namier himself supplies would appear to suggest that George was infected with more of the ideas of the same circle—the circle which had formed the centre of opposition in the previous reign. Bute tells Newcastle, for example, "That the King had a notion of not being governed . . . by his Minister or Ministers, as the late King had been." There is even evidence that the alleged resentment of the court against the might of the magnates was by no means the fiction of the imagination of later historians. Bute writes to Newcastle: "No, my Lord, I know your power; you have all the great men of the Kingdom [on your side]." George, when he talks of the succession to Newcastle, discloses a further bitterness of feeling. He is determined that Bute shall succeed to the office, for Bute "will think of mine and his

country's good, not of jobs." In all this, surely, we have the outer framework of George III's ideas and purposes—one which in the correspondence of later years was to give proof of extraordinary fixity. And what is all this but the framework provided by Adolphus a hundred and fifty years ago—the very system that has dominated serious historiography during most of the intervening period?

*What men think they are fighting for  
is important*

AND if George III was wrong in his talk of "Whig" and "Tory," of "corruption," and of ministers who tried to govern the king, we must remember that what men imagine the situation to be—what they dream or feel that they are out to do—is an actual dimension of the political events that are the object of study. The modern school are too neglectful of this dimension which political conduct possesses—too neglectful even of those glimpses or leakages of purposeful policy which can be found in the actual documents they are using. They are overcontemptuous about the writers on politics—too supercilious in their treatment of Bolingbroke and Burke, for example—too blind to the part which these may play in actual life. Here is an interpretation of history which, through an anxiety to avoid being hoaxed, is in danger of refusing to realise the operative force of ideas.

At a time when political parties have come to assume new shapes it is wonderful to see how the politicians may still go on thinking about them in the traditional way. In the reign of George III men might at one moment conceive of the factions somewhat in the manner of Sir Lewis Namier; but at a different level of their thinking—or when they approached the question from a different angle—the same men might discuss parties in categories that had become antiquated, the Whigs being set against the Tories still. It is possible that the future historian, when he has to write about the Liberals of our own recent decades, will be similarly puzzled by the way in which two planes of existence

intersect. "Whiggism" in George III's reign may denote a particular set of people; but alternatively it may represent a point of view, or even only a shadow cast by the battles of long ago. The writings of Bolingbroke, David Hume, and Edmund Burke show how difficult it was for the minds of the 18th century to produce a coherent, consistent and practicable idea of party. A purely positivist attempt to describe party in the nude—to anatomise the material thing—is bound to be dangerous; for a great proportion of the existence of party lies in the realm of thought.

### *The Formulation of the Issue*

WHEN George III commended Adolphus's account of the early years of his reign, he praised its accuracy particularly in regard to himself. We need not presume on this piece of testimony overmuch; and the historian may too easily transfer to the person of the king the ideas which are put forward by the men around him—put forward perhaps in his name. The things which are declared by the men who enjoy the royal favour, however, may be more significant historically than the things which the king himself meditates in the privacy of his soul. One repeatedly meets even the opposition charge that a disturbing factor in the situation after the accession of George III was the change in what was called "the language of the court." The men in the neighbourhood of Bute certainly seem to have imagined themselves to be collaborating in a comprehensive policy. In 1762, Gilbert Elliot, who owed his advancement to Bute, wrote: "Nor is it to be expected that in critical times ancient systems of power will fall to the ground without a struggle." It is interesting that Bubb Dodington should have used language so similar to this when writing to Bute in the earliest weeks of the reign: "Remember that to recover monarchy from the inveterate usurpation of oligarchy is a point too arduous and important to be achieved without much difficulty and some degree of danger." Here, from the very bosom of the age itself, and from the very brink of the new era, is the

converse of Sir Lewis Namier's view that ridiculously small purposes led to a paradoxically great commotion. If so many historians did go wrong on this initial issue, they were following witnesses who might well have seemed close to the heart of things.

We can take our cross-section at a different level, again, however, and examine the problem as it was presented to the outside world at the time—the issue as it divided the public. This also is possibly more important for the shaping of the framework of our history than the secrets of George III's inner mind. Here once again we find the attack on corruption, on party distinctions, on the Whig oligarchy, on the system that had put royal authority under eclipse. We see all this in the propaganda on behalf of the court; but it appears over again in the opposition answers, which pick out the successive points for taunt or attack. Polemical writings may be an inferior form of evidence in some respects, but they do show what public opinion is being asked to decide, even if that question is being provoked hypocritically to cover something else. The *Annual Register* did not say that the alleged court attack on "the Whig oligarchy" was a hoax. It even admitted that in the political conflict a genuine constitutional issue had been raised. (On this issue the *Annual Register* in fact decided at the end of the argument in favour of the king.) Supposing it could be proved that no "Whig" party existed and that there never had been an "oligarchy," the existence of the overt issue is unaffected. It was sufficient if people believed in the existence of a Whig oligarchy, and imagined that this was what they were fighting against.

In these ways we may take our cross-section at different levels, and still it is the same general framework of narrative that is produced. And that framework—in its general shape and its specific elements—is the very one within which the prevailing historiographical tradition, from Adolphus to Winstanley, construed the early years of George III's reign. If the framework is correct, it is an ancient one; but if so imposing a tradition is to be overthrown we must be clear about

the evidence on which we are acting, clearer still about the process of inference to which the evidence is being subjected. And we must be clear that we are prepared to apply the same principles and modes of interpretation to other areas and periods of history.

*The "King's Friends" as "Civil Servants"*

THOSE of us who have spent our lives in combat against "the Whig interpretation of history" may still be a little perturbed by the way in which the new school are treating their predecessors. Even in all this, they are setting their own work against that of defunct popularisers and textbook writers, with hardly a reference to the things that held the field in higher regions of scholarship till *The Structure of Politics* appeared. Yet, in a generation that is supposed to be scientific, they themselves resort to the very pattern of "Whig" device and fallacy, presenting the formula only in reverse. Over fifty years ago, von Ruville suggested that the men who deserted their parties to follow the cause of the king might be regarded as "government servants." He made no more of this point, which is interesting in itself, but the Namier school have transformed the term a little, and prefer to say "civil servants." This latter designation is in itself perhaps a less fortunate one, in that it carries more distinctively modern connotations into the 18th century. And in nothing

is the new school more persistent than in its use of the term for polemical purposes—the exploitation of precisely the modern flavour that it carries. The King's Friends were not in fact "civil servants" though we may accept the view that they were like them in certain respects. There is a point at which the analogy is being overpressed, and this is exactly the point at which it happens to serve a polemical intent. If these men had in fact been modern "civil servants" they would not have been in the House of Commons, and then the problem would not have arisen. They did in fact present an issue—one which it was easy to resolve as soon as they were excluded from the House of Commons. The Whigs were wrong in imagining that these men were an unconstitutional phenomenon in those days, in the way that they would be if they existed at the present time. But it is not permissible to short-circuit the question by giving the King's Friends a nickname less appropriate and more anachronistic than the one which they had in their own generation. And we are the victims of a conjuring trick if, just because an anachronism has been waved in our faces, we allow ourselves to be persuaded that the Whigs had no right to oppose these men in their political rôle. This—the most famous of the formulations of the Namier school and the most reiterated of their *clichés*—is simply the Whig fallacy turned inside out.

## You

Yov, if I say that brilliant  
 Upsetting vocable this verse  
 Staggers before it's learnt to crawl  
 And howls until you take it up.  
 No pride not even consciousness  
 Of being; only wanting your  
 Having it to you and can sleep  
 Then and then only: can no more  
 Than sleep but if after a time  
 Of sleep it stirs it murmurs rhyme.

*Oliver Bernard*