George III: An Essay in Monarchy

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George III, as G. M. Ditchfield readily acknowledges in his authorial preface, has hardly been ignored by historians. Biographical studies by John Brooke and Stanley Ayling appeared in 1972, and another by Christopher Hibbert in 1998.(1) George's kingship, and particularly the question of whether he was trying to restore a more politically active type of monarchy, have been much debated by devotees of high politics. Indeed, so extensive and intensive has been the concentration on the king's alleged unconstitutional behaviour that in 1974 John Cannon, reviewing Brooke's study, questioned whether there was any more to be said on George's actions and motives, and even suggested that detailed biographical work on the leading players in the politics of the period - in the manner pioneered by Namier - was making the eighteenth century dull and off-putting compared with the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.

Ditchfield deals with this issue very directly: he uses Cannon's view as a launching pad for his explanation of the need for another study of George III. The justification he offers is convincing - or at any rate convinced me. He highlights three major recent developments in historical studies of the eighteenth century that earlier work on George III inevitably failed to address. The first is the recognition of the centrality of religion to a period in which it was once thought to be of declining importance. The second is the increasing awareness of the need to understand British history in a properly European context. A growing interest in monarchy as an institution that played a key role in popular identification with the nation is the third. Ditchfield accordingly offers us chapters on George III's religion, his role as a European figure, and his later popular phase, when he acted as a focus for national revival after defeat in the American war, and for a new form of patriotic pride at the time of the conflict with revolutionary France.

Unavoidably, Ditchfield is obliged to consider again some of the older perspectives on the king. The fluctuating fortunes of George's historical reputation are the subject of the first chapter, in which various interpretations of his role in high politics are summarized and studies of the king's health are evaluated (his famous bouts of insanity are now widely recognized to have been a form of porphyria). In another chapter, Ditchfield offers his own judgements on George III and British politics from his accession to the throne in 1760 until the general election of 1784 - perhaps the most contentious period of the king's long reign. The promotion of the Earl of Bute, George's former tutor, to senior political office, despite his lack of experience or following in parliament; the king's continuing to show greater confidence in Bute than in his immediate successors; the dismissal of the first Rockingham administration in 1766; and, perhaps most serious of all,
The undermining of the Fox-North coalition and the imposition of Pitt the Younger on a hostile parliament at
the end of 1783 - all were cited at the time, and have been cited many times by historians since, as instances
of George III's willingness to ignore constitutional proprieties. Ditchfield is generally sympathetic to his
subject, but far from uncritical. The king's direct interventions in decision-making, and the issue of whether
he pushed monarchical power beyond what was considered to be constitutionally acceptable, are dealt with
fairly and judiciously.

George III is often remembered by non-specialists as the king who lost America, a view based partly on the
language of the Declaration of Independence ('The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of
repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of absolute Tyranny over
these States') and partly on the interpretation of the Whig historians of the nineteenth century who saw a
more authoritarian monarchy as the root cause of the conflict with the colonies. We now know, of course,
that the Declaration of Independence placed all the blame on the king at least partly to destroy continuing
affection for him in the thirteen colonies/states. We also know that the perspective of the Whig historians
was anachronistic; they read back into George III's reign many of the constitutional assumptions current in
their own century. Nevertheless, given George's reputation, Ditchfield could hardly have avoided this issue,
and he devotes a chapter to the king and empire. Here George III emerges in much the same way as he does
in the chapter on high politics - as a monarch who was not afraid to have his say, but who was not his own
first minister. On American affairs, at least until the outbreak of war with the thirteen colonies, George
generally supported his governments rather than imposed his views upon them. He does not come across as a
hard-liner. Occasionally, indeed, he acted as a restraining influence, as when, in 1769, he cautioned against
remodelling the charter of Massachusetts to strengthen executive authority. Once armed conflict with the
rebel colonies began, George came more to the forefront and was clearly determined that the war should be
pursued to a successful conclusion; but even then he made it abundantly clear that he saw himself as
contending for the rights of the British Parliament, not his own independent authority.

The chapter entitled 'The Changing Nature of the British Monarchy, 1784-1810' analyses George III's period
of greatest popularity. If the first decade and a half of his reign were dogged by controversy about his role in
politics, from the general election of 1784 until the end of his active reign (from 1810 the king was so
incapacitated that his son acted as regent) he enjoyed a good deal of popular affection. The transformation in
George's standing owed less to any changes that he made to his image than to changing circumstances. In the
aftermath of the unsuccessful American war, as Linda Colley has demonstrated, George became a symbol of
national determination to recover from defeat. His simple lifestyle seemed to exemplify the virtues of
middle-class thrift and sobriety, and contrasted sharply with the aristocratic extravagance of leading
opposition politicians, especially Charles James Fox. But it was above all the French Revolution that made
George III the 'father of his people'. True, the Revolution was initially viewed benignly, or even actively
supported, by significant sections of the British public. As the Revolution developed, however, its violence,
its attacks on property and religion, and finally its rejection of monarchy in any form, persuaded large
numbers of Britons that it represented a major threat. The anarchy associated with the Revolution in France
made the apparent stability and order of Britain's political and social system all the more attractive -
especially to property owners. And the middle-aged and long-reigning George, devoted and pious family
man, constitutional monarch and defender of the faith, was an almost perfect symbol of stability and order.
'Patriotism' had, in earlier decades of the eighteenth century, been the language of those who were critical of
existing political arrangements - the parliamentary opposition and its extra-parliamentary following. From
the 1790s it increasingly was appropriated by defenders of the status quo, a development symbolized by the
way in which the song 'God Save the King' became popular, and started to supplant the more libertarian
'Rule, Britannia' as the national anthem.

One of the most interesting chapters in Dr Ditchfield's study attempts to locate George III as a European
monarch. George started his reign announcing his pride in his Britishness. Before he came to the throne he
had - like his father Frederick, Prince of Wales, before him - looked critically on George II's partiality for his
Hanoverian territories. His determination to end the German aspect of the Seven Years' War was apparent.
But, as Ditchfield shows, this early anti-Hanoverian disposition softened with time. As a mature monarch,
George III was perfectly prepared to attend closely to the interests of the Electorate, even if those interests were not always in harmony with the policies pursued by his British ministers. This no doubt owed something to the loss of America; in 1782, deeply unhappy at having to accept another Rockingham ministry, committed to recognizing the independence of the United States, George contemplated abdicating and moving permanently to Hanover. But George's change of heart towards Hanover seems to have predated the end of the American war. The conflict itself demonstrated Hanover's value, as George was able to deploy Hanoverian troops to help the British war effort and his status as Hanoverian ruler facilitated the negotiation of treaties with other German states that provided Britain with still more manpower. The chapter also considers George's personal continental connections and his attitudes to other monarchs. His lack of royal solidarity is striking - in the early stages of the French Revolution, George sympathized with Louis XVI's plight on a personal level; but he had no love for the French monarchy as such, and he did not press his ministers to make restoration of the Bourbons a war aim in 1793.

Dr Ditchfield is a leading historian of religion in eighteenth-century Britain, so it comes as no surprise that the chapter on George's religious views is the most original and insightful. George's refusal to accept Catholic emancipation as part of the Act of Union with Ireland in 1800 is often taken as an indication of his inflexible hostility to Catholicism and his unrelenting Protestantism. The picture painted by Ditchfield is certainly of George as a committed and pious Anglican, but as far from a hard-liner. He comes across in Ditchfield's account as a moderate Anglican - determined to maintain the Church's special position in national life, but sympathetic to Catholic grievances. Despite his unwillingness to accept full Catholic emancipation, he is not known to have objected to the relief measures for Catholics passed in the American and French Revolutionary Wars. While he was not prepared in 1800 to complete the process, he appears to have accepted that changing circumstances made Catholicism less of a threat to the British constitution than the republicanism of the rebellious American Protestants and the atheism of the French revolutionaries. George's attitude to Protestant Dissent was, if anything, more cautious than his attitude to Catholicism. In 1772-3 he was critical of bills coming before the British Parliament to exempt Dissenting ministers and schoolmasters from the requirement that they subscribe to the majority of the Anglican Church's 39 Articles. The support for the American rebels offered by many Dissenters no doubt increased the king's suspicions, as did the prominent part played by Dissenters in the movement for parliamentary reform. Yet even Dissenters could be viewed sympathetically. George established cordial relations with the English Moravians and he appointed the Quaker John Fothergill as one of the royal physicians.

Ditchfield has produced a rounded, readable, and well-balanced assessment of George III. It must have been tempting for him simply to draw on existing scholarship, supplemented by the well-known printed editions of the king's correspondence. The author has resisted that temptation and researched well beyond this body of sources. The manuscripts used include, no doubt, material consulted for his other work on religious history (the Scott Collection, a set of papers of the Revd Russell Scott, still in private hands, would surely not have been tracked down on the off-chance that they might reveal something about George III); but the Royal Archives at Windsor have also been profitably employed. The extensive bibliography lists the titles of two dozen contemporary newspapers and periodicals consulted, and over one hundred printed primary sources - memoirs, diaries, letters, sermons, and pamphlets. Equally, Ditchfield might have settled for a work of synthesis; instead, he has given us rather more. While this book's main achievement is to increase our understanding of George III by using some of the insights of recent scholarship on monarchy, religion, and Britain's relationship to continental Europe, the author has added more than a few insights of his own, based on a thorough knowledge of the period, and particularly its religious dimensions.

Notes

The author is glad to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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