

# Preface

The eighteenth century was long deemed 'the classical age of the constitution' in Britain, with cabinet government based on a two-party system of Whigs and Tories in Parliament, and a monarchy whose powers had been emasculated by the Glorious Revolution of 1688–89. This simple picture was destroyed in 1929 when Sir Lewis Namier published his *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*. He demonstrated that no such party system existed; that the monarchy was not a cypher; and that the correct political analysis of Parliament was of an administration side comprising factions of politicians currently in office, a Court Party of office-holders, and supportive independents, and an opposition side of other political factions and independent MPs. Namier reached this conclusion by a methodology that revolutionised the writing of political history. He broadened it to discuss not merely the leading politicians but also the rank and file, the so-called counting of heads; and he deepened it by the use of such techniques as prosopography, the study of social and family connections.

Namier, who became Professor of Modern History at the University of Manchester in 1931, was one of the most influential historians of the twentieth century, for imitators and disciples sought to apply his interpretation of how political history should be written to earlier and later periods of British history, and to foreign countries. 'We are almost all Namierites now', wrote his most recent biographer (Linda Colley, *Namier* (1989), p. 101). In due course there was a reaction against the enthusiastic application of his methodology. Critics were rightly convinced that ideas and ideals formed part of political history, but wrongly claimed that the counting of heads necessarily implied the discounting of such considerations. The illogicality of that contention has been demonstrated by much recent scholarship.

Namier's conclusions as to the absence of party politics in eighteenth-century Britain have been modified, though not refuted, by historians studying the beginning and end of the century, but his perception of the political system of mid-eighteenth-century Britain has retained general acceptance. The structure he depicted is the essential framework for a proper understanding of power politics and policy-making. This book, by Namier's last research student, is an attempt to apply that interpretation to the political story of the first decade of George III's reign, Namier's home territory. Factional politics was at its height in the 1760s, a circumstance that gave the King much more freedom of manoeuvre than if a party system had existed.

The role of George III has been the subject of frequent and ongoing debates among historians. This book provides detailed information from which readers may well draw conflicting conclusions, according to their prejudices. Much of it has come to light since a mid-twentieth-century controversy over interpretations of George III's political behaviour. There can be no doubt now that the King closely concerned himself with ministerial appointments. How far he was involved in policy decisions is less clear, for much of any such participation would have been in verbal discussions of which little record survives. Whether his behaviour was unconstitutional is, at bottom, a matter of interpretation. One factor can be subtracted from any argument about the King. Nothing is said here of the King's alleged insanity, the one 'fact' most people know about George III: for his illness of porphyria, which it really was, did not surface at this time.

This book is primarily a study of high politics, for the power structure was centred on the Crown and Parliament. One pioneer of the currently fashionable study of popular politics, John Brewer, in 1976 highlighted this decade as one of an alternative structure of politics to that depicted by Namier (*Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III*). His book, however, discussed not the events of the period but the wider political environment, drawing attention to the growing importance of public opinion, and especially to the press in its various manifestations. There can be no doubt that political matters were extensively discussed in newspapers, taverns, and coffee-houses. Demagogue John Wilkes did make a notable impact on the political scene, in the press and on the streets, as this author's biography of him has shown (*John Wilkes: A Friend to Liberty* (1996)). But when the furore had died down, the political world was still dominated by the King and the Parliamentary factions.

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