

The Hanoverian Dimension in British History, 1714–1837

EDITED BY
BRENDAN SIMMS AND TORSTEN RIOTTE



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For more than 120 years (1714–1837) Great Britain was linked to the German Electorate, later Kingdom, of Hanover through Personal Union. This made Britain a continental European state in many respects, and diluted her sense of insular apartness. The geopolitical focus of Britain was now as much on Germany, on the Elbe and the Weser, as it was on the Channel or overseas. At the same time, the Hanoverian connection was a major and highly controversial factor in British high politics and popular political debate. This volume is the first to explore the subject systematically by employing a team of experts drawn from the UK, USA and Germany. They integrate the burgeoning specialist literature on aspects of the Personal Union into the broader history of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain. Never before has the impact of the Hanoverian connection on British politics, monarchy and the public sphere been so thoroughly investigated.

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Brendan Simms

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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marked by royal celebrations, by the time of the bicentenary, the mid-Victorian fascination with German culture had been replaced by industrial and commercial competition.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.

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

*

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).

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, ‘Kurahannover, 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*

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 Riotte 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 Riotte 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.

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

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.