

THE NEW **OXFORD** HISTORY OF ENGLAND

A POLITE AND
COMMERCIAL
PEOPLE
ENGLAND 1727–1783

PAUL LANGFORD



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ENGLAND

General Editor · J. M. ROBERTS

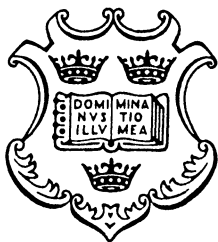
*A Polite and
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1727-1783



PAUL LANGFORD



CLARENDON PRESS · OXFORD

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Bangkok Buenos Aires Cape Town Chennai
Dar es Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi Kolkata
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi
São Paulo Shanghai Taipei Tokyo Toronto

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Published in the United States
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First published 1989

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Data applied for

ISBN 0-19-285253-1

7 9 10 8

Printed in Great Britain
on acid-free paper by
Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn, Norfolk

**FOR
MARGARET**

General Editor's Preface

The first volume of Sir George Clark's *Oxford History of England* was published in 1934. Undertaking the General Editorship of a *New Oxford History of England* forty-five years later it was hard not to feel overshadowed by its powerful influence and well-deserved status. Some of Clark's volumes (his own among them) were brilliant individual achievements, hard to rival and impossible to match. Of course, he and his readers shared a broad sense of the purpose and direction of such books. His successor can no longer be sure of doing that. The building-blocks of the story, its reasonable and meaningful demarcations and divisions, the continuities and discontinuities, the priorities of different varieties of history, the place of narrative—all these things are now much harder to agree upon. We now know much more about many things, and think about what we know in different ways. It is not surprising that historians now sometimes seem unsure about the audience to which their scholarship and writing are addressed.

In the end, authors should be left to write their own books. None the less, the *New Oxford History of England* is intended to be more than a collection of discrete or idiosyncratic histories in chronological order. Its aim is to give an account of the development of our country in time. Changing geographical limits suggest it is hard to speak of that solely as a history of England. Yet the core of the institutional story which runs from Anglo-Saxon times to our own is the story of the State structure built round the English monarchy, the only continuous articulation of the history of those peoples we today call British. Certainly the emphasis of individual volumes will vary. Each author has been asked to bring forward what he or she sees as the most important topics explaining the history under study, taking account of the present state of historical knowledge, drawing attention to areas of dispute and to matters on which final judgement is at present difficult (or, perhaps, impossible) and not merely recapitulating what has recently been the fashionable centre of professional debate. But each volume,

allowing for its special approach and proportions, must also provide a comprehensive account, in which politics is always likely to be prominent. Volumes have to be demarcated chronologically but continuities must not be obscured; vestigially or not, copyhold survived into the 1920s and the Anglo-Saxon shires until the 1970s. Any one volume should be an entry-point to the understanding of processes only slowly unfolding, sometimes across centuries. My hope is that in the end we shall have, as the outcome, a set of standard and authoritative histories, embodying the scholarship of a generation, and not mere compendia in which the determinants are lost to sight among the detail.

Preface

IT is fifty years since the publication of Basil Williams's *The Whig Supremacy*, an early volume in the original Oxford History of England and one which dealt in part with the period covered by this volume of the New Oxford History of England. When the first series was in preparation it was perhaps easier than it is now to predict and fulfil the expectations of its readers. The demands of narrative and the hegemony of political history imposed a pattern which was widely accepted. Social, economic, religious, and cultural history were treated as separate and subsidiary matters. If the Oxford History of England lacked the familiar perspective and confident assumptions of its august predecessor the Cambridge Modern History, it rested on a considerable consensus about what was important and what was not. That consensus was weakening even before the completion of the first Oxford series, and it is certainly not available to its successor. History has expanded beyond what could have been conceived by Basil Williams's readers in 1939. It comprehends subjects which are found nowhere in his pages, draws on concepts which had not been heard of when he wrote, and sometimes appeals to values foreign to his experience. In terms of scholarly research it has become ever more specialized. As a discipline it has been enhanced or subverted, depending on standpoint, by a wealth of new techniques, many drawn from other disciplines. The consequences for history as an academic subject are endlessly debated. Whether there even remains a coherent and rational discipline worthy of the name is itself something which can be disputed. What is not in doubt is that it has become difficult to meet the diverse requirements of readers and students, and difficult, as well, to bring order and system to a vastly more complicated, considerably more professional, and arguably more faddish subject. There is no longer general agreement on what constitutes the proper province of the historian, let alone a ready formula for balancing the requirements of narrative and analysis. The composition of a historical 'survey' represents a problem to

which there is plainly no correct, or even widely recommended solution.

My own solution is something of a compromise. There are four chapters of narrative (2, 5, 8, 11) to meet an indispensable requirement, that of describing matters of State as they evolved in respect both of relations with foreign powers and internal affairs. But politics is not confined to these chapters. There is a chapter (14) on the structure and development of the State as an institution, and questions of political theory and practice make frequent appearances elsewhere. For the rest I have opted for themes rather than neatly differentiated topics or broad categories such as 'social', 'economic', and 'cultural'. All the themes are selected with references to a major preoccupation of the time, and each chapter has a contemporary expression for its title. They are arranged in broadly chronological order, but I have felt free to follow the themes wherever they lead, sometimes pursuing them from the beginning of the period to the end, sometimes retracing my steps to pick up an important influence or analogy.

In addition to the brief indication of topics listed in the table of contents, each chapter is preceded by a short statement summarizing its argument and subject. Throughout my intention has been to integrate what are often treated as distinct areas of interest, partly in search of illuminating connections and parallels, partly to recapture something of the contemporary experience of the period. Two chapters centre on the nature of propertied society: 3 deals with some central middle-class concerns of the age, while 12 considers in more detail their social and cultural consequences in the later part of the period. Three chapters have to do with economic change: 4 examines the uncertain commercial trends of the second quarter of the century and assesses their implications for public morality and social policy; 9 and 13 analyse the growth and expansion which occurred especially after 1750, 9 with the emphasis on the campaign for 'improvement', 13 in relation to the impact of war and industrialization. Two profound cultural and ideological changes have a chapter to themselves: 6 explains the challenge which the evangelical revival presented to contemporary institutions and beliefs; 10 describes the sentimental revolution of the 1760s and the impulse which it gave to so-called reform. Chapter 7 assesses the image which the English presented to themselves and to foreigners.

I have sought as far as possible to take account of current scholarship, but this book is in no sense a résumé of recent research on eighteenth-century England. My main object has been to emphasize the changes which occurred in an age not invariably associated with change. To a great extent they have to do with the enrichment and influence of a broad middle class whose concerns became ever more central to Georgian society and whose priorities determined so much both of debate and action. The result is a bias perhaps, but one which seems to me to reflect the most significant developments of the mid-eighteenth century. I have also sought to convey something of the colour of a colourful era, not least by generous quotation from contemporary sources, many of them literary. The eighteenth-century Englishman's own perception of the changes which he lived through not only assists historical understanding of the changes themselves; it also does much to promote imaginative insight into the character of his age. In addition I have devoted some detail to the treatment of persons and things not of recognized importance in their own right, where it seems that they exemplify interesting developments. It is not my contention, for example, that Alexander Fordyce or John the Painter are important in the same historical sense as George Grenville or John Howard, only that their careers reveal some characteristic attitudes and anxieties. Examples of this kind can be more illuminating than any amount of authoritative assertion and generalization.

Dates before the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in 1752 are given in the old style, but the year is treated as beginning on 1 January throughout. Quotations are reproduced with the original spelling and punctuation unmodernized. The source of all quotations is identified in the footnotes. In a work of this kind it is not possible to acknowledge all secondary authorities. In the bibliography, too, it has been necessary to keep detailed references to a minimum. For these omissions I plead the nature of the enterprise. Other deficiencies are entirely my own. What merits it has are shared with others. The writing of this book has been made possible by the tolerance of my wife, to whom it is dedicated, and the more erratic but no less beneficial forbearance of my small son. It also owes much to the supervision of an unfailingly attentive and congenial general editor, on whose judgement and scholarship I have liberally drawn.

P. L.

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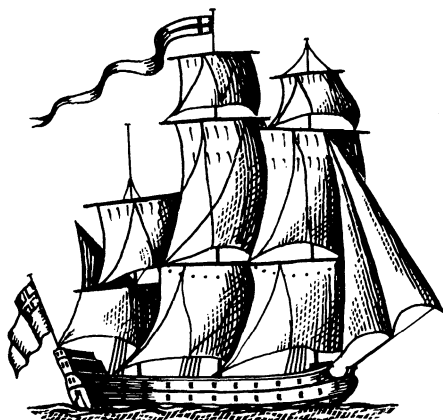
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

THE expression 'a polite and commercial people' was used by the distinguished academic, MP, and judge, William Blackstone, in his magisterial *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, published between 1765 and 1769.¹ Blackstone is a fitting source for the title of this volume. His lifetime, 1723 to 1780, coincides with the period which it describes, and his varied career touched many of the themes with which it is concerned. But similar terms were commonplace in the 1760s and 1770s, and suggest something of a consensus about the central characteristics of mid-eighteenth-century England. They also correspond well with the images of eighteenth-century life which were transmitted to posterity. Politeness conjures up some familiar features of Georgian society, its civilized if secular outlook, its faith in a measured code of manners, its attachment to elegance and stateliness, its oligarchical politics and aristocratic fashions. Politeness is stamped on the country houses and portraits which for many provide the most vivid introduction to the culture of the eighteenth century. It is to be found in the pages of the standard texts through which modern readers customarily encounter eighteenth-century literature, the *Spectator's* journalism, Pope's poetry, Horace Walpole's letters, Gibbon's history, Burke's rhetoric, Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, Johnson's own *Lives of the Poets*. Commerce is not less redolent of an era in which the empire, built on trade and extended by arms, expanded beyond the empires of ancient as well as modern times. Moreover, it will forever be associated with the enterprise of an age of extraordinary economic growth, accompanied by the first clear signs of industrialization.

Associations of this kind conceal facile generalizations, oversimple conclusions, and dangerous misunderstandings. But the

¹ iii. 326.

terms themselves, rooted in the usage of the day, are none the less important. Understanding mid-eighteenth-century England involves deciphering the code in which it thought and wrote, rescuing its meaning from the contamination of modern usage, and testing its relevance against the hard historical evidence. Blackstone's phrase was not only meant to be descriptive: though it revealed what he believed the English to be, it also implied his own approval that they were so. Not least it associated his own age with the spirit of progress. His book was designed to explain the arcane mysteries of English law to an audience which had the intelligence and interest to grasp its principles, but was too busy serving the diverse requirements of a complex, developing society to put itself through the costly experience of a traditional legal education. Practically every learned and scientific specialism had its Blackstone in the middle of the eighteenth century, appealing to much the same readership. It was a readership which, these writers believed, would not have been available in an earlier, less enlightened age. In short, a polite and commercial people was peculiarly the accomplishment of Blackstone's own time, at least of his own century. What exactly did he mean by it?

Commerce did not merely signify trade. Rather it suggested a definitive stage in the progress of mankind, as evidenced in the leadership of western Europe, and the manifold social and cultural consequences thereof. The eighteenth century had many anthropologists, economists, and sociologists, though it did not call them by these names. Most of them agreed that they lived in a commercial age, an era in which the processes of production and exchange had dramatically increased the wealth, improved the living standards, and transformed the mores of western societies. They contrasted the results with the feudal conditions still to be found in much of Europe and with still more primitive societies discovered overseas. France, Holland, and Britain were the obvious leaders in this progress, but Britain, in particular, seemed to be in the very forefront, with its formidable intellectual inheritance, its admirable political institutions, its spectacular financial sophistication, its vast overseas empire, and its burgeoning industrial production.

Commerce not only expressed the peculiar modernity of the Hanoverian age, it also indicated the problems which preoccupied contemporaries and the uncertainties which clouded their con-

fidence. Commerce in an international setting was an acutely competitive affair, in which the full power of the States competing was exerted to strengthen the national economy. The struggle for raw materials and tropical commodities, as well as for markets and the carrying trade which served them, was central to international relations. Mercantilism was not a contemporary term, and can be rather misleading. But its emphasis on competition is proper. Every war during this period was in essence a commercial war, and to a marked extent a colonial war, whether the enemy was a rival power or one's own insubordinate colonists. Every peace was the continuation of war by economic means. Views might differ on the commercial merits of one war or another, or one peace treaty or another, and different interests might be adversely or advantageously affected, but the essential object was the same. Since war and the conduct of foreign relations were the principal business of kings and their ministers much of the political and parliamentary history of the period was radically affected. The domestic consequences of commercial rivalry were hardly less far-reaching. Contemporary wisdom suggested the need for relatively free competition, but all kinds of covert interests, communal traditions, and collective sensibilities could be resistant to the requirements of an entrepreneurial order. Since Parliament was entrusted with oversight of the laws governing competition and government had a vital interest in the borrowing and taxation which bore on trade and industry, this too was a matter of supreme political importance.

Commerce was not just about exchange but more fundamentally about consumption. Adam Smith's celebrated *Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, championed the interest of consumers against monopolistic producers, and identified their demands as the critical spur to the creation of wealth. Not inappropriately for a work by a Scot in an age of Scottish 'enlightenment' it was probably the most influential book produced in England between 1727 and 1783. Yet it was only the most distinguished contribution to a continuing debate about the means by which consumption could be maintained. Moreover the moral and social consequences provoked even more speculation and argument. A history of luxury and attitudes to luxury would come very close to being a history of the eighteenth century. There is a sense in which politics in this period is about the distribution and representation of this luxury,

religion about the attempt to control it, public polemic about generating and regulating it, and social policy about confining it to those who did not produce it.

Luxury was the subject of endless controversy, not least when the object was to predict the future, one of the favourite objects of controversialists. Optimists saw no obvious limit to the enrichment of so vigorous a society, and endorsed the numerous improvements and changes which it brought to rural and urban life. They fearlessly replanned the education, supervision, and welfare of the lower class to fit it for such a society, assumed that British power would maintain the international competitiveness of this remorseless successful State, and made due allowance for the provision of godly discipline and pious benevolence in a commercial age. Pessimists worried about the economic nemesis which must befall a people unaware of the natural limits of expansion, doubted the demographic and commercial vigour of their own State, and deplored the transformations which economic change brought to traditional values, faiths, and customs. They denounced the corruption and hypocrisy which marred a once venerated political system, urged a reversion to fundamental religious values, and grimly looked forward to the collapse of what seemed in every sense a meretricious society. It was possible to entertain some of the confidence with some of the doubt, and few people took an extreme view on all of these questions. Complacency and despair were usually to be found in equal measure and often followed each other among the same people in rapid succession. But between them they embrace the most pervasive concerns of the age.

In a sense politeness was a logical consequence of commerce. A feudal society and an agrarian economy were associated with an elaborate code of honour designed to govern relations among the privileged few. Their inferiors could safely be left to languish in brutish ignorance under brutal laws. But a society in which the most vigorous and growing element was a commercial middle class, involved both in production and consumption, required a more sophisticated means of regulating manners. Politeness conveyed upper-class gentility, enlightenment, and sociability to a much wider élite whose only qualification was money, but who were glad to spend it on acquiring the status of gentleman. In theory politeness comprehended, even began with, morals, but in practice it was as much a question of material acquisitions and urbane

manners. It both permitted and controlled a relatively open competition for power, influence, jobs, wives, and markets. Though it involved much emulation and admiration of aristocrats, it did not imply an essentially aristocratic society. Britain in the eighteenth century was a plutocracy if it was anything, and even as a plutocracy one in which power was widely diffused, constantly contested, and ever adjusting to new incursions of wealth, often modest wealth.

Politeness and politics had the same stem and were certainly complementary terms in the eighteenth century. But there was a significant distinction. Politeness was primarily about the social control of the individual at a time of intense enthusiasm for individual rights and responsibilities. Politics, at every level, involved individuals in consciously making decisions which affected large numbers of people. Assessing the consequences needs a certain historical sensitivity to the personalities of those involved. It is possible to be reasonably confident that the sentimental vogue would have occurred in the 1760s and 1770s without the stimulus supplied by the writings of Rousseau. It is even feasible to suppose that infant mortality and prison conditions would have been exposed to critical investigation without the leadership provided by Hanway and Howard. But it is less easy to be sure that Canada was destined to join the British empire without the generalship of Wolfe, or the Stuarts condemned to stay at Rome without the statesmanship of Walpole.

Yet the underlying tendencies of public life were closely related to the themes displayed elsewhere. The traditions inherited from the seventeenth century revealed the vigour on which the British prided themselves, but not the discipline and order which they sought to acquire. Popular libertarianism, religious conflict, party strife, dynastic instability, all remained features of the decades which followed the Revolution of 1688. The competition and change so characteristic of the mid-eighteenth century might have been expected to make these contentions worse. They also put a still greater premium on regulating the consequent tensions, securing the highest possible degree of consensus, and generally averting the chronic divisions which had threatened the stability of post-Revolution in England. To this extent the politics of the period, though not always very urbane, were the politics of politeness, the pursuit of harmony within a propertied society. Nor was this a matter of the operation of unseen forces. Rhetoric aside, all the

most successful politicians of the age, Walpole, Pelham, Newcastle, North, the two Pitts, were its practitioners, even when, as in the case of Walpole and the elder Pitt, they had made their name by confrontation. It is no coincidence that the very term 'patriotism', the battle cry of opposition and the reminder of a fundamental political division in the first half of the century, was first reduced to cant and then rendered anodyne as the expression of national unity in the second half.

The 'people' to whom Blackstone addressed his lectures, his books, and his parliamentary speeches, were certainly polite and commercial. But most people were neither, as he very well knew. Polite living and commercial consumption with any real degree of choice were for the propertied members of society. This was by no means a small class and it was a feature of the age that it was a diverse and a growing one. Even so it did not include more than a minority of the subjects of George II and George III. The great majority of the population were propertied only in the pedantic sense employed by political philosophers, that is that they had a property in their own lives and labour. They lacked the kind of property which made it practicable to acquire politeness and engage in conspicuous consumption, though there were always censors at hand to criticize the humble artisan or peasant for seeking to do both. To propertied people they were a continuing irritation, an implied rebuke and source of guilt, a cause for concern, a potential threat, and a stimulus to philanthropy. In short, they were the perpetual challenge of the age. The story of politeness and commerce as it developed in the mid-eighteenth century is not least an account of the way in which the polite and commercial class dealt with its inferiors.

It is also the story of a transformation, or rather a series of transformations. Politeness and commerce were already hackneyed terms in the 1730s, and Blackstone's expression would still have seemed appropriate in the 1780s. But this is not to say that they went with a static society. In fact it was the utility of both that they allowed for the dynamism of the age. The commercial spirit of the 1770s was as marked as that of the 1720s. But Walpole's generation would have been startled to find it threading the landscape with waterways, raising cities and suburbs where there had been only villages, revolutionizing farms and manufactures, dictating war against the American colonies, and promoting par-

liamentary legislation on an unprecedented scale. Politeness, too, was as necessary in the 1770s as the 1720s. But Lord Burlington's generation would have been astonished by the Gothic Revival, middle-class tourism, macaroni extravagance, evangelical puritanism, and the sentimental excesses of the cult of feeling. There was much that was even more revolutionary in the responses which both politeness and commerce provoked: Methodist 'enthusiasm', systematic collective philanthropy, subversive political radicalism, and, not least, critical interest in the status of women, children, foreigners, slaves, distant peoples, animals, and every other living creature not blessed with the inestimable divine gift of birth as a free-born, propertied Englishman. But Englishmen themselves were hardly the same people, and there was much less certainty by the 1780s about who precisely they were. The British empire in 1783 was not at all what it had been in 1727, nor were relations between the constituent peoples of the British Isles the same. Change, as many contemporaries insisted, was the endemic condition of the age. What lay beyond politeness and commerce themselves was something which perplexed and fascinated enquiring minds. For the rest, no doubt, it was sufficient to wrestle with the practical consequences of the transformation which they had already wrought.

CHAPTER 2

Robin's Reign, 1727–1742

THOUGH the accession of George II aroused widespread expectations of change, both at home and abroad, the new King eventually endorsed the men and measures of his predecessor. The reign began in remarkably tranquil circumstances, with no suggestion of a reviving Jacobite threat. It confirmed the growing stature of Sir Robert Walpole, and simultaneously served to identify him with the ills of contemporary society. A galaxy of literary talents exposed the faults of his 'system' and created an enduring image of corruption as the prime characteristic of the 'Robinocracy'. Yet Walpole's supremacy showed increasing signs of strain in the mid-1730s. His excise scheme proved a major miscalculation, and caused a crisis at court, as well as exposing him to severe criticism inside and outside Parliament. It enabled his opponents to appeal to 'Country' sentiment rather than to narrow party prejudices. Divisions within the royal family provided a focus for aristocratic opposition. Episcopal unrest at the deistic tendencies visible in court life endangered the alliance of Whig politicians and Whig Churchmen. An outbreak of anticlericalism in the House of Commons made it easier for Dissenters to challenge the privileges of the Church, and the consequent religious tensions added an element of instability to ministerial politics. Above all there was growing

evidence of popular alienation from the regime, culminating in the pressures which forced Walpole to declare war on Spain in 1739. Military failure and the extension of the war to Europe provided the crucial stimulus required to weaken Walpole's hold on power. It needed only the general election of 1741 to bring to an end an administration which had broken new ground in British political history and firmly established its head as a uniquely successful, if also uniquely execrated Prime Minister.



THE ACCESSION OF GEORGE II

IN the monarchies of the eighteenth century no occasion raised more hopes and offered more disappointments than the accession of a new monarch. Especially was this the case in a limited monarchy, where the pattern of politics as well as the fate of individual politicians might be affected. In this and indeed in most respects the accession of George II in June 1727 turned out to be a curious anticlimax, more important for what it failed to change than for what it changed. There was no indication that the new King intended to challenge the laws and conventions which contemporaries inaccurately but reverently described as the Revolution Settlement. The champions of the new court stressed its mildness and benevolence, as well as its respect for traditional rights and liberties. The scientist and Freemason J. T. Desaguliers, mindful of Newton's death a few months earlier, celebrated the accession with Newtonian metaphors. His verse expressed both the contemporary faith in the unique virtue of England's balanced constitution, and the enthusiasm of the 1720s for mechanistic descriptions of the natural world. In his relations with his subjects, George was compared to the sun, though not indeed in the sense of a Sun King such as Louis XIV. 'His Pow'r, coerc'd by Laws, still leaves them free, Directs but not Destroys their Liberty'. The rules of gravity as well as of light operated to his advantage. 'Attraction now in all the Realm is seen, To bless the Reign of George and Caroline.'¹

Less fancifully, and at the level which brought the monarchy into the minds of ordinary Englishmen, it was made clear that the customary rites would be strictly observed. Despite the factious politics of the City of London, party animosities were not permitted to mar the succession. The coronation, accounted by contemporaries a spectacular success, was held during a tumultuous parliamentary election in the City, but with no adverse effects. Loyalty was gratified by the report that the Corporation expended the large sum of £4,889 on the traditional royal banquet in the Guildhall.² The Queen was prominent in these festivities and did much to create a comforting atmosphere of normality. She was the

¹ *The Newtonian System of the World, the Best Model of Government: An Allegorical Poem* (Westminster, 1728), pp. 24, 34.

² W. Maitland, *The History and Survey of London* (2 vols., London, 1756), i. 541-3.

first consort to appear at the coronation by right of her husband's inheritance since 1625, as her husband was the first Prince of Wales to succeed his father since Charles I in 1625. Though the Jacobite threat could not be ignored there was a marked sense of dynastic continuity about the events of 1727. In time, admittedly, the public image of the new regime was to be sullied. Family life at court came to resemble a bear garden rather than the happy domesticity celebrated by court poets. Queen Caroline gained a reputation for theological heterodoxy which alarmed those who associated the monarchy with ecclesiastical orthodoxy if not with divine right. But this lay in the future: in 1727 the very uneventfulness of the accession was reassuring.

Hanoverian regality was confident but not pretentious, at any rate by the baroque standards of the day. Foreigners were partly shocked, partly impressed, when they witnessed the modest magnificence of the crowned heads of England. The palace of St James's, which George II showed no inclination to rebuild, was an acknowledged source of embarrassment, even of scandal, to Englishmen who cared about the image which their ruler projected abroad. The only splendid statue of a recent king in London was Grinling Gibbons's portrayal of James II in Whitehall, which successive Revolution monarchs had permitted to retain its prominent place. Attempts under George I to offer a fitting Hanoverian competitor had not been very successful. A ludicrous statue surmounted the spire of St George's, Bloomsbury. Another, erected in Grosvenor Square in 1726, was defaced and eventually dismembered by passers-by.³

There was no hint that George II's succession would bring a new and alien splendour to the court: pedantic though he was about forms and precedences, his pedantry always smacked more of the German princeling than the rival to the Most Catholic and Most Christian Majesties of the Bourbon monarchies. Yet his court did not give out a sense of insecurity. To all intents and appearances the succession was rock solid. There would be no Twenty-Eight to follow 1727 as there had been a Fifteen to follow 1714. This was not merely the perspective from London. Provincial England exhibited the same stability. It was confirmed by the assurance with which the oligarchs of Whig government in corporation and

³ G. S. Dugdale, *Whitehall Through the Centuries* (London, 1950), p. 76; E. B. Chancellor, *The History of the Squares of London* (London, 1907), p. 39.

county alike confronted their opponents. In Whittlebury Forest in Northamptonshire, for example, village communities hastened to demand their supposedly ancient right of felling the tallest trees as 'coronation poles'. But when a number of valuable trees vanished overnight, suggesting commercial exploitation of customary privileges, neither the government nor its local supporters were impressed by the claim that the right had been clearly established in 1714, on the accession of George I. Then, in the midst of a succession crisis, it had been prudent to treat such provocation with lenity; in 1727 there was, and was felt to be, no such necessity.⁴ In Whittlebury Forest as at Westminster Whig rulers behaved as if the accession of the second Hanoverian King was the most natural thing in the world.

The tranquillity of George II's accession had much to do with the international setting. In Rome the Old Pretender was completely isolated. Since 1716 the Anglo-French alliance had effectively deprived him of the support on which the Stuarts depended for their restoration to the English throne. Without this the promises of aid from Vienna and Madrid were worth little. This is not to say that British ministers were heedless of the Jacobite threat, least of all in the disturbed diplomatic conditions of 1727. Europe was virtually divided into two armed camps, the alliances of Hanover and Vienna. The former, based on Anglo-French collaboration, was dedicated to preserving the uneasy balance of power negotiated at the great peace settlement of Utrecht in 1713. The latter, bringing together Spain and Austria in an unlikely combination, was designed to destroy it. The implications were maritime and colonial as well as continental. In the last year of George I's reign Britain and Spain were on the brink of war. Some of the principal British gains at Utrecht—Gibraltar, Minorca, and a share in Spain's American trade—were at risk. Within days of George II's elevation his ministers assured foreign courts, friendly, neutral, or hostile, that there would be no significant change in the diplomatic posture of the Court of St James, let alone any weakening of its stance towards the Vienna alliance. The will of the King himself was clear on these points. George II was a veteran of the War of the Spanish Succession. His knowledge of European affairs was extensive, his judgement in diplomatic matters generally sound,

⁴ J. H. Cooke, *The Timber-Stealing Riots in the Forests of Whittlebury and Salcey, In 1727-28* (Northampton, 1885).

if unimaginative. Like his father he valued the interests of his Electorate at least as highly as those of his British subjects. It was widely believed in England that the alliance of Hanover was designed mainly with the security of Hanover in mind. But its architect, Lord Townshend, had insisted that it guaranteed the security of the Protestant Succession and the prosperity of British trade. In any event it seemed prudent to continue the policy of George I. Cardinal Fleury, the principal director of French foreign policy, may have been slightly startled to receive a personal letter from the new King of Great Britain. He can hardly have been surprised by its assurance of unchanged measures.⁵

Less predictable was the King's decision to continue with the men as well as the measures of his father. As Lord Hervey, an acute if acerbic chronicler of court life, recorded in his memoirs, George II had frequently expressed his dislike for the 'four governors of this kingdom': Sir Robert Walpole, the First Lord of the Treasury; his brother Horatio Walpole, ambassador to Versailles and unofficial diplomatic adviser to the Cabinet; the Duke of Newcastle; and his fellow Secretary of State Lord Townshend. 'He used always to speak of the first as a great rogue, of the second as a dirty buffoon, of the third as an impertinent fool, and of the fourth as a choleric blockhead; it was very natural to expect the reins of power would not long be left in their hands.'⁶ Certainly these men expected short shrift from the new court. George I had died at Osnabrugh on 11 June. When Walpole carried the news to his successor on 14 June, he was curtly ordered to report to Sir Spencer Compton, the new King's political confidant. But Compton made the fatal mistake of asking Walpole's assistance, notably in drawing up the official declaration which a new monarch was required to make to his Council. Such deference gave Walpole an invaluable opportunity to demonstrate his superior skill and experience. Later on, both George II's son Frederick, and his grandson the future George III, went to elaborate lengths to ensure that on their own accession there would be no such necessity to rely on their predecessors' ministers. In 1727 the old ministry continued virtually unchanged. Compensation was found for the

⁵ W. Coxe, *Memoirs of the Life and Administration of Sir Robert Walpole, Earl of Orford* (3 vols., London, 1798), ii. 518.

⁶ R. Sedgwick, ed., *Some Materials towards Memoirs of the Reign of King George II*, by Lord Hervey (3 vols., London, 1931), i. 29-30.

leading adherents of the new court—a peerage for Compton, the office of Master of the Horse for the Earl of Scarborough. Apart from this the only significant alterations were those which Walpole succeeded in procuring to demonstrate his supremacy, including the removal of a personal enemy, Lord Berkeley, from the Admiralty.

This extraordinary turn of events gave rise to much speculation. Hervey's account stresses the stupidity of Spencer Compton, who allowed himself to be so easily outmanœuvred by Walpole. But Hervey was incapable of offering a charitable explanation where a malicious one would do. It is at least as plausible that Compton was, as Walpole's Secretary to the Treasury John Scrope believed, 'frighted with the greatness of the undertaking, and more particularly as to what related to money affairs'.⁷ The influence of Queen Caroline was also important. She had scant regard for the abilities of Compton, and did not conceal her distaste for his attention to the King's mistress Mrs Howard. Above all, she possessed a shrewd appreciation of Walpole's talents, based on the years which Walpole had spent in opposition with the then Prince and Princess of Wales between 1716 and 1720.

If the Queen was seeking evidence to convince her husband she soon obtained it. Parliament met for a short session on 27 June in a seemingly dazzling demonstration of Walpole's managerial talents. The King was granted a civil list of £800,000. This sum was unprecedentedly generous and carried with it a promise of any surpluses on the duties voted to finance it. The Queen's jointure was fixed no less lavishly at £100,000. The largess was not altogether Walpole's doing. Parliament passed through a brief 'honeymoon-period' in its relations with George II in 1727, before his political preferences were revealed. Tory opponents of the previous King hoped for a less hostile disposition on the part of his successor. Only the Jacobite William Shippen had the temerity to oppose the financial arrangements. Walpole was a skilled parliamentary performer, certainly; but, more important in the summer of 1727, he was lucky.

⁷ Cox, *Walpole*, ii. 520.

THE GROWTH OF OPPOSITION AND THE FALL OF TOWNSHEND

George II's surprising adherence to his father's minister gave rise to a mixture of congratulation and consternation. In a published sermon the Bishop of Gloucester Joseph Wilcocks rejoiced that unlike Rehoboam, 'the Son and Successor of Solomon, he forsook not the Council of the old Men, those who stood before his Father while he yet lived, and who, by their Experience and Success, were most likely to give wholesome Advice, and, by the Blessing of God, to make his Reign glorious'.⁸ Wilcocks was duly rewarded with the Deanery of Westminster and the Bishopric of Rochester. Others were less enthusiastic. The price of endorsing George I's choice of ministers was to drive still deeper the resentment of George I's opponents. Some of these were discontented Whigs, men like Lord Carteret and William Pulteney, who had lost the struggle for power with Walpole and Townshend under one Hanoverian King and were now deprived of a second chance to win it under his successor. Their following was not large: in the Commons it was doubted whether more than a dozen MPs would support them. However, they provided the germ of a 'malecontent Whig' party which was to grow to formidable proportions in subsequent years.

No less disappointed and much more numerous were the Tories, whose expectations of a fresh beginning in their relations with the Hanoverian regime proved sadly mistaken. Yet they had some grounds for optimism. There was no logical reason for George II to perpetuate his father's proscription of the Tory party. The precedent of William III clearly demonstrated that a Revolution monarch with Whig antecedents could only gain by refusing to become the property of one party. To those who asserted that the Tories were Jacobites, it could be answered that while the Stuarts remained loyal to Rome there was little danger of their successfully appealing to the 'Church Party', as Tories frequently described themselves. It was plausible, too, to argue that Jacobitism was the resort of men rendered desperate by the antipathy of George I. Given a less hostile atmosphere under his successor it would quickly lose its attraction. Queen Caroline was well known to favour a degree of *rapprochement* with the Tories. Some of her

⁸ *The Providence of God, the Preservation of Kingdoms* (London, 1728), pp. 15-16.

clerical friends, including the celebrated Thomas Sherlock, were of Tory or at least High Church background. Yet none of these arguments carried the day. The King listened graciously enough to suggestions that he might begin by relaxing the persecution of the Tory squires in their natural habitat, the Commissions of the Peace. But as the memoirs of Lord Chancellor King reveal, the hopes thus raised were quickly quashed by the opposition of Whig magnates such as the Duke of Grafton in Suffolk.⁹

Possibly the court was confirmed in its attitude by the results of the general election which by law followed a new accession. From a strength of nearly 180 in the Commons the Tories were reduced to less than 130. Nor was this simply a case of fair-weather friends deserting them in the close boroughs, where party loyalty took second place to the personal interests of corrupt borough-mongers or tiny electorates. In the counties, where electorates were large and relatively independent, the Tories had held almost three-quarters of the seats, 58 out of 80. After the election they could muster less than half, 37. The loss of both seats, in Kent, in Yorkshire, in Lincolnshire, and in Cambridgeshire, for example, could not be attributed to oligarchical manipulation. It seemed to court Whigs that Toryism was on its death-bed if not yet in its death-throes. The parliamentary session of 1728 appeared to confirm their view. Austria and Spain were brought to the negotiating table, and the prospects for a lasting peace appeared good. On questions which might have been controversial the ministry won massive majorities: 290 to 84 on the size of the army, 280 to 84 on the retention of Hessian mercenaries in British pay, 250 to 97 on the National Debt.

These promising indications proved misleading. The peace-makers made painfully slow progress. There were reports of Spanish attacks on British trade, but the court seemed reluctant to respond in kind. Admiral Hosier's ships were compelled to watch the silver galleons carrying Spain's financial life-blood pass freely under their guns; a still more expensive fleet was kept armed but immobile at Spithead. The war had to be paid for yet it was not to be waged. The land tax stood at an unpopular four shillings in the pound. Walpole was driven to desperate expedients to finance the maintenance of land and sea forces on a war footing.

⁹ *The Life and Letters of John Locke, with extracts from his Correspondence, Journals, and Common-Place Books. By Lord King* (2 vols., London, 1830), ii. 49-50.

Merchants complained bitterly that the balance of trade was turning against them. The anxieties voiced were not merely those of the bellicose, the interested, and the alienated. Whigs had accepted the French alliance on the grounds that it protected Britain's naval and commercial interests, while offering a prospect of dictating peace to the rest of Europe. But in 1729 this case was beginning to look flimsy: there was a suspicion that the reviving confidence and vigour of the French court, under the kingship of Louis XV and the direction of Cardinal Fleury, would end by making the British the dupes rather than the dictators of Europe. When the opposition ventilated the sensitive issue of 'Spanish depredations' in February 1729, the ministry's majority fell with startling suddenness from over 200 to only 35.

The administration was also weakened by increasingly acrimonious relations between Walpole and Townshend, long-standing though their partnership had been. The death of Lady Townshend, Walpole's sister, in 1726, had removed an important connection between the two men. But the accession of a new King, and the special relationship which Walpole enjoyed with the Queen, made matters much worse. There is no reason to challenge Hervey's judgement. A 'great mortification to Lord Townshend's pride was the seeing and feeling every day that Sir Robert Walpole, who came into the world, in a manner, under his protection and inferior to him in fortune, quality, and credit, was now by force of his infinitely superior talents, as much above him in power, interest, weight, credit and reputation.'¹⁰ No less important, from Walpole's vantage-point, his brother-in-law was becoming a liability. In the Commons it was Walpole's task to raise supplies for a foreign policy of doubtful utility; he also had to bear the brunt of public and parliamentary criticism. The employment of the Hessian troops and the Spanish depredations had the potential to bring down the ministry. Later, in 1730, the opposition found another such issue when it was reported that France was rebuilding the fortifications of Dunkirk, in violation of its treaty obligations. Everything pointed to action against Townshend. The aid of the Queen and Townshend's fellow Secretary of State, Newcastle, was enlisted, and in May 1730 Townshend was compelled to resign.

Walpole had already anticipated this outcome by taking control of foreign policy. In November 1729 the Treaty of Seville restored

¹⁰ Hervey, *Memoirs*, i. 83.

peace with Spain. After protracted negotiation, a *rapprochement* with Austria made possible a more general settlement, confirmed by the Treaty of Vienna in March 1731. Thus was Britain freed from the burden of an undeclared but costly war. The Austrian alliance was a daring stroke. It included a controversial guarantee of the Pragmatic Sanction, by which the Emperor Charles VI provided for his daughter's succession to the Habsburg territories on his own death. It also weakened the Anglo-French alliance, which had transformed the pattern of European relations since 1716. Not least, in retrospect, it concluded forty years of British involvement with the rivalries of the continental powers. Yet Walpole's object, peace, if necessary at any price, seemed secure, and his reward was considerable. During the parliamentary session of 1730 he was able to reduce the armed forces, bring down the land tax, and abolish the salt duty. With Fleury he had retained sufficient credit to extract a French promise rescuing him from the Dunkirk imbroglio. At court he was supreme, in Parliament he was virtually unchallengeable. Abroad he made his master the boasted, if not quite the acknowledged, arbiter of Europe. 'Robin's Reign' had truly commenced.

WALPOLE'S SUPREMACY

Walpole's pre-eminence at the start of a second decade in power had a novelty about it which is difficult to appreciate in retrospect, with knowledge of the long and successful administrations of later Georgian Prime Ministers. Contemporaries, regardless of their political persuasion, were struck by it. The historically minded were driven back to the sixteenth century in search of precedents, and even then few imagined that Tudor monarchs had been so much under the thumb of their ministers as George II seemed to be. Walpole's supporters cited Burghley, risen from unpretentious origins to direct the destiny and save the religion of his country. Opponents preferred the ambition, arrogance, and avarice of Wolsey. It was the second analogy which tended to prevail with the uncertain and the uninformed.

In his own day Walpole enjoyed a unique degree not only of personal power but of personal abuse. This malevolent chorus long affected his reputation. By the late eighteenth century, however, less unfavourable verdicts were being offered. The economist and

philosopher Adam Smith saw in Walpole a far-sighted financial reformer, and the elder Pitt publicly regretted his youthful opposition to Walpole. The writer Philip Thicknesse flatly declared that Walpole 'introduced the Protestant succession'.¹¹ Sir Robert Peel, not the most likely admirer, perhaps, expressed his strong approval. 'Of what public man can it be said with any assurance of certainty, that placed in the situation of Walpole, he would in the course of an administration of twenty years have committed so few errors, and would have left at the close of it the house of Hanover in equal security, and the finances in equal order.'¹² These assessments rightly recognized Walpole's abiding preoccupation with the need, in an age of chronic dynastic instability, to establish the Hanoverian Succession on a lasting foundation. It was generally the Whigs of 1689 who received the credit for securing the Revolution Settlement, but Walpole has a no less impressive claim. Edmund Burke even exonerated Walpole from the gravest accusation laid against him:

He was an honourable man and a sound Whig. He was not, as the Jacobites and discontented Whigs of the time have represented him, and as ill-informed people still represent him, a prodigal and corrupt minister. They charged him, in their libels and seditious conversations, with having first reduced corruption to a system. Such was their cant. But he was far from governing by corruption. He governed by party attachments. The charge of systematic corruption is less applicable to him, perhaps, than to any minister who ever served the crown for so great a length of time.¹³

Cant or not, it was widely believed that Walpole did indeed reduce corruption to a system. In part this was simply because he was the principal dispenser of patronage. The means of corruption did not multiply under Walpole; official patronage and the National Debt, cited by his antagonists as the main sources of improper influence, were both stable during his ministry. Nor was it true that Walpole engrossed all patronage to himself. He never gained that control of the Crown's ecclesiastical preferments which many of his successors came to expect as of right. He also had limited powers of appointment over the armed forces. Even in his own

¹¹ P. Thicknesse, *Useful Hints to those who make the Tour of France* (London, 1768), p. 198.

¹² N. Gash, *Peel* (London, 1976), p. 304.

¹³ *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (8 vols., London, 1854), *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, iii. 50.

fiscal department he could never depend entirely on the servility of the revenue boards, the customs and excise commissioners. What was true, however, was that Walpole's decision to remain in the House of Commons rather than proceeding to the Lords, when he effectively became first minister in 1721, placed him in a unique position to control and channel the patronage which related to the lower house. This included everything which bore in some measure on MPs or their electors. In such matters he made himself the acknowledged conduit for the transmission of applications and favours, even when his actual command of them was less extensive than his supplicants imagined. Previous ministers, Danby and Harley, for example, had aspired to a monopoly of parliamentary patronage; neither approached it as closely as Walpole.

It is easy to see why Walpole was vulnerable to the charge of corruption. He revelled in the wealth which his office brought him, though it was much exaggerated by contemporaries. When he died in 1745 it came as a shock to many that he was reported to have left debts amounting to £40,000. None the less, his ostentatious display of suburban sophistication in Chelsea and aristocratic opulence at Houghton provoked much critical comment. There was also in his character and conversation a degree of coarseness readily mistaken for cynicism. This sometimes irritated his friends, including the Queen, and contributed to his reputation for parvenu vulgarity. A lifetime of politics and high office did not give him, to say the least, an elevated view of human motives. It was easy for his critics to assume that his disparagement of others reflected a want of probity in himself. Certainly he believed that most of his political enemies were hypocrites who pursued him out of spite and party spirit rather than high-mindedness. He had been the victim of such malice in 1712 when a Tory Parliament placed him in the Tower and expelled him from the Commons for peculation which was never proved. Political prosecutions of this kind he always detested: the Atterbury Plot, which he considered a genuine Jacobite conspiracy, was another matter. No doubt he had a shrewd suspicion that such prosecutions were more likely to change the occupants of the Augean stables than to cleanse them. But his defence of men who were manifestly guilty of malpractice and fraud left a damaging impression.

A series of scandals disfigured public life in the early 1730s. Four statutory bodies were affected: the South Sea Company, the

York Buildings Company, the Charitable Corporation, and the Derwentwater Trust. Two of these cases caused uproar. The disgraceful affair of the Charitable Corporation caught public trustees lining their own pockets at the expense of a fund established for the employment and relief of the poor. Yet Walpole went out of his way to defend one of his supporters among the trustees, Sir Robert Sutton. Sutton was nevertheless expelled from the Commons. The revelations concerning the Derwentwater Trust were no less disturbing. It transpired that Jacobite estates forfeited to the State had been plundered by men appointed to supervise their sale in the public interest. Walpole did his best to save one of his City friends who was involved, Sir John Eyles. Such 'screening' recalled his role in the South Sea Bubble when he had shielded the most highly placed villains from parliamentary or judicial retribution, thereby preserving the court of George I from possible ruin, and advancing his own political career.

The image of the 'Skreenmaster' was one of the most enduring associated with Walpole, though he was never proved guilty of such breaches of trust himself. Even his supporters were sometimes dismayed by this aspect of his politics. Sir John Perceval, an independent Whig who usually supported Walpole, observed that 'it is this meanness of his (the prostitution of the character of a first minister in assisting and strenuously supporting the defence of dunghill worms, let their cause be ever so unjust, against men of honour, birth, and fortune, and that in person too), that gains him so much ill will'.¹⁴ Certainly such conduct was a gift to his opponents, for it facilitated the most improbable allegations. There was nothing whatever, for instance, to connect Walpole with Colonel Francis Charteris, convicted perjurer and rapist. But when Charteris received a royal pardon for the rape of a serving-maid in 1730 it was easy to assume that this was yet another case of ministerial protection of vice in high places. Satirists did not hesitate to draw the analogy between Rape Master General and Skreen Master General.

THE CASE AGAINST ROBINOCRACY

Personalizing politics in this way offered an easily identifiable target, as well as a suitable subject, for the popular press. It

¹⁴ Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Egmont Diary*, i. 85.

produced some influential cartoons: *Robin's Reign* in 1731, for which the printer William Rayner was successfully prosecuted, and *Robin's Progress* in 1735, a commission which Hogarth, as the brilliantly successful creator of the *Harlot* and the *Rake*, was asked to undertake. He prudently declined, and the result was an inferior product by an unknown artist but one which left no one who saw it in any doubt as to who and what were being satirized. In retrospect it is obvious that Walpole satisfied a deep contemporary need to find a scapegoat for the ills of the day. Opponents hit on his personal vulnerability in this respect almost by accident. Certainly this was true of John Gay, author of the most successful of all supposedly anti-Walpolian satires.

Gay was not so much a proscribed patriot, as a disappointed placeman. His successful edition of *Fables*, published in 1726, had been dedicated to the younger of George I's grandsons, the future Duke of Cumberland; moreover, through Prince George's mistress Mrs Howard he had what he took to be a secure interest in the future. But on George II's accession, Mrs Howard proved to be an injudicious investment. Gay was offered the humiliating position of Gentleman Usher to the infant Princess Louise. To Alexander Pope, he wrote: 'O that I had never known what a Court was! Dear *Pope*, what a barren Soil (to me so) have I been striving to produce something out of!'¹⁵ The *Beggar's Opera*, which he went on to write, was doubtless in large measure a result of his frustration. Whether it was aimed specifically at Walpole is another matter. No one character could clearly be identified with the Prime Minister and the plot had no unambiguously political content. But Walpole, who was present on the first night in Lincoln's Inn Fields, can hardly have been surprised by its uproarious reception. The roll call of criminals in Act I included '*Robin of Bagshot*, alias *Gorgon*, alias *Bluff Bob*, alias *Carbuncle*, alias *Bob Booty*'; the celebrated scene in which the partners in crime, Peachum and his nominal gaoler Lockit, grew to suspect and finally quarrel with each other, was treated as a hit at Walpole's deteriorating relationship with Townshend; and the repeated references to the 'Great Man' in association with unsavoury characters of the criminal underworld was inevitably taken to have a political connotation. At the end the beggar appeared on stage to remind his audience

¹⁵ C. F. Burgess, ed., *The Letters of John Gay* (Oxford, 1966), p. 66.

of the 'Similitude of Manners in high and low Life'.¹⁶ But his listeners plainly preferred to make more precise comparisons with the court of George II and the character of his first minister.

The success of the *Beggar's Opera* demonstrated the popularity and profits to be derived from political satire. Rich, the proprietor of the theatre, became richer and, as the contemporary witticism had it, gay. Gay became rich, though he lost the apartment in Whitehall which he enjoyed as a Commissioner of Lotteries, and spent his declining years in the fashionable and opulent company of the Duke and Duchess of Queensberry. Lavinia Fenton, the actress who depicted the one truly innocent character in the piece, Polly, became a celebrity overnight, caught the eye of the Duke of Bolton, and was said to have had £400 a year settled 'upon her during pleasure, and upon disagreement £200 a year'.¹⁷ The government banned Gay's next play, *Polly*, and began waging a ferocious but somewhat ineffectual war against the theatre. The result was merely to intensify the political polarization of the stage and indeed the arts generally. Like Gay, Jonathan Swift had been a disappointed seeker after preferment. In 1726 he also had written a popular work, *Gulliver's Travels*, which was interpreted as a more specific satire than had been intended. The same could be said of the third great masterpiece of these years, Pope's *Dunciad*, published in 1729. Henry Fielding built his early career as a dramatist on uncompromising satire. Even so, his most enduring denunciation of Walpole's politics, one which, like the *Beggar's Opera*, employed the parallel between high politics and low criminality, was published much later, after Walpole's fall. 1743, the year of his *Jonathan Wild*, was also the year in which Pope's *Dunciad* was given a thrust more explicitly directed against Walpole himself. By then there were no dangers in such unequivocal criticism. Indeed the lesser talents of Grub Street had long since thrown caution to the wind in this respect.

This is not to say that the case presented against Walpole's ministry was by any means merely a personal one. Over the years, the *Craftsman*, first published in 1726 to express 'malecontent' views, developed into an influential vehicle of propaganda against the government. Week in and week out it offered an analysis of contemporary ills which forms one of the eighteenth century's

¹⁶ *The Beggar's Opera* (London, 1921), pp. 4, 47, 91.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

most important statements of the relationship between political ideas and practice. Much of this analysis was provided by Lord Bolingbroke, the disappointed rival of Robert Harley in the last years of Queen Anne's reign and a declared Jacobite under George I before his return from exile in 1725. A conflict which pitted Bolingbroke against Walpole was fascinating. Both were men of the highest intelligence, both born leaders. They were more or less of an age: Walpole was fifty-one at the accession of George II, Bolingbroke forty-nine. Each was a product, in political terms, of the 'rage of party' which had followed the Revolution of 1688 and reached crisis-point in the second decade of the eighteenth century, between the impeachment of Dr Sacheverell in 1710, and the South Sea Bubble in 1720. Both had retreated from the partisan extremism of their youth. Walpole's Whiggism in the 1730s included much that would have been acceptable to the Tories, and Bolingbroke's Toryism was quite compatible with the views of patriot Whigs. Each was a formidable parliamentary performer, though Bolingbroke was prohibited from taking his seat in the Lords after 1725.

In their contrasting fortunes there was doubtless a large element of luck. But there were also some crucial differences between the two men. If Walpole was arrogant, he rarely made the mistake of displaying it in his daily dealings. Bolingbroke did not suffer fools gladly, and left even those whom he flattered resentful of his condescension. Walpole had a core of steel: his political courage carried him through some desperate crises and made him a figure of exceptional personal authority. Bolingbroke had broken under the stress of the disputed succession in 1715; he never recovered the respect of his contemporaries. Not least, Walpole had qualities much admired by backbench MPs: 'bottom', judgement, consistency. Bolingbroke was considered brilliant, erratic, and unreliable. Even so the contest between Bolingbroke's pen and Walpole's parliamentary power in the 1730s was by no means unequal.

In part, Bolingbroke's argument was historical.¹⁸ He discerned in British history a continuing struggle between the spirit of liberty and the spirit of faction, and plundered Paul Rapin's recently

¹⁸ This and subsequent quotations are from Bolingbroke's *Remarks on the History of England* and *A Dissertation on Parties* in *The Works of Lord Bolingbroke* (4 vols., London, 1844).

published *History* for appropriate examples. The ancient Britons were not mere slaves. 'This, we know, they were freemen.' Their liberty, consolidated by the Saxons, had survived the fearful damage inflicted by the Norman Conquest, and the civil strife of the later Middle Ages. It had even defied the despotic tendencies of the Tudors. Bolingbroke had read his Harrington and had no doubt that the sixteenth century had witnessed a decisive strengthening of this tradition, a redistribution of property from Church and nobility to commoners, buttressing the parliamentary defence against the tyranny of the Stuarts and Cromwell alike.

It was easy to depict Walpole as a manipulator of faction. Yet he was also a Whig, with libertarian credentials of his own. Bolingbroke's ingenuity in depriving his opponents of this argument made an important contribution to the cause of opposition. The Robinocracy, he pointed out, might signify the rule of the Revolution families, but it did not follow that it embodied Revolution principles. He shrewdly distinguished what he called the means and end of revolution. The means, that is the principle of resistance, had a Whiggish origin; but the end, the limitation of monarchy and the maintenance of civil liberty, had been retarded by the Whigs of the post-Revolution era. Even the Act of Settlement, the historic compact of the British people and the Electors of Hanover, had lost two of its great safeguards. The requirement that a king might go abroad only with the consent of Parliament, had been repealed in 1715, and the stipulation that war might not be waged for the defence of the foreign dominions of the Crown, had been blatantly violated by George I. The idea, increasingly attractive to Whigs of Walpole's kind, that the Revolution was final and needed no reinforcement, was dismissed with Machiavelli's often quoted maxim that liberty could be preserved only if a constitution were constantly restored to its first principles. Frequent revolutions testified to the essential health of the society in which they occurred. Bolingbroke's tainted past might have been supposed to make this a dangerous argument, but he met the objection head-on, with a perceptive assessment of the state of parties in England. The language of party, he claimed, had been redundant even at the time of the Revolution; by the 1730s it was quite without meaning. Non-resistance and divine right had long since been abandoned in theory as well as in practice, and the old religious animosities which had underpinned them dissolved.

Those who claimed exclusive use of the name of Whig were only a tiny faction of what had once been the Whig party. Those they called Tories and Jacobites were an equally tiny portion of the old Tory party. Both these minorities had an interest in perpetuating an ancient and now irrelevant conflict of their own. The real issue was the corruption of the court versus the patriotism of the country.

This argument was vital to an opposition based on an unstable coalition of discontented Whigs and proscribed Tories. But it needed more to bridge the emotional gulf between Whig and Tory. Among the smart intellectuals of Bolingbroke's circle, and in the increasingly cohesive social life of London's parliamentary classes, this gulf might be crossed. In a few counties, too, it could be spanned. In Bedfordshire the Duke of Bedford made a point of courting the Tories and in due course became not so much a Whig magnate as the ruler of an entire region. But in most localities the lingering appeal of a distinctive Tory tradition remained powerful. So did religious differences. Yet the need for collaboration in Parliament, and therefore in parliamentary elections, was obvious. Walpole could not be defeated by Whigs or Tories, only by a combination of both. Hence the emphasis of Bolingbroke and his friends on the priority of forging a true Country Party, capable of overcoming the old enmities. Hence, too, their concentration on issues which served this priority. The opposition's parliamentary tactics closely matched its propaganda in the press. The Hessian mercenaries, the Spanish depredations, and the Dunkirk fortifications could be depended upon to incense all hot-blooded Englishmen regardless of party; so could the corruption which underlay the Walpole regime and which the opposition attacked with periodic pension bills. These bills were so popular that Walpole had to rely on the House of Lords to defeat them. There was also the annual onslaught on the standing army, as a mercenary, potentially despotic force, and the unremitting war on the National Debt, a product of the Revolution, indeed, but one which dismayed honest Whigs as it did hidebound Tories. In most of these matters Walpole had little room for manœuvre. His ministry needed, and he argued plausibly that the Protestant Succession needed, placemen and pensioners, standing armies and a national debt. But in one respect he offered a hostage to fortune. His excise scheme was a deliberate initiative; it was also vulnerable to the bipartisan approach of the *Craftsman*.

THE EXCISE CRISIS

Walpole's great objective during the early years of the new reign had been to restore a measure of political tranquillity, chiefly by remodelling Townshend's foreign policy and thereby reducing taxation. From the Treaty of Vienna to the general election which was due in 1734, or as he probably planned, in 1733, this remained his priority. It is often said that Walpole had nothing which could be called a social policy. In a sense this is an anachronism; no eighteenth-century minister had a social policy which would satisfy the criteria of the twentieth century. But it would be truer to say, in any case, that he had a social policy which was lacking in appeal to modern audiences. His aim was to relieve the landowners, particularly that class of small country gentlemen who had borne the burden of the State's expenses since the Revolution, and who, in his view, continued to pay a disproportionate share of taxes. Like many politicians Walpole thought that he perfectly understood the aspirations of the class from which he had himself emerged, though his own circumstances had long since removed him from its essential concerns, let alone its social milieu. In this he doubtless exaggerated his own acumen. There were Tory country gentlemen who retained a conviction that it was their duty to shield their inferiors. The price of paternalism was the land tax. Others so detested Walpole that they forgot their own interest as taxpayers. On the other hand, the country gentlemen together exercised vast electoral influence; in the House of Commons those of them who were Whigs held the fate of ministries in their hands. Certainly Walpole's advisers were confident of the political profits which might be realized by his policy. The excise scheme of 1733 promised revenues which would permit a permanent reduction of the land tax to one shilling in the pound. As Charles Delafaye, one of Walpole's senior officials, put it, 'Half the land tax taken off, and no more remaining than 1s. in the pound, which was never known before since the revolution, must be popular in the country, let the Pulteneyans say what they will against it in the house, and must be of service against the next election.'¹⁹

The excise fitted well with Walpole's fiscal policy. Already he had reduced the land tax to 3s. in 1728 and 1729, 2s. in 1730 and 1731, and 1s. in 1732. Since 1727 he had periodically tapped the

¹⁹ Coxe, *Walpole*, iii. 125.

Sinking Fund surpluses to lighten the load elsewhere. In 1733 he was to go further, taking large sums from the Fund itself to relieve the taxpayer. The policy was controversial: it endangered the much admired strategy for repayment of the National Debt which Walpole himself had initiated in 1716. But the circumstances of 1733 were not those of 1716. Interest payments on the Debt were lower, and the capital burden less pressing. Walpole sought the applause of contemporaries, not of posterity. The same concern marked his revival of the salt tax in 1732. The salt duty had been abolished in 1730 as an objectionable tax on general consumption. In reviving it to help keep down the land tax Walpole was accused of grinding the faces of the poor. He was also charged with providing renewed employment for the salt officers and thereby swelling the fund of patronage at his disposal. There was, however, another consideration. The salt duties had belonged in the Sinking Fund account. When revived in 1732 they were included in the annual budget. This was effectively a means of transferring resources from Debt redemption to the current account. Walpole may also have viewed the exercise as a test of the public acceptability of excises. In 1724 he had introduced excise duties on tea, chocolate, and coffee, but the transaction had meant more to the East India Company than to the ordinary consumer and voter. The salt duty was politically more sensitive. Yet it was carried readily enough in the Commons. In proposing to convert the customs on tobacco and wine into inland duties Walpole was convinced that he would at once benefit the Exchequer, relieve the taxpayer, and reap a substantial political reward.

Walpole's excise scheme came with sufficient notice to permit an orchestrated campaign in the press. The arguments were old, reaching back into the seventeenth century. Excise duties involved giving extensive powers of search to revenue officers, and a wide jurisdiction to magistrates and excise commissioners. The Englishman's right to privacy on his own property, and also to trial by jury, were put at risk. An entire genre of horror stories, retailed in the press and depicted in broadsheets and prints, exploited such fears. But more important were the diverse interests affected. Walpole emphasized the economic advantages of his proposals. Customs duties were notoriously liable to evasion; the excise would eliminate smuggling, stimulate legitimate trade, even transform London into a 'free port', a natural entrepôt for the commerce of

other nations. But this optimism was not shared by those chiefly affected. It was not only fraudulent merchants who were wary of laws which provided for more efficient revenue administration. Walpole caused much synthetic outrage but also genuine irritation by describing his opponents in the merchant community, many of them respected figures in the City, as 'sturdy beggars'. Others, lower down the social scale, felt as strongly. Even honest dealers might prefer to keep clear of officious excisemen. The shopkeepers and tradesmen of England were immensely powerful as a class, scarcely less so in electoral terms than those country gentlemen whom Walpole sought to gratify. Whig or Tory, there was no doubt what they thought of more excises. In the spring of 1733 petitions to Parliament and instructions to MPs flooded in from the provinces in support of a vociferous campaign in London itself.

In the Commons, in March, Walpole's initial proposal relating to tobacco was carried by fair majorities, 265 to 204, 249 to 189. But a minority in excess of 200 was cause for concern, and the growing evidence of public alarm as well as private antagonism made it likely that it would increase rather than diminish. That it did so, however, was only indirectly due to the clamour out of doors. Further incursions into Walpole's working parliamentary majority could only be achieved by detaching or at least neutralizing some of his accustomed supporters, including men who held office in the administration. Walpole's personal enemies seized their opportunity. At court a whispering campaign started: it was widely reported that the King himself had lost faith in his minister. There was no truth in the story but the behaviour of some of George II's friends lent it verisimilitude. In the Commons, when the City formally presented its petition against the excise on 10 April, Walpole's majority fell to seventeen. In the Lords there seemed every likelihood of an equally damaging aristocratic revolt. That evening Walpole held a meeting of his supporters, one which was to live in the annals of Whiggism. Though the excise was doomed, he made it clear that he considered the crisis as imperilling the dynasty itself. His appeal for loyalty to the old cause was never forgotten by those who heard it. On the following day he announced the withdrawal of the excise scheme in the Commons.

Tumultuous rejoicings and demonstrations ensued, confirming, if confirmation was needed, that perseverance would have been

dangerous indeed. On the streets of London Walpole was burnt in effigy, along with Queen Caroline, and also, such was the mob's sense of humour, with Sarah Malcom, a murderess whose bloody crimes had lately enthralled newspaper readers. The violence of the populace caused something of a reaction on the back-benches. But this was not the main reason for Walpole's rapid recovery from a desperate situation. The decisive consideration was George II's fidelity. The Tory diarist Mrs Caesar judged acutely in comparing the excise crisis with the Sacheverell affair of 1710 and concluding that there was one crucial difference: Queen Anne, in 1710, had decided to support her ministry's opponents, while George II refused to do so.²⁰ To secure this outcome Walpole pushed his influence to the limit. The King felt compelled to remove Lord Chesterfield and Lord Clinton from their posts in the royal household forthwith. There followed further dismissals, the Dukes of Montrose and Bolton, the Earls of Stair and Marchmont, Lord Cobham and his followers. In the upper house the ministry survived with its majority barely intact; it took peerage creations as well as the dismissals to restore it to health.

In the Commons, recovery was swifter and more complete. The ministry's supporters rallied. 'We have been all put to our stumps' wrote the future Prime Minister Henry Pelham, 'but by the steadiness of the Party . . . and the firmness of our master in the main point, we are now gott pretty firm in our seats again, and I doubt not in the least but we shall continue so.'²¹ Pelham's confidence proved justified. The final session of Parliament in 1734 was relatively quiet, and enlivened only by the opposition's attempt to repeal the Septennial Act. Yet Walpole paid a high price for his miscalculation. The general election which followed was exceptionally acrimonious and violent. It brought into play the votes of countless small men, freeholders, farmers, tradesmen, and artisans, to whom Walpole's excise seemed the acknowledged precursor of a general excise, offering fearful prospects of taxes on bread, meat, and every common necessity. It proved impossible to dislodge this impression from the ordinary voter's mind. Walpole's newspaper the *Hyp-Doctor* admitted the existence of 'our New English Fever, unlike those which have reign'd in former Years. To trace the

²⁰ Bodleian Library, MS Film 740, Mrs Caesar's Diary.

²¹ British Library, Add. MS 27732, fo. 170: Pelham to Lord Essex, 17 May 1733.

Topography thereof would be to go over most of the Counties of England.'²²

There were 136 contested elections, more than in any other general election before 1832 except 1710 and 1722. In open constituencies, counties and large boroughs alike, the government was trounced. The Tory party returned 149 MPs to Westminster: this was the only election between 1713 and 1760 in which it improved its parliamentary position. But the test applied by the electorate had little to do with party loyalties as such. Printed lists revealing the voting on the excise in 1733 were circulated. MPs who had supported it were severely punished in the large constituencies. More was spent by the Treasury on secret service expenditure in 1734 than in any year between 1688 and 1782, but it made little difference. In Kent, despite its customary bias to the court (thanks to the local influence of the Admiralty and revenue departments), two ministerial men were replaced by two 'Country' candidates; in Hampshire, where government normally enjoyed a similar advantage, one seat was lost, the other only narrowly saved. Two Tories were seated for Gloucestershire, to the pride of Lord Bathurst, 'it being to be observ'd that there have not been two Torys sent out of this County not once since the Revolution'.²³ Above all, in Walpole's own county of Norfolk the Whigs were humiliated.

That the ministry survived these disasters was the result of two special circumstances. Ironically, those of Walpole's friends who had deserted him in the excise debates were rewarded in the election. In Derbyshire the Cavendish family actually gained a county seat, one which they were to hold until 1832, because they were untainted by association with the excise. More important still was the cumulative success of the Hanoverian regime in controlling the smaller constituencies. The close boroughs of the south and west proved invaluable in repairing the damage done elsewhere. John Scrope, Walpole's Secretary to the Treasury, and therefore intimately involved in the planning of the excise, was defeated in the large and prestigious constituency of Bristol. He found a seat instead at Lyme Regis. In such places it proved no disadvantage to have voted for the excise. With the usual ministerial campaign to 'weed the House' in constituencies where

²² 14 Aug. 1733.

²³ Add. MS 22221, fo. 129: Bathurst to the Earl of Strafford, 13 May 1734.

controverted elections made it possible to unseat opponents, this proved sufficient. In 1735 Walpole was able to secure majorities of about eighty even on controversial questions. It was enough, but it was far from what he had envisaged when planning his excises; nor did it compare with his majority at the commencement of the previous Parliament in 1727.

Like everyone else Walpole was also aware of the psychological damage inflicted by the excise crisis. Before 1734 he had been able to claim the support of a clear majority of the electorate and the propertied public. After it he was manifestly a closet minister, manipulating the court's political machinery against the wishes of most of his countrymen. His supporters were forced to resort to desperate arguments. The election result had been the consequence of a passing infatuation, itself due to the malevolence and misrepresentation of the 'malecontents'. Moreover the ignorance and stupidity of ordinary voters made them unqualified to determine affairs of state. The freeholders who had voted so decisively in the counties were 'as unable to express the *Sense* of the Nation about the Conduct of the Ministry, as the *Beasts* they ride on to give their votes'.²⁴ Such claims revealed the increasingly narrow basis of Walpolian rule. They also reflected the changing character of Walpole's administration. The Parliament of 1727 to 1734 had seen him at the peak of his powers and his confidence. In these years he was a genuinely creative minister, refashioning his country's foreign policy and reforming its financial system. After 1734 he was perpetually on the defensive. This did not affect his underlying strategy, that of protecting the Hanoverian Succession. It was the constant theme in Walpole's seemingly tortuous political life, and the fact that contemporaries often chose to forget it should not be permitted to obscure its overwhelming importance in his calculations. But even his friends and followers increasingly came to see their leader as an old man in retreat.

NOBILITY AND ROYALTY

The excise crisis and the ensuing election presented the picture of a minister who had lost all credit with the people over whom he ruled in the King's name. Yet the popular uproar which he faced somewhat obscures the extent to which he was the victim

²⁴ *London Journal*, 15 June 1734.

of a factious aristocracy. By 1734 there remained only a handful of Tory peers who had not in some measure succumbed to the temptations of Whig rule after 1714. The influence of King and court in the upper house was always proportionately more extensive than in the lower. The bishops, the royal household, and not least the natural affinity which bound so many noblemen to the prince, provided the Crown's ministers with a built-in advantage. Yet Walpole, the supposed master of corruption, had come desperately close to losing control of the Lords in 1733. In the general election he accordingly paid special attention to the elective element there. The choice of sixteen representatives from a body of nearly one hundred and fifty Scottish peers, many of them so impoverished as to be barely on a par with the minor English gentry, was always influenced by government. The 1734 election was evidently no exception. In the press, and then in the first session of the new Parliament, the opposition made much of the unconstitutional means employed at Edinburgh to corrupt and coerce the Scottish peers. Walpole also strengthened his position in the House of Lords, partly by exerting more rigorous discipline over his followers there, partly by creating new peers who would add to the government's debating power. These included Lord Hardwicke, shortly to be Lord Chancellor, and Lord Hervey, one of his most faithful supporters at court. But the opposition was certainly not less entrenched or bitter in the upper house than it was in the lower.

In this there was not a little snobbery. Walpole was a parvenu in the eyes of some peers. He was to be the only Hanoverian Prime Minister before Addington in 1801 who did not inherit blue blood from either his father or mother. It was well remembered how he had led the opposition to the Peerage Bill of 1719, that blatant attempt to establish the British aristocracy as an inaccessible caste. His decision not to take a peerage in 1721 eased the task of managing the Commons but made it more difficult to control the Lords. There was a group of alienated young peers, including the able Lord Carteret, who had clustered around Sunderland in the early years of George I's reign and whose hopes of preferment had been dashed by Walpole. There was another group which had attached itself to Prince George, in the conviction that the death of George I must terminate Walpole's influence. Some of these men, such as Scarborough, remained loyal after 1727; others

rebelled, and were punished, in 1733. The fact that George II stood by Walpole did not necessarily reconcile them to their fate. The famous Rumpsteak club, formed by those who had had the royal back turned on them, knew sufficient of their master both to despise his reliance on Walpole and to doubt its endurance. Moreover the very extremes to which Walpole resorted in 1733 caused a stiffening of aristocratic dislike for him. Particular exception was taken to the thoroughness with which opposition peers were removed even from their military commands. There was a view in noble circles that service in the army was the right not the privilege of a peer, and that it carried no obligations to the minister of the day.

Nervousness at court was intensified by the troubles which afflicted the King's immediate family in the mid-1730s. It is doubtful whether royalty has ever been the object of more obloquy than it was during these years. The most innocent pursuits became the subject of party recrimination. The liking of the King and Queen for Handel's Haymarket opera led to a state of open war between the musical 'ins' and 'outs', moving the Princess Royal to remark that she 'expected in a little while to see half the House of Lords playing in the orchestra in their robes and coronets'.²⁵ Queen Caroline's literary activities proved equally controversial. Her patronage of the labourer turned poet Stephen Duck brought down an avalanche of ridicule from the opposition wits. Her building projects in Richmond Park, notably the grotto and library, which she entrusted to Duck's care, gave rise to similar mirth. Pope's famous grotto at Twickenham was evidently another matter, as was the elaborate tribute to the traditional values of classical patriotism and English constitutionalism which Cobham was erecting at Stowe.

Malice had some substance to feed on. George II spent long periods in Hanover. Ministers experienced acute difficulty keeping him at home, even when his presence was urgently required, as in 1737. In the gutter press he was treated with open contempt. His sexual habits were mocked, his personal foibles, especially his irascibility, derided. In the winter of 1736, when he nearly perished in a storm *en route* from Hanover to London, there was hardly a hint of real concern except among his ministers. Anyone who doubted that the Englishman's hard-pressed loyalty was more to

²⁵ Hervey, *Memoirs*, i. 273.

the Protestant Succession than the current incumbent needed only to observe the public response to junior members of the royal family. When the Princess Royal married the Prince of Orange in 1734, the first occasion of its kind since the betrothal of James I's daughter to the Elector Palatine, every opportunity was taken to make unfavourable comparisons between the House of Orange and that of Hanover. The Dutch Prince made a highly successful tour of the provinces, including a visit to proscribed Oxford, which gave time for the lesson to sink in. More important by far, however, was the Prince of Wales.

Since his arrival in England in 1728 Prince Frederick had been the object of intense interest and speculation. His relations with his parents, particularly his mother, were disastrous, for reasons which even those intimate with the family never fully understood. Yet he proved an elusive catch for the opposition politicians who made it their highest priority to secure him. In the excise crisis he declined to join them against the ministry, despite pressure from Chesterfield and Cobham to do so. What finally made his mind up is far from certain. Perhaps it was the sheer accumulation of resentments and temptations to which he was subject. In this respect his marriage to Princess Augusta of Saxe-Gotha, reluctantly authorized by the King in 1736, was something of a landmark. The reluctance did not go unremarked in Parliament: one of Cobham's young followers, William Pitt, lost his rank in the army for having the temerity to refer to it. But worse followed in 1737, when the opposition put forward a motion requesting an establishment of £100,000 per annum for the Prince. The proposal was not unreasonable. It was generally agreed, except by the King and Queen themselves, that the civil list arrangement of 1727 had assumed some such settlement. More relevantly, from Walpole's standpoint, the court's supporters in the Commons were likely to be nervous about putting their opposition to the future King on record when the present King was approaching his fifty-fifth year. In the event the motion was defeated by a narrow majority of thirty; but for the abstention of many Tories it would have been carried. Walpole proved characteristically adept at producing a compromise proposal by which the Prince received a guaranteed sum of £50,000, though at the cost of straining his own relationship with the King to its limits.

The 'reversionary interest' represented by a mutinous Prince of

Wales was a recurring problem for Georgian Prime Ministers. With an ageing king on the throne, it created a natural rallying point for opposition. Its strength was its dynastic respectability. Opponents of the Crown could not be accused of disloyalty when they were led by the heir to the throne. Walpole himself had skilfully exploited George II's hostility to his father between 1716 and 1720, and went to great lengths to deny his enemies a similar advantage with Prince Frederick. Excusing the Prince's unfilial conduct was one of the more irritating, but necessary chores which Walpole found himself undertaking in the presence of the King and Queen.

There were limits even to Walpole's tolerance. At the end of July 1737 the Princess of Wales gave birth to her first child. In a manner which seemed as brutal to his wife as it was offensive to his mother, the Prince removed the Princess, on the point of being delivered, from the direct supervision of the King and Queen at Hampton Court to St James's Palace. Even his friends found it difficult to defend this measure. His parents demanded immediate submission or excommunication. The Cabinet found itself in a quandary. But against the advice of Lord Chancellor Hardwicke, Walpole insisted that 'they had now an advantage over the Prince which ought not to be parted with; and that it would be better for the administration to have a total declar'd separation than that things should remain in the precarious doubtful state in which they then stood.'²⁶ Hardwicke was a good deal younger than Walpole, with a family which had yet to make its way in the world. He naturally viewed the King's formal declaration of war on his son with misgivings. Walpole had passed the age of sixty and could afford to stop worrying about the reversionary interest. He probably hoped to obtain a firmer hold than ever over George II.

Walpole's response to the death of the Queen in September 1737 is of comparable interest. It was a moment of genuine grief for the minister and indeed for the King, notwithstanding his notorious infidelity. The occasion was marked by the presentation of the Queen's 'crystal hunting-bottle, with a golden stopper and cup', one of only two such gifts which Walpole ever received from his master, the other, as his son Horace waspishly noted, being a

²⁶ P. C. Yorke, *The Life and Correspondence of Philip Yorke, Earl of Hardwicke* (3 vols., Cambridge, 1913), i. 172.

diamond with 'a great flaw in it'.²⁷ In a political sense the opponents of Walpole thought his loss a major one. But this was far from certain. There was no noticeable slackening of George II's loyalty. Moreover Walpole had previously grumbled to Hervey about the difficulty of having to overcome not one obstinate royal will but two. For all his skill as a parliamentarian, Walpole's supreme talent lay in managing the royal closet. His constant coaxing of George II had been carried out in close collaboration with Queen Caroline. It is possible that the task was easier without the need to persuade his collaborator. On the other hand, there is force in Chesterfield's belief that courtiers would have doubts about Walpole's standing. At a court opinions counted for more than truths, rumours for more than realities. Even so, Chesterfield's colourful optimism on the occasion seems excessive. 'We have a prospect of the Claud Lorraine kind before us, while Sir Robert's has all the horrors of Salvator Rosa.'²⁸ Walpole's extraordinary art collection at Houghton had examples of both masters, the favourite landscape painters of the age, and he would have understood the implication all too clearly. But there is no hint that he thought his political position weaker after the Queen's death.

CHURCH AND STATE

Suggestions that Walpole's grasp was beginning to slip received support from the evidence of growing insubordination among his Church supporters. But as in the case of the Prince of Wales, it is difficult to conclude that Walpole was entirely to blame. The religious storms of the mid-1730s had scattered origins, some of them apparently trivial squalls, the full significance of which could hardly have been predicted. One was the restlessness of Protestant Dissenters. On the part of most of them there was no weakening of their support for Whiggism. They felt some uncertainty, however, about Walpole's commitment to their own definition of Whiggism. Perhaps the most alluring prospect in the promised land of Augustan Whigs was the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. Walpole never denied its attraction but preferred to treat it as a distant probability rather than an immediate possibility. He

²⁷ *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis (48 vols., New Haven, 1937-83), xxv. 464.

²⁸ M. Wyndham, *Chronicles of the Eighteenth Century* (2 vols., London, 1924), i. 60-1.

pointed to the positive benefits which Dissent had received from the Hanoverian regime; the repeal of the Occasional Conformity and Schism Acts in 1718, and the grant since 1723 of the *regium donum*, a fund provided by the Crown for the support of Dissenting ministers. As for the Test and Corporation Acts, it could be argued that a judicious combination of occasional conformity and legislative indemnity made them a dead letter for the great majority of Nonconformists. But the rank and file of Dissent, especially in the provinces, entertained a growing suspicion that their leaders had swallowed such arguments far too readily.

Samuel Holden, Chairman of the Dissenting Deputies Committee, strongly defended the dealings of the leadership with Walpole. He reasoned that it was by means of this relationship that the celebrated Dissenting educationist Philip Doddridge had been protected against the threat of prosecution by Tory critics in Northamptonshire. Not all his listeners were impressed. The Liverpool Dissenters roundly lectured the Deputies on their 'fundamental Mistake'. 'It is this, Applying to the Great Men privately, and Endeavouring to make them Parties with you against the Bigots ... instead of applying to them in their Legislative Capacity, where such Complaints properly come before them.'²⁹ There were attempts to make this an issue in the general election of 1734. In the end, however, these fires were damped down by Holden and his colleagues. Not until 1736 was a formal motion for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts put before the Commons. It was defeated by 251 votes to 123. Another motion three years later was lost by 188 votes to 89. Nearly fifty years were to pass before Parliament formally considered such proposals again.

The Dissenters were on stronger ground when they were able to appeal to a community of interest with other Protestants, particularly those pious but latitudinarian Whigs who were well represented among back-benchers in the House of Commons. This element included some distinguished names: Sir John Barnard, the most influential and revered of all City politicians, Sir Joseph Jekyll, a prominent lawyer and the very embodiment of independent Whiggism, William Glanville, a resourceful campaigner against corrupt administration. Such men regarded the Dissenters as allies, particularly when real enemies could be identified. One

²⁹ N. C. Hunt, *Two Early Political Associations* (Oxford, 1961), p. 196.

of those periodic Catholic scares which marked the eighteenth century as much as the seventeenth provided an obvious opportunity for collaboration. The sparks of anti-popery were fanned into flames by the Dissenters in a series of lectures which they commissioned at their London headquarters, Salters Hall, in 1735. The lecturers, all distinguished preachers and teachers, dwelt on the renewed danger from Rome. Samuel Chandler, who was to spend much of his long career urging co-operation with the established Church, appealed in one of these sermons for joint efforts against Roman Catholics. He was not without encouragement. In December 1734 Gibson, as Bishop of London, had issued a circular warning his clergy against the increased activity of popish priests. Parliament recommended the bishops to enquire closely into Catholic proselytizing in their dioceses.

Little was done in the event, largely because little needed to be done. There was no real evidence of rapid growth in the Roman Catholic population, though the press indulged in reckless exaggeration and speculation. The *Old Whig* reckoned, absurdly, that there were 10,000 priests in London alone. It also calculated a total of 600,000 Catholics in the country as a whole, at least four times the true figure.³⁰ Trivial incidents were seized upon. A fire in St Martin's Lane was attributed to two Irish papists who had long been at odds with their neighbours and landlords. The acquisition of a new altar-piece depicting the Virgin Mary in St James's, Clerkenwell, was treated as clear evidence of the growing incidence of superstitious practices. If the Dissenters played their part in this campaign, they played a still bigger part in doctrinal disputes. One of the Salters Hall lecturers, James Foster, engaged in a gruelling controversy with Henry Stebbing, a royal chaplain. Their dispute turned appropriately on the nature of heresy. Both Foster and Stebbing were to enjoy long and successful careers as polemicists; their encounter in 1735 suggested that not every Nonconformist initiative in ecumenism was guaranteed a welcome even from Whigs.

The affair which precipitated a genuine crisis within the Church was the nomination of Thomas Rundle to the Bishopric of Gloucester in December 1733. Rundle was thought to have deistic tendencies, and in his youth he had been a disciple of the heretical William Whiston. Gibson entertained sufficient doubts about his

¹³ 13 Mar. 1735.

orthodoxy to make a strong protest against his elevation. The concrete evidence in the case was slight: it consisted of the recollection by Richard Venn, one of Gibson's diocesan clergy, of a conversation in which Rundle had openly avowed his scepticism. Rundle's proscription probably had more to do with the general sensitivity of the bench at this time than with the specific charge against him. Eventually Gloucester was given to the untainted Martin Benson, and Rundle was found lucrative compensation in the bishopric of Derry, where, it was assumed, his heresy could do little harm.

Gibson's victory proved pyrrhic. His treatment by the press reveals much about the dilemma of Churchmen at this time. Gibson was a good Whig and a loyal supporter of the government. In the common phrase he was Walpole's 'pope'. But he was no Hoadly or heretic: he shared with many Whigs as well as High Church Tories a growing anxiety about the threat posed to conventional belief by Dissent and Deism. His best-known work was the massive *Codex Juris Ecclesiae Anglicanae*, published in 1713. It was a learned and well-documented defence of the jurisdiction of the Church, much cited in the controversies of the 1730s. 'Dr Codex', as Gibson became known, was made a byword in the prints for the unregenerate Laudianism even of a Whig episcopate. Vulgar abuse was reinforced by some telling arguments directed against him, notably by Michael Foster, a Whig lawyer who was later to become a judge. Foster's *Examination of the Scheme of Church Power laid down in the Codex* went through three editions in 1735 and 1736 and was eagerly followed up in the press.

This was no storm in an episcopal teacup. Gibson and his friends had much to be worried about. In 1736, in the case of *Middleton v. Croft*, Hardwicke, then Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench, delivered a judgement which effectively exempted laymen from the jurisdiction of the Church. This came to be seen as the definitive assertion of the supremacy of statute over canon law. In Parliament, too, there was growing evidence of hostility to the claims of the Church, sometimes in seemingly minor matters. In 1736 the House of Commons suspended its financial support for the restoration of Westminster Abbey, after complaints that the Dean and Chapter had permitted the exhibiting of waxworks in the Chapel of Henry VII, one of London's most popular tourist attractions. It is easy to see why Gibson felt beleaguered. His own

Primate, William Wake, was a senile and useless figure, though not so senile, as the uncharitable pointed out, that he was prevented from loading his relations with the most lucrative sinecures in the gift of an Archbishop of Canterbury. At his back Gibson was conscious of the pressure from his own supporters. There were, for instance, the stirrings of a lobby to re-establish Convocation. Since 1718 Convocation had been effectively killed by continued prorogation, initially to prevent a confrontation between Bishop Hoadly and his trinitarian critics, thereafter in the cause of letting sleeping dogs lie. But not all Whigs approved this policy. In 1742 Convocation was to be permitted to sit. The Whig Archdeacon of Lincoln George Reynolds sought to persuade it to reform the canons of the Church in a manner which quickly decided his superiors against continuing with the experiment. In the mean time there was no mistaking the growing tension and unease within the Church.

The anticlerical forces in the Commons registered a considerable victory in 1736. The Mortmain Bill of that year reflected lay concern about the lands and endowments which the Church received, particularly as a result of the activities of Queen Anne's Bounty. Since its charter in 1704, the Bounty had added some £420,000 to the capital value of the Church. Its object was to increase the income of the poorest incumbents, but to the secular-minded the accumulation of property seemed alarming. There were stories, as old as the Church itself, about death-bed benefactors who bought their way into heaven at the expense of their heirs. 'Arguments of such Donations will never be wanting when Men are pinched by the Messenger of Death.'³¹ The bill restrained these legacies by requiring that they be made at least a year before the death of a testator. Certain bodies were excepted, notably the universities and their sister foundations at Winchester, Westminster, and Eton. A further provision restricted the right of Oxford and Cambridge colleges to purchase advowsons for the enjoyment of their Fellows. The resulting Act was a blow for institutional charity, but it commanded widespread support in an age obsessed with property and devoted to the preservation of family estates.

The bishops had more success in their opposition to a companion measure, the Quaker's Tithe Bill. Quakers could not, in strict consonance with their principles, contribute freely to the support

³¹ G. F. Best, *Temporal Pillars* (Cambridge, 1964), p. 106.

of a State church. In practice, they accepted their liability when prosecuted in the courts. By legislation passed in 1696 such prosecutions were normally undertaken before local magistrates acting with summary powers. But it remained possible for tithe owners to pursue their case in the Exchequer and in ecclesiastical courts. These proceedings were costly and objectionable to those who denied the jurisdiction. The issue was a somewhat synthetic one, not least because many Quakers found it convenient and even conscionable to pay their debts without a murmur. But the reaction of the bishops suggests that the Tithe Bill of 1736, which would have enforced summary jurisdiction in such cases, brought together a range of anxieties and insecurities among Churchmen. Clerical petitions were organized and a considerable agitation worked up.

Walpole supported the Tithe Bill in the hope that it would take the edge off the anticlerical feeling with which he had to contend in Parliament. It has been suggested that he positively sought a break with the Bishop of London, but such hazardous malice was out of character.³² He seems to have been genuinely startled by Gibson's response. The bill passed the Commons, and, after vigorous lobbying by the bishops, was defeated in the Lords. Thereafter relations between Walpole and his 'pope' were never the same. Clerical advice was increasingly taken from others, notably Thomas Sherlock, Bishop of Salisbury, who had, ironically, opposed the Tithe Bill, and John Potter, who was given the Primacy on Wake's death in 1737. The Crown's ecclesiastical patronage drifted into the greedy hands of Newcastle and Hardwicke. The rift between Walpole and Gibson proved less damaging than it might have been, for the opposition was ill-placed to exploit it. High Church Tories had little in common with their Whig allies. It is possible that Walpole's support for the Mortmain and Tithe Bills had been designed to exploit this difference. Significantly, when the Quakers lobbied the Prince of Wales for support, he declined to become involved. In any event, ministerial anticlericalism was short-lived. William Warburton's *Alliance between Church and State* was published at the time of greatest strain in 1736. It offered a realistic defence of the position of the Church, one which abandoned all pretensions to an independent

³² N. C. Hunt, *Two Early Political Associations*, p. 95; but see S. Taylor, 'Sir Robert Walpole, the Church of England, and the Quaker's Tithe Bill of 1736', *Historical Journal*, 28 (1985), 51-78.

authority, and yet laid on the State a clear duty of protection. It was strongly approved by Sherlock and the court. In time it came to be seen as the classic statement of complacent Georgian Erastianism and a mark of the stable relationship between religion and politics in mid-eighteenth-century England.

THE POLITICS OF PROTEST

The anticlerical agitation was not the only threat to Walpole's rule at this time. There were popular disturbances which caused considerable alarm. The King's Speech closing the session of 1737 referred to these convulsions in strong terms: 'You cannot be insensible, what just scandal and offence the Licentiousness of the present times, under the colour and disguise of Liberty, gives to all honest and sober men; . . . defiance of all authority, contempt of magistracy, and even resistance of the laws, are become too general.'³³ The general election of 1734 had been particularly tumultuous. In the Welsh marches, for example, troops had to be employed to maintain order. But not all the protest was overtly political. In Gloucestershire and Herefordshire, the erection of turnpikes provoked the destruction of toll-gates. Coastal districts witnessed pitched battles with smuggling gangs. In Cornwall the county bench was so concerned by the mob violence which erupted after some controversial property litigation that they requested the intervention of the judges. In London the disruption ranged from the faintly ridiculous to the downright dangerous. The theatres were subjected to violent disputes, one of them involving the wrecking of Drury Lane by militant footmen. More disturbing were the Rag Fair Riots of July 1736, when the Irish community in East London found itself assailed on account of its competition with English labour, particularly in the building trade. The Gin Act³⁴ of the same year provoked riots in defence of cheap liquor. The opposition predictably blamed Walpole for popular disorder, the natural result, they alleged, of years of misgovernment, indebtedness, and corruption. Walpole had another explanation. The London riots in particular he blamed on the 'lower sort of Jacobites'.³⁵

³³ *Cobbett's Parliamentary History*, x. 341-2.

³⁴ See p. 149.

³⁵ G. Rudé, *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1970), p. 218.

With hindsight this is difficult to credit. Walpole's fears of Jacobitism were genuine, and they were not entirely without substance. But the agents and spies whom he maintained were a source of many false alarms. In the shadowy world of the secret services there was always a penumbra of plot and counterplot, information and misinformation, difficult to ignore at the time and equally difficult to assess in retrospect. A dynastically insecure State provided a constant temptation to dabble in Jacobite intrigue. Ministers grew understandably nervous after an incident in Westminster Hall on 14 July 1736. The courts of Chancery, King's Bench, and Common Pleas were all in session, when, in Lord Hardwicke's words, 'A parcel or packet containing several papers, and some sheets of several acts of parliament, and likewise a quantity of gunpowder, . . . fired and blew up', scattering seditious libels around the Hall. Hardwicke suspended the business of his court, perused the papers, which contained a denunciation of recent enactments, including the Gin Act and Mortmain Act, instantly defended the 'reasonableness and necessity' of the Acts, and urged magistrates 'to discover and bring to punishment the authors and contrivers of this wicked and abominable insult'.³⁶ The outcome of this gunpowder plot was somewhat unexciting: it proved to be the work of a non-juring clergyman of doubtful sanity, Robert Nixon, who was duly fined and imprisoned. Any hope Walpole had of discovering a Christopher Layer or a Francis Atterbury to repeat his triumph of 1723 was disappointed, but it is easy to see why he was moved to anxiety by the activities of the mob in the capital.

Worse still occurred in Edinburgh. In September 1736, a highly effective demonstration of mob power ended in the lynching of Captain Porteous, commander of a military detachment which had killed eight rioters during the tumults attending the execution of a local smuggler. Porteous had been convicted of murder but reprieved by the Crown. The King, though in Hanover at the time, took a close interest in the subsequent proceedings. So did the ministers, including Walpole's principal manager of Scottish affairs, Lord Islay. As Islay's own 'minister for Scotland' Lord Milton observed, 'there is an end of government, if such practices be suffered to escape punishment'.³⁷ Punishment, however, proved

³⁶ Yorke, *Hardwicke*, i. 137–8.

³⁷ Cox, *Walpole*, iii. 364.

no easy matter, in a case where the offenders were public heroes. Eventually, the ministry was forced to obtain an Act of Parliament fining the city of Edinburgh in order to compensate Porteous's widow, and disqualifying its Provost from office. For Walpole the Act was a major embarrassment. Its unpopularity north of the border compelled most Scottish MPs to vote against it. More importantly, it alienated Islay's brother, the second Duke of Argyll. Argyll was no manager, nor was he a natural leader. But as head of the Campbells he enjoyed huge influence in Scotland. He was also arrogant, ambitious, and above all unpredictable. In the Porteous affair he openly opposed his brother and Walpole. The possibility of a more permanent split in the Campbell family held obvious dangers for the ministry.

This was not Walpole's only parliamentary embarrassment in 1737. Sir John Barnard produced a scheme for the gradual reduction of interest on the National Debt from four per cent to three per cent. There were precedents for easing the interest burden, and no Treasury minister could deny the fiscal advantages of conversion. But a twenty-five per cent reduction in income for those dependent on government stock threatened to alienate some of the major interest groups which supported the regime. It was pointed out that the younger sons of landed gentry, as well as 'monied men', would be sufferers. Walpole was compelled to kill the bill. He gained many friends in the City by doing so, as Barnard, the Father of the City, made some enemies.

It was, and is, often said that the Septennial Act of 1716 rendered parliamentary politics more tranquil than they had been during the era of triennial elections. This is not supported by the evidence of the mid-1730s, when a Parliament which had several years to run provided a succession of alarums and excursions. In one sense, indeed, septennial Parliaments intensified debate, with notable effects on the relationship between the press and party politics. An opposition which enjoyed no immediate prospect of an election had an interest in encouraging extra-parliamentary agitation, even violence. Government, equally, had an interest in quelling public concern and confining the political excitement to Westminster. The achievements of the opposition press in the age of the *Craftsman* are well known, but Walpole's Grub Street activities were hardly less important. In some respects he had the advantage. Although government commanded no formal powers of censorship

it possessed a formidable arsenal of legal and political weapons. Thanks to the Special Juries Act of 1729, it was the common assumption that ministers could procure complaisant juries when they pressed charges against printers, publishers, and authors. The Crown's lawyers also had the right to prosecute in the Court of King's Bench with none of the usual preliminaries and proofs required in criminal cases. Above all, the Secretaries of State enjoyed considerable powers, including the issue of warrants for the arrest of persons and seizure of papers: these 'general warrants' were to figure in the notorious case of John Wilkes in the 1760s. Few prosecutions for seditious libel were carried to a conclusion, but those that were, such as the actions against Richard Franklin, publisher of the *Craftsman*, in 1730, and Henry Haines, its printer, in 1737, had an intimidating effect where other potential offenders were concerned. For every such prosecution there were many arrests *in terrorem*, and for every arrest there were still more petty campaigns against street hawkers distributing scurrilous broadsheets and ballads.

There was a positive side to Walpole's propaganda campaign. His surviving papers reveal a well-organized and heavily subsidized government press. Admittedly, his writers tended to be of relatively low calibre. They included William Arnall, a barely educated hack who subsisted on Walpole's dole and wrote as Francis Walsingham in the *Free Briton*, James Pitt, a schoolmaster from Walpole's native county, who appeared as Mother Osborne in the *London Journal*, and John Henley, author of the *Hyp-Doctor* and much derided for the 'monstrous jumble of divinity and buffoonery' at his famous oratory.³⁸ These are not names to conjure with in the history of political journalism, yet their possessors kept up a trenchant and resourceful defence of their master, with the aid of Treasury subsidies and Post Office distribution. By the mid-1730s there were some grounds for supposing that they had at least halted the advance of their more talented opponents. In circulation terms the *Craftsman* probably reached its peak, a substantial twelve or thirteen thousand copies each week, in 1734-5. Thereafter, as Bolingbroke's enthusiasm wilted and his editor Nicholas Amhurst lost something of his edge, it declined steadily. Its more ferocious sister *Fog's Weekly Journal* suffered a similar decline.

In this context the Prince of Wales's defection was especially

³⁸ G. Midgley, *The Life of Orator Henley* (Oxford, 1973), p. 144.

important. A new journal *Common Sense* was founded in 1737 with the Prince's friend Chesterfield one of its directors. Prince Frederick succeeded in drawing about himself a talented group of young men. Some of them, James Thomson, George Lyttelton, and Henry Brooke, were to enjoy literary reputations of the first order. Together they promoted the vision of Frederick as a constitutional prince of truly old English principles, offering patriotic harmony and reform in place of Hanoverian strife and corruption. Later, it was a vision best known from Bolingbroke's *Patriot King*, the form in which it passed into Whig legend as the source of a sinister creed for tyrants. But in the 1730s it was associated with new and exciting literary talents.

Walpole had many means of combating such forces. His reluctance to buy off an earlier generation of gifted intellectuals, when most of them, including Swift, Gay, and Pope, were plainly prepared to discuss terms, remains mystifying. But there were some notable defections to his cause in his last years of power, not least Henry Fielding. Fielding's early forte was the stage and the stage itself was something of a special case. Since the beginning of George II's reign the theatre had achieved an unprecedented degree of independence. Magistrates found it impossible to repress the activities of unauthorized theatres, and the owners of licensed playhouses proved equally incapable of controlling their actors. The weak point in the law was the Vagrancy Act of 1714, which was generally supposed, along with older legislation, to render actors liable to the same penalties as rogues and beggars. When the law was tested in the case of John Harper, a player at the Haymarket, in 1733, it proved sadly deficient. Harper argued that he was manifestly not a vagrant, but a freeholder and a substantial householder. It was helpfully pointed out by his friends that he was an unlikely vagabond and highly unsuitable for hard labour in the Bridewell, 'he being a Man so corpulent, that it is not possible for him either to labour, or to wander a great deal'.³⁹ In any event he was vindicated by the Court of King's Bench.

After this, playwrights and actors threw caution to the winds. Anxiety was expressed about the threat which they presented to the industry and law-abidingness of the middling and lower ranks. The activities of one of the unauthorized theatres, in Goodmans Fields, seemed to offer a special danger to the working habits of

³⁹ *London Magazine*, 1734, p. 87.

apprentices in the business districts of London. Sir John Barnard, on behalf of the City, sought a bill bringing actors clearly within the vagrancy law in 1735. He did not succeed until the second attempt in 1737. Then, however, the bill was carried with a crucial amendment proposed by Walpole, subjecting dramatic productions to scrutiny by the Lord Chamberlain. Such censorship would never have been accepted in other spheres. But Walpole adduced powerful evidence with which to convince back-benchers of the need to curb the stage. He cited a play, as yet unacted, *The Festival of the Golden Rump*, which attacked the King and Queen in offensive and obscene terms. There is a suspicion that Walpole had promoted this piece, which was accompanied by a deliberately objectionable cartoon, in order to strengthen the case for censorship. The result was a landmark in the history of the stage. In future it was impossible legally to produce a play which did not carry the government's approval. Moreover, the unlicensed theatres were rendered technically illegal; when they revived, in the 1740s, it was under perpetual threat of ministerial action if they trespassed on political sensitivities. In short, the Act was the one undoubted and comprehensive victory in Walpole's extended warfare with the intellectuals of his day.

THE POLICY OF PEACE

The King took a close interest in the Porteous Riots and the Licensing Act. But the sternest test of Walpole's capacity to manage him came in matters of foreign rather than domestic policy. In 1733-4 George II was tempted to intervene in the War of the Polish Succession. Ostensibly it was a war to determine the choice of candidate for the Polish throne, a choice which lay between Louis XV's father-in-law Stanislas Leszcynski and the Austro-Russian candidate Augustus of Saxony. In reality it was another struggle between Bourbon and Habsburg, with the additional anxiety, bequeathed by the War of the Spanish Succession, of Spain's involvement on the side of France. Britain was obliged by treaty to go to the defence of Austria. But Walpole declined to treat the Polish succession as a *casus belli*, and gloried in his pacifism. He told Queen Caroline, in a celebrated boast: 'Madam, there are fifty thousand men slain in Europe this year, and not one

Englishman.⁴⁰ This was a powerful argument, though like many of Walpole's measures it smacked more of pragmatic, insular Toryism than principled, internationalist Whiggism. More controversially, Walpole believed that his policy must make Britain the arbiter of Europe. The Continental powers would fight to a standstill and the King of England would mediate a suitably judicious peace. 'If I can keep this nation out of the war a year longer, I know it is impossible but England must give law to all Europe.'⁴¹

This proved a notable miscalculation. Charles VI of Austria was induced to make peace on terms which owed nothing to the King of England and registered a considerable reverse for the Habsburg cause. In Poland the French candidate was unseated but only at the cost of placing him in the Duchy of Lorraine and alienating that duchy to France on his death. In Italy Spain's attempt to revise the Treaty of Utrecht was finally successful, with the acquisition of Naples and Sicily for the cadet branch of the Spanish royal family. For its part, Austria obtained Bourbon acquiescence in the Pragmatic Sanction. So far as Britain was concerned, Walpole had deprived the Jacobites of a potential opportunity, had protected the British taxpayer, and had preserved his reputation for husbanding the nation's resources. Whether the price of this success, a manifest reduction in British prestige and influence on the Continent, was worth paying, remained to be seen.

The weakness of Walpole's parliamentary opponents during the Polish War was that they found it difficult to argue that he was neglecting genuine British interests. It was all too easy to imagine the anti-Hanoverian rhetoric which they would have employed if English troops had been sent to the aid of Austria. But the situation was quite different when relations with Spain deteriorated in 1738. The formal settlement of Georgia in the 1730s had revived old disputes about the territorial limits of Spanish Florida. The loss of Gibraltar and Minorca remained a continuing cause of Spanish resentment. Above all there were the notorious 'depredations'. British violations of Spanish trade laws in the Caribbean met with a firm response from the Spanish authorities in America. Under the terms of the Peace of Utrecht it was difficult to distinguish between legal and illegal trade. The Treaty of Seville in 1729 had

⁴⁰ P. Yorke, 2nd Earl of Hardwicke, ed., *Walpolonia* (London, 1781), p. 361.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

laid down a workable procedure for settling such disputes. There was a synthetic quality about the hysteria of 1738–9. Stories which inflamed opinion in England, the tale of Jenkins' Ear, and the account of the tortures inflicted on the crew of the *Robert* with 'hand vices and screws', went back some years.⁴² None the less, public disquiet, fed with colourful tales of British 'tars' rotting in Spanish gaols, was readily aroused.

In the parliamentary session of 1738 the Commons mounted a detailed investigation. The result was a report demanding strong measures. For Walpole, the issue had all the incendiary potential of the Dunkirk question without much prospect of Spanish compliance in defusing it. Though the Spanish court was not unwilling to negotiate, it had its own grievances. A preliminary agreement in September 1738 involved paying a sum of £95,000 by way of damages, in return for payment to Spain of £68,000 which the South Sea Company owed on its own account. The Company's refusal to co-operate killed this agreement, the notorious convention of the Pardo, in January 1739. A parliamentary clamour forced the ministry to maintain a naval presence in the Mediterranean under Admiral Haddock. War inevitably followed.

It was Walpole's belief that he had been pushed, and his country tricked, into the war by a combination of mercantile self-interest and political malice. Throughout the first two years of the war he stressed the unrepresentative character of those who opposed his policy, compared with those 'men of figure and sense in the kingdom' who took his own view.⁴³ According to his brother Horace, it was only the 'vulgar, the ignorant, the prejudiced and the disaffected'⁴⁴ who favoured the war. Such claims are difficult to adjudicate. Certainly the business community was far from united in support of the war. It was pointed out that Britain's trade with mainland Spain was worth far more than the hypothetical profits which might be gained by a costly struggle for empire in the Americas. In the City those who clamoured for belligerent measures were stigmatized by the ministry's supporters in a paper distributed freely through the Post Office as 'an insignificant Body of Tradesmen and Mechanics'. A respectable Virginia merchant

⁴² J. O. McLachlan, *Trade and Peace with Old Spain, 1667–1750* (Cambridge, 1940), p. 107.

⁴³ *Parliamentary History*, xi. 502.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* xi. 274.

was listed as a tobacconist, a well-known silk dyer as a 'rag dyer', and the City-bred High Sheriff of Hertfordshire as a 'soapmaker'.⁴⁵ This had something of the effect that Walpole's contemptuous remarks about 'sturdy beggars' had had in 1733. In 1739 the Livery went out of its way to veto the choice of a ministerial supporter, Sir George Champion, as Lord Mayor, though by custom he stood next in the line of succession. The following year, the Aldermanic bench retaliated by turning down the popular choice for the mayoralty, a prominent opponent of the ministry, Sir Robert Godschall. It was a reminder that even in the heartland of patriot politics the Robinocracy continued to flourish. Indeed what truly created a consensus against Walpole was not so much his reluctance to go to war as his lack of enthusiasm for waging it. An early success at Puerto Bello in November 1739 inspired the most exaggerated ambitions of plunder in Spanish America. Subsequent campaigns, designed with the capture of Cartagena, Cuba, and Panama in mind, proved costly failures. By 1742 all hope of finally bringing to fruition the dreams of Drake and Raleigh had been abandoned.

For this Walpole got most of the blame. His direction of hostilities was criticized as at best a mockery, a 'Jeu de Théâtre', at worst a disgraceful display of cowardice, 'our long pacifick war against Spain'.⁴⁶ Certainly his own heart was not in it. His opponents employed the image of valiant British seamen betrayed by their governors if not their admirals. Richard Glover's highly successful ballad *Hosier's Ghost* recalled the Admiral who had supposedly been condemned to impotence in the face of the Spanish treasure fleet in 1727, in order to plead the cause of his successors. Such criticism was as defective as Glover's sense of history. Warfare in the Caribbean was never what fireside strategists liked to picture it: the devastating toll taken by the climate and the difficulties inseparable from joint operations between army and navy proved too much for more than one eighteenth-century expeditionary force. Nor was the war unaffected by party politics. Vernon, the hero of Puerto Bello, made no bones about his support for the opposition. He blamed his reverse at Cartagena on insufficient support from home and on the commander of the land forces, General Wentworth. Tobias Smollett, who was present at

⁴⁵ *Common Sense*, 17 Mar. 1739.

⁴⁶ *Craftsman*, 24 Jan. 1741; *Common Sense*, 5 Dec. 1741.

Cartagena as a naval surgeon, censured both officers when he gave his own account in his novel *Roderick Random*.

By the time of Cartagena, in 1741, the war had already changed in character. The death of Charles VI in 1740, and the great Continental conflict which it provoked, gave the War of Jenkins' Ear the appearance of a side-show. With the Habsburg empire on the point of dismemberment, Britain was increasingly drawn into the war in Germany. But the War of the Austrian Succession was not without its compensations. In 1740 there was a real danger that France would intervene in the Spanish war. From the British standpoint, this would have converted a buccaneering adventure into a deadly war of survival, raising the possibility of defeat at sea and a Jacobite invasion. 'Nothing but a diversion upon the Continent can save us,'⁴⁷ it was said in London, when reports arrived that squadrons at Brest and Toulon were preparing to sail. The Austrian war certainly proved a diversion.

WALPOLE'S FALL

The preliminaries and progress of war made Walpole's parliamentary position perilous. The Convention of the Pardo had been carried in the Commons by the slender margin of 260 votes to 232, an indication of the fate which he would have met later on if he had stood out against the war when the Convention broke down. January 1740 saw a motion for a bill to reduce the number of placemen in the Commons. It was supported by many instructions from the constituencies, reminiscent of the onslaught on the excise in 1733. The ministry defeated it by only 222 votes to 206. In the same session the Seamen's Registration Bill was treated as an attack on civil liberties and met with a furious reception both in Parliament and in the press. Sir John Barnard asserted that it would make a sailor and a slave 'terms of the same signification': the bill was defeated, notwithstanding Walpole's personal support for it.⁴⁸ 1740 also marked the open defection of the Duke of Argyll. His journey to Scotland in the summer of that year, portrayed in the prints as a 'State Pack Horse' on the road from London to Edinburgh, was observed with considerable interest, as were his

⁴⁷ A. M. Wilson, *French Foreign Policy during the Administration of Cardinal Fleury, 1726-1743* (London, 1936), p. 324.

⁴⁸ *Parliamentary History*, xi. 416.

subsequent electioneering activities. Scottish burgh elections were largely determined by electoral colleges composed of municipal representatives. There was no doubt that in many burghs the Argyll interest threatened a reverse for the ministry at the forthcoming general election.

In the final session of the 1734 Parliament it seemed that an election might not even be required to bring Walpole down. Much depended on the Tories. In 1738 the Jacobite William Shippen had had the impudence to announce that the names of Whig and Tory were dead, and that Court and Country were indeed their true successors.⁴⁹ This had long been the dream of the patriot leaders: a genuinely united coalition of all parties dedicated to the destruction of a corrupt ministry. It was not to be. In February 1741 motions were put forward in both houses, requesting the King to dismiss his minister. They were heavily defeated, in the Commons by 290 votes to 106. It was the abstention of many Tories which proved decisive. They pleaded, in self-defence, their ancient principles, particularly the impropriety of attempting to dictate to a king his choice of ministry. They also nurtured an entirely justified suspicion that their Whig allies would ditch them once Walpole had been brought down. In any event the second Parliament of George II ended in a state of high excitement and uncertainty. Walpole's supporters in the press revelled in the discomfiture of their opponents. The defeat of the *Motion*, as it became universally known, was indeed astonishing. As it turned out, however, it was only a stay of execution for Walpole himself.

Who killed cock robin? Walpole's fall from power in February 1742 had long been anticipated, and often prematurely predicted. Moreover, Walpole's primacy had been so complete, so unprecedented, that its end could not but prove a sensation. It was easy to suppose that such an impregnable fortress could only have surrendered to treachery within. Certainly there were some potential traitors. Walpole's old adversary Spencer Compton, Earl of Wilmington, had never been a loyal supporter, and it did not go unremarked that his friend George Bubb Dodington, who had joined the opposition in 1740, was to be observed in frequent consultation with him. Walpole believed that the rot had spread closer to the core than this. According to his son Horace Walpole, he blamed Newcastle and Hardwicke, increasingly the dominant

⁴⁹ *London Magazine*, 1738, p. 334.

forces within the Cabinet, for his fall. There was also talk of dirty work in Scotland. Islay's career was not such as to inspire faith in his fidelity. He was, after all, Argyll's brother, and it seemed plausible to assume that the Campbell brothers were keeping a foot in two camps. Yet none of this carries much conviction. There is no evidence that any of Walpole's inner circle of supporters lost heart until it became obvious that his prospects of continuing in power were hopeless. Walpole was the first servant of the Crown, not the master of a ministry responsible to himself. He was not entitled to expect, nor in all likelihood did he seriously suppose, that the stability of the King's affairs and the conduct of a difficult and dangerous war, would be endangered for the sake of keeping him in power against the expressed will of Parliament.

In the final drama the general election played a large part, though the space of time which lapsed between the elections themselves in the spring of 1741 and Walpole's resignation nearly a year later somewhat obscured its significance. There was no doubting the view of the electorate. Admiral Vernon, the hero of Puerto Bello, was put up in seven constituencies and returned in three. His narrow defeat in the populous city of Westminster, after a violent contest, had more to do with sharp practice by the ministry than the verdict of public opinion. In the event the open constituencies did not produce a great number of contests (there were only ninety-five contests in all) nor did they determine the outcome of the election. Already, in 1734, the counties and large boroughs had swung so clearly behind the opposition that further substantial gains in such constituencies could hardly be expected. Rather it was in the smaller boroughs, which had saved Walpole in 1734, that the battle was fought in 1741: in this struggle the forces of his more recent enemies, those who had declared themselves since the defection of the Prince of Wales, counted for more than the public debate about his policies, or even than the deficiencies of his war management. In Scotland, traditionally the preserve of government, Argyll's defection took its toll. In the West Country the Prince of Wales led an effective campaign, based on his own Duchy of Cornwall, and supported by boroughmongers who had an eye to the future, to make inroads into Walpole's Court and Treasury support.

Calculations about the results of the election varied considerably and continue to do so. No eighteenth-century Parliament presented

a clear-cut party division, and modern assessments of the election take into account the conduct of MPs in the subsequent parliamentary session, something which was susceptible to further influence between the elections themselves and the summoning of Parliament. Certainly Walpole believed, when the Commons met in December 1741, that he still had a chance of securing a working majority, albeit one dangerously close to single figures. In normal circumstances his opponents would have begun by contesting the choice of a Speaker. But Arthur Onslow, the incumbent, was no creature of the court, and resistance to his election would probably have alienated potential supporters. The opposition did, however, secure the appointment of one of their own sympathizers, George Lee, as Chairman of the Committee of Privileges and Elections.

In any new Parliament the earliest and most telling divisions concerned not the great strategic warfare of public policy but the scattered skirmishes of disputed elections. Walpole had appreciably improved his position by such tactics after previous general elections. This time they proved his downfall. The defeat which seems to have decided him was a division of 236 to 235 on the Chippenham election, on 28 January. But it was the deteriorating trend which made his decision inevitable. On 21 January he had won a marginal victory by three votes against William Pulteney's motion proposing a committee of inquiry into the conduct of the war. Walpole's defence of his record on this occasion was perhaps his most brilliant performance in an outstanding parliamentary career. But three votes in a record house of more than 500 MPs left little room for optimism and none for manoeuvre. There was no possibility of parleying. Walpole had tried the desperate expedient of a negotiation with the Prince of Wales during the previous Christmas recess. No doubt he had in mind that reconciliation of father and son which he had brought about in 1720 in order to save the Sunderland ministry. But there was to be no repetition in 1742. He took a peerage as Earl of Orford and left the House of Commons, its first undoubted Prime Minister, on 11 February 1742. It was rightly seen as a moment of profound significance, though in widely differing terms. The press resorted to a variety of disgusting metaphors, principally on the theme of evacuation, the necessary purging of a Britannia deeply affected by corruption and putrefaction, and thereby a guarantee of renewed health in the body politic. Walpole summarized his fate less

colourfully to the Duke of Devonshire. 'I must inform you that the panick was so great among what I should call my own friends, that *they all* declared my retiring was become absolutely necessary, as the only means to carry on the publick businesse, and this to be attended with honour and security.'⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Coxe, *Walpole*, iii. 592.

CHAPTER 3

The Progress of Politeness

HOWEVER difficult to quantify, the growing affluence and influence of the middle class were widely recognized. Luxury and refinement seemed within the reach even of relatively humble families. The pursuit of genteel status and the acquisition of polite manners in some measure united a class which in other respects appeared diverse and divided. Educational institutions were reshaped to meet its needs, with the emphasis on the acquisition of useful skills and social graces. The old grammar schools and universities came under heavy criticism and were compelled to adapt to changing requirements. Some of the most notable cultural developments of the period, for example the expansion of the market for books and the immense popularity of novels and histories, reflected the taste of middle-class consumers. So did the ubiquity of the assembly as a focus for ordinary social life and the proliferation of spa towns and seaside resorts for bourgeois recreation. Middle-class women shared in the literary and social opportunities of the period, but found themselves increasingly excluded from gainful employment. Some of them tentatively adopted a feminist position. For most, however, marriage remained the central preoccupation, one which was regarded by all families as a matter of the highest priority; the marriage market was regulated by

informal moral censorship and even subjected, in 1753, to statutory control. The internal tensions of middle-class life, social and sexual, did not prevent its defenders adopting a united front in the face of external dangers. Much attention was paid to the control and discipline of servants. The alliance of money and gentility was calculated to maintain the morale and sense of superiority of propertied people. Politeness was the mark of an immensely vigorous but also a remorselessly snobbish society.



THE MIDDLE CLASS

THE significance of the middle class in eighteenth-century England is easily neglected in retrospect. It is even possible to ignore it altogether, such is the poverty of historical sociology and the limitations of the models of class employed by twentieth-century historians. Somewhat fanciful accounts of the social tensions of this period fasten on the colourful but often theatrical conflict of 'plebeians' and 'patricians'. In such struggles bourgeois elements are permitted to appear, inconsequentially, as occasional leaders of those below and powerless dependants of those above, a perspective which deprives them of coherence and incidentally obliterates their overwhelming importance in the social history of the period. Contemporaries thought the growing wealth and importance of the middle orders of society the most striking of developments. The Scottish philosopher John Millar pointed to what he considered an extraordinary change which had come over British society since the Revolution of 1688. A great body of merchants, moneyed men, and farmers had transformed the face both of urban and agrarian society.¹

The view that western society, in its 'commercial' stage of development, brought particular benefits to the middling entrepreneur, whether in trade, manufacturing, or farming, is supported by ample historical evidence. This is hardly surprising given the unequally allocated rewards of rapid economic growth in developing societies, and the reluctance of eighteenth-century legislators to redress the balance by means of taxation. What was lacking at the time, however, was detailed statistical enquiry as to the distribution of the wealth. In its absence, Millar, like many other commentators, declined to give the emergence of the middle class the precise lineaments craved by the social historian. It was commoner by far to dwell on the superior moral credentials and industry of the middle class than to analyse its make-up. The most elementary generalizations about it are consequently difficult to sustain.

When contemporaries talked of the 'middle sort', they generally had in mind a wide range of incomes and a great variety of occupations. In the countryside small farmers, without property of their own, joined freeholders, perhaps possessing a small patrimonial

¹ W. C. Lehmann, *John Millar of Glasgow, 1735-1801* (Cambridge, 1960), pp. 334-5.