

# The New Criterion

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## The fogey king

by *George William Rutler*

*A review of George III, by Jeremy Black.*

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Books in this article

*Jeremy Black*

*George III*

Penguin, 144 pages, \$19.00

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**B**ackstage after a performance of Alan Bennett's play *The Madness of George III*, Princess Margaret asked Nigel Hawthorne, who played the lead, what caused her ancestor's sad derangement. The Queen's sister, not usually taciturn, received in silence the reply: "It is hereditary, Ma'am." The common diagnosis of porphyria has more recently been disputed by a study of the Royal College of Surgeons, which attributes the king's alleged madness to a bipolar disorder and dementia due to the neurotoxicity of recurring mania.

Howbeit, the king who reigned for six decades, and who was anything but the tyrant the Declaration of Independence portrayed him to be, is known less for his majesty and more for his madness, even to the absurd extent of the ridiculous caricature in the musical *Hamilton*. Jeremy Black, the astonishingly prolific author

of a lengthy biography of “America’s Last King,” corrects many misperceptions in this small volume, a worthy part of the Penguin Monarchs series, which Black rightly calls “superb.”

From an American perspective, it is worth remembering that the king told his Philadelphia court painter, Benjamin West, at the end of the Revolution, that if Washington returned to his farm rather than taking a crown, he would be “the greatest man in the world.” (The king had first contradicted his advisors in wanting to keep fighting after Yorktown.) Nonetheless, Washington desired to be something like the “Patriot King” that the Hanoverian king really was, although at times this was compromised, as when the monarch peremptorily dismissed William Pitt in 1801, who by way of justification was little less than a megalomaniac. Washington referred to himself in a regal third person and at first favored the title “His High Mightiness, the President of the United States and Protector of Their Liberties.” Although Black does not mention the 2008 television miniseries *John Adams*, he does record the conversation between the king and the new ambassador, which the script by Kirk Ellis quotes verbatim, and which gives a good sense of the monarch’s courtesy and wit. Nor was he lacking in aplomb and even bravery when he kept his calm during assassination attempts in 1795 and 1800.

Of the Hanoverian line, George III was the first who could claim birth on British soil, and at the age of ten recited from Joseph Addison’s play *Cato*: “What, tho’ a boy! It may with truth be said, A boy in *England* born, in England bred.” But the culture of the German principalities where he sent his sons to study was an abiding influence. After all, he took seriously his office as Elector of Hanover and was married to Sophia Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, the mother of his fifteen children in a union far more congenial than that of George II with Caroline of Brandenburg-Ansbach and George IV with the lamentable Caroline of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel. Their marital bliss anticipated that of George’s granddaughter Victoria and her husband, Albert, but without their mawkishness.

Through an exotic descent from Alfonso III of Portugal and his African mistress, Queen Charlotte may have been a mulatto, or so some said. The king died in 1820, blind and deaf, unaware that his queen had died two years earlier.

George's obedience to his coronation oath made him a stalwart steward of the Church of England, his commitment one of genuine piety, making him nearly a "clerical monarch," although his abolition of slavery fifty years before Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was purely pragmatic, lacking the moral zeal of many evangelical Christians. Catholic Emancipation, about which he harbored great reservations, was more difficult for him than what to do about the slave trade, although he not infrequently socialized with leading Catholic recusants and provided a huge annuity for the younger son of James III, who as Henry IX was both a Stuart claimant and a cardinal. Some of the American Founding Fathers scorned him as a "Papist" for granting toleration to Catholics in Quebec. His Irish policy was much more myopic, while a statue of him in the national Catholic seminary which he founded at Maynooth is a memorial to his calculation rather than his charity. Thousands of Catholic clergy and laity fleeing the French Terror were given a welcome refuge in Britain, and later George had the sympathy of the Holy See in the Napoleonic Wars. In Windsor Castle hangs a portrait of the Papal Secretary of State, Cardinal Consalvi, who was a close friend of the king's prime minister Lord Castlereagh. Professor Black is as incisive about the king's attitudes in many more such matters, as he was in his scholarly studies of Walpole and Pitt the Elder.

**B**orn two months prematurely, and baptized immediately for fear that he would not live, George achieved survival before modern obstetrics—a remarkable feat—and he attributed his life to his wet nurse. Long before age took its toll, his demeanor and conservative censoriousness of louche aristocrats made him what might be called a "young fogey." But this was mitigated by his instinctive kindness to all classes and his humor, which made his presence on travels around England so popular even through political upheavals. The Earl of Bute, for all purposes his surrogate father, fashioned his appreciation of the arts and sciences

beyond the level of a mere dilettante, and as an expert bibliophile and horologist George III funded the Royal Academy, knighted Sir Joshua Reynolds, and entertained Samuel Johnson. He financed Captain Cook's first voyage to the Pacific and established the botanical gardens at Kew, Calcutta, and in the Antilles. William Herschel, alluding to Virgil's *Georgics*, named the newly discovered planet Uranus "Georgium Sidus," and that bestowal of immortality was not mere court flattery. One wishes that Black would have used his literary skill to describe the audience that His Majesty gave to the first ordained Native American minister, Samson Occom, a Mohegan, which inspired the king to charter Dartmouth College in the wilds of New Hampshire.

Of two earlier biographers, John Plumb was less sympathetic than John Brooke, whose book has a foreword by Prince Charles, but Jeremy Black is perhaps more balanced than both, with a use of archival sources that supports his degree of respect and, may it be said, admiration, for the stately "Farmer George" who seemed happiest when raising pigs.

While interest in the majestic and eventually mad monarch ebbs and flows according to the spirit of the times, this contribution to the Penguin Monarchs series pays well-tempered tribute to the man whose influence touched Cape Town, Java, Australia, Nepal, India, Canada, and Africa, and who still is a name to be reckoned with today.

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