THE **HISTORY** ESSAY

Satirists regularly trained their sights on George I – as shown in this etching by John Leech, accompanied by the caption "Georgy Porgy the First going out for a ride in his State Coachy Poachy"

MARY EVANS

THE DELIGHTFULLY DYSFUNCTIONAL GEORGIANS

The Tudors might steal the limelight, but the reigns of Georges I and II were just as scandalous – and key to Britain's emergence as a global power

By Lucy Worsley

Accompanies the BBC Four series *The First Georgians*

Sometimes it's a depressing business being a historian of the 18th century. It seems that the Tudors, the Victorians and the Nazis get all the glory, with their beheadings, bicycles and frequent appearances in the National Curriculum. But 2014 is the year in which the Georgian monarchs fight back.

The tercentenary of the accession of George I in 1714 is being celebrated with Historic Royal Palaces' new displays at Hampton Court, Kensington, and Kew Palaces. There's also the Royal Collection's exhibition at the Queen's Gallery at Buckingham Palace, in addition to one recently staged at the British Library. There's an 18th-century season on the BBC, including my own series *The First Georgians: The German Kings Who Made Britain*, while in Germany, curators and historians are eager to celebrate a more positive anniversary than that of the First World War.

In reality, the Georgians don't need to fight: they charm their way into our affections with their love of ice cream, tea parties, gin, classical architecture, satire and sparkling fashions. They experienced the Scottish Enlightenment, as well as the birth of the novel and the office of prime minister. 'The Georgian Age', for many people, is synonymous with the pleasing images of the stately homes of England and Keira Knightley as the Duchess of Devonshire.

While the Georgian aesthetic is known and loved, though, the Georges themselves, our Hanoverian monarchs, evoke a less positive response. All too often George I and George II are seen as grumpy, German and indistinguishable. The *Horrible Histories* TV series covers the Georges with its celebrated boy-band performance of 'Born 2 Rule', with "Georges One, Three, Four and Two" singing about how they were "born to rule over you… just because our blood was blue". The song depicts the Hanoverians as unattractively "bad", "sad", "mad" and "fat". And they've been neglected by historians too. George II, in particular, "can rightly be described as a forgotten king," says his most recent biographer, Andrew Thompson.

In reality, George I and George II were just as excitingly dysfunctional as Henry VIII. Theirs was truly a dynasty, with plenty of children, giving us enough characters to fill out a whole soap opera. They were also reasonably good kings. They weren't flashy or showy, but under them Britain could truly claim to have become 'Great'.

George I, born Georg Ludwig, Elector of Hanover, was an unlikely king of Great Britain. He only came into line for the throne with the passing of the Act of Settlement in 1701. This was parliament's solution for what to do if Queen Anne died with no surviving heirs. She did just that, in 1714, having gone through 17 ill-fated pregnancies including many miscarriages, all in a futile attempt to produce a future king.

Fate's finger fell upon Georg because his mother Sophia, Electress of Hanover, a direct descendent of James I and VI, turned out to be Anne's nearest Protestant relative. Roughly 50 nearer relatives of Anne's were passed over, as the Act of Settlement had decreed, due to their Catholicism. Sophia herself would have been Britain's queen if she had not died only a few weeks before her distant cousin Anne, meaning that the crown went to her son instead.

Georg Ludwig ruled the little Electorate of Hanover, so-called because he and his fellow electors had a say in electing their collective overlord, the Holy Roman Emperor. His family had recently risen rapidly up through the ranks of their fellow princely rulers through canny marriages. George I was known by some of his British subjects as 'Lucky George' because of his unexpected inheritance of the British crown at the age of 54, but he was in a pretty lucky position already. Once in Britain, he would openly pine for his homeland, and take every opportunity to return.

When Georg arrived in London in September 1714 to be crowned George I, he was seemingly accompanied by his two German mistresses – one fat, one thin – known as the Elephant and the Maypole. Or at least, this is what the British wanted to believe. This was not the least of many communication problems between George I's subjects and their new ruler. As George had learned French, German and Latin before even embarking upon English, it was understandable that he spoke it haltingly, and in a thick German accent. In fact, the truth about George I's supposed mistresses is stranger than fiction, for the 'fat' mistress was really his illegitimate half-sister.

The transplantation of a tight-knit group of Germans into the heart of the British court was bound to cause jealousy and xenophobia. George's German supporters were seen to monopolise all the best jobs. One particularly striking example was Mohammed von Königstreu (literally, 'True to the King'), the monarch's Turkish valet, who had followed George across the North Sea. His duties ranged from helping the king to dress in the morning to treating his hemorrhoids. Content with his Turk, George failed to appoint a groom of the stool, traditionally one of the most valuable and intimate court offices. He therefore disappointed a number of would-be grooms among the British

ALAMY

Ehrengard Melusine von der Schulenburg, George I's mistress. The king's arrival in Britain without a wife left him with a serious image problem

THE **HISTORY** ESSAY

"George I had divorced his wife for adultery and locked her up in a remote German castle. More torrid accounts claim that he'd had his wife's Swedish lover assassinated"

Sir Godfrey Kneller's portrait of King George I, who became Britain's first Hanoverian king in 1714. George and his son are often damned as dull and grumpy, yet, argues Lucy Worsley, they were every bit as dysfunctional as Henry VIII

courtiers. Incensed, they put it about that the king "keeps his Turk for abominable uses".

In the light of these sexual slurs, the reality of George's intimate life is a little disappointing: he had just his single, skinny, long-term official mistress, Ehrengard Melusine von der Schulenburg. But there had been fireworks in the past: in Hanover in the 1690s, Georg had divorced his wife for adultery and locked her up in a remote German castle. More torrid accounts of the affair claim that he'd had his wife's Swedish lover assassinated, and the corpse thrown into the river outside the family's palace in the city of Hanover.

It was far too good a story to be forgotten, especially as George I arrived in Britain with a notable gap by his side where his wife should have been, and it left him with a lasting image problem. This was somewhat typical. Much of the initial attraction of the Hanoverian dynasty rested upon not who they were, but who they weren't. They weren't Catholic. They weren't absolutist and despotic like the French kings. William Thackeray (a hundred years later) thought that George I, "cynical, and selfish, as he was […] was better than a king out of St Germains, with the French king's orders in his pocket, and a swarm of Jesuits in train".

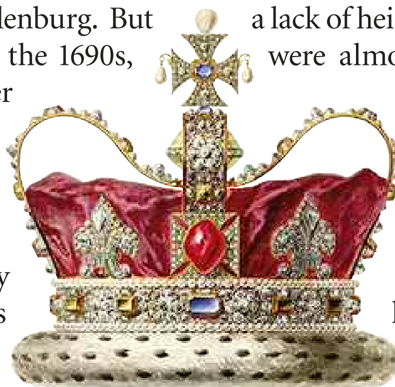
The nearest blood claimant to the British throne was James Stuart, the would-be King James III, who had to gnash his teeth in France while George I peacefully strolled into his new realm. His supporters, the Jacobites, waged a propaganda war, claiming that their man was the truly British alternative to these interlopers from Hanover, a place associated with yokels and the farming of turnips. During the new king's coronation a spectator was arrested for brandishing a turnip on a stick to make exactly that point.

George I also, in terms of personality, did very little to help himself. Because he was shy, his new subjects did not really feel that they knew him, and so gossip filled the gaps.

Another way in which the king's influence has been minimised is through the argument that he was the tool of his Whig politicians. "The Whigs said George I was king," says WC Sellar and RJ Yeatman's old favourite *1066 and All That (1930)*. The Whiggish argument runs that Britain, and particularly its system of constitutional government, was the wonder of the western world, somewhat at the expense of its king. This proposition that there was a uniquely British respect for liberty implies that the Georgian monarchs were not very powerful, engaged or even fluent in English. It's a well-worn canard that George I had to communicate with his first minister, Sir Robert Walpole, in bad Latin, as their best common language. In fact George I did read English newspapers, and is recorded as having spoken in English. More recently, Hannah Smith's *Georgian Monarchy: Politics and Culture, 1714–1760* (2009) pointed out that the Hanoverians were far more warmly welcomed by the British people than the somewhat snide accounts of their courtiers would suggest.

One boon that the Hanoverians presented to their new subjects was the endless amusing gossip provided by their private lives. The problem with the Tudors, and then the Stuarts, had been a lack of heirs. Now, with such a fecund family on the throne, there were almost too many of them. Each Georgian king in turn had a terrible relationship with his successor-in-waiting, his eldest son.

And all this was revealed in a press that was much more free than in the more absolute days of the 17th century. Due to an administrative mistake in the 1690s, parliament failed to renew the Licensing Act that had controlled the press, and one result was a profusion of newspapers, pamphlets and parody. No wonder



George I's crown of state. Over 50 Roman Catholics had closer blood ties to the throne when he became king

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY/BRIDGEMAN

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

Thomas Hudson's 1744 portrait of George II. Britain's second Hanoverian king led his troops to victory over the French at Dettingen and triumphed at Culloden. Yet that didn't stop a Thames waterman yelling curses at him as he walked through his royal gardens

THE **HISTORY** ESSAY

“The very presence of rival camps within the court – that of George I and his son, the future George II – allowed the concept of ‘His Majesty’s loyal opposition’ to be born”

This satirical etching from 1732, entitled *The Golden Rump*, references George II’s haemorrhoids. The king is depicted standing on an altar, kicking his left leg and breaking wind. Queen Caroline, to his right, administers a flavoured brandy as an enema

that Voltaire, fleeing the restrictive, patron-based literary sphere of France, found Britain a haven for free speech. Writers rejoiced. This was the age of satire.

George I’s notoriously poor relationship with his son was partly a clash of personality: he was as taciturn as his son was volatile and passionate. But their personal difficulties were heightened by politics. Figures of influence flocked to the rival court of the Prince of Wales rather than his father.

And yet, as so often with the Hanoverians, there was an upside to this too. The very presence of rival camps within the court – that of the king and his son – allowed the concept of ‘His Majesty’s loyal opposition’ to be born. You didn’t need to take up arms to express displeasure with the regime. You could just go to the prince’s parties instead. And because both George I and George II loved to go back to Hanover for summer holidays, their politicians had to get on with government even when their king was away. The concept of cabinet responsibility emerged in these frequent royal absences.

One of the most epic episodes of Hanoverian dysfunctionality took place at Hampton Court in 1737. George II, by then king for a decade, was at loggerheads with his son Frederick Prince of Wales. Frederick, whose wife, Augusta, was pregnant, was determined to deprive his hated parents of their traditional right of attending the royal birth. “At her labour I positively will be,” George II’s wife Caroline had said. “Let her lie-in where she will.”

But when his teenage wife’s labour pains began at Hampton Court in the middle of the night on Sunday 31 July, Prince Frederick bundled her into a carriage and drove her through the night to St James’s Palace. Augusta “cried and begged not to be carried away in her painful condition”. Frederick’s response was to use such force to hold her down in the coach that he hurt his back, while his wife’s

BRITISH MUSEUM

"Caroline came from a German tradition of lively, intelligent, liberal royal women that was far removed from the British approach that gave us the poorly educated and relatively unimpressive Queens Mary and Anne"

skirts were soaked with "the filthy inundations which attend these circumstances". The baby was finally born in the early morning at St James's Palace. A lack of preparation at the sumptuous royal dwelling meant that the little girl had to be wrapped in a table napkin.

The king and his son exchanged indignant letters that angrily complained about each other's conduct, all of which were very entertainingly published in *The Gentleman's Magazine*. This was high theatre. George II's perceived cruelty to his son, and his neglect of his popular queen, Caroline, in favour of mistresses, meant that his reputation sank low. A Thames waterman travelling past Hampton Court by boat yelled curses at the king "and all his Hanover dogs" as the monarch walked in the palace's riverside garden.

Queen Caroline – shown in a John Vanderbank portrait – loved the theatre and was an ardent patron of intellectuals

BRIDGEMAN

And yet despite all the sniping, George II stayed secure on his throne. The troublesome Frederick ended up predeceasing his father and George II came into his own, as a fiery-tempered commander at the victorious battle of Dettingen in 1743, part of the War of the Austrian Succession. He also took decisive action to defeat a Jacobite rebellion (forever to his disfavour with the people of Scotland), sending his second, soldier son, the 'Butcher' Duke of Cumberland, to dispatch Bonnie Prince Charlie and his rebellious Highlanders at the battle of Culloden in 1746. After this dramatic engagement, he must have felt at last secure: "I never saw the king in such glee," one courtier said. As Andrew Thompson puts it, "effective leaders are not necessarily nice people".

But how effective was George II? The 18th century has often been painted as the age of the people – *A Polite and Commercial People* (1992), as Paul Longford's influential social history had it (although he also charted the ways in which the Georgians were unruly, sentimental and often poverty-stricken). There is a beguiling narrative of the 18th century – recently respun in the British Library's Georgians Revealed exhibition – in which something like a middle class pushed forwards all the key developments in art, architecture, culture and music, while the court itself was a barren backwater, presided over by the anti-culture George II, who would claim, in his German accent, that he hated all "boets and bainters".

Yet this is to overlook the fact that the Hanoverians were enthusiastic participants in culture. Both George I and George II, for example, often visited London's theatres and operas alongside their subjects. Indeed, Caroline, the wife of George II, was a royal patron of intellectuals on a scale not seen since the clever king Charles II. She came from a German tradition of lively, intelligent, liberal royal women that was far removed from the British approach that gave us the poorly educated and relatively unimpressive Queens Mary and Anne.

The Hanoverians may not have exactly been splashing the cash that drove the cultural life of the country, but they certainly created the conditions in which it was possible for it to thrive.

Their courtiers may well have thought them dull and generations of students may have struggled to remember which king was which. Yet these uncharismatic Hanoverian monarchs were certainly unafraid to fight when it mattered. While Culloden and the profits of the slave trade form dark stains on their reigns, it was on their watch that many of the institutions and attitudes of what we now recognise as modern British were made.

Complex, colourful, contradictory and conflict-filled, the Georgian age has so many good stories. It's surprising that those of the individual Hanoverian monarchs are not better known. Perhaps 1714, and 2014, are the years to change all that. **H**

Lucy Worsley is chief curator at Historic Royal Palaces, as well as a successful history writer and broadcaster

DISCOVER MORE

BOOKS

- **George I: Elector and King** by Ragnhild Hatton (Thames and Hudson, 1978)
- **Georgian Monarchy** by Hannah Smith (Cambridge University Press, 2006)
- **George II** by Andrew Thompson (Yale University Press, 2011)
- **Courtiers: The Secret History of the Georgian Court** by Lucy Worsley (Faber & Faber, 2011)

EXHIBITIONS

- **The First Georgians** is at the Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace until 12 October
- **The Glorious Georges** is at Hampton Court, Kensington and Kew Palaces until 30 November

TELEVISION

- Lucy Worsley is presenting **The First Georgians: The German Kings Who Made Britain**, as part of the *18th Century Britain* season, in late April

Next month's essay: Joanna Bourke investigates the use of pain as a weapon of war