



The Christian life of King George III

In the popular mind George III is probably remembered for two things, the loss of America as a British colony, and the madness of his latter years. In the first he was probably the scapegoat for the failure of the British policy, while the illness of his latter years was not insanity but a hereditary disease, porphyria. The treatment he received for his so-called 'madness' has been described as horrific, repressive and punitive. I believe, however, that he should be remembered above all for his Christian life. John Elias, a noted leader of the Welsh Calvinist Methodists at the turn of the nineteenth century, described the King as '*a sovereign noted for his sobriety and religious inclination, his great humility and dependence on God for aid, his fatherly care for his subjects, and his knowledge of the way of salvation*'.¹

Unlike some of his predecessors, George III had a deep concern for the good of his people. Throughout his life he was prepared to abandon his personal happiness for the sake of his country. As he came to the throne he announced that he believed that '*the best means to draw down the divine favour upon my reign ... (is) ... to countenance and encourage the practice of true religion and virtue*'. Some years later he wrote,

'I do not pretend to any superior abilities, but will give place to no one in meaning to preserve the freedom, happiness and glory of my dominions and all their inhabitants, and to fulfil the duty to my God and my neighbour in the most extended sense'.²

Throughout his life he remembered and endeavoured to follow the advice given him by his mentor, Lord Bute:

'A prince ought to endeavour in all his thoughts to excel his people in virtue, piety, generosity, nobility of sentiment; that when they have occasion to approach him they may do it with love and veneration'.³

As Nesta Pain in her book, *George III at home*, remarks, '*George was the one sober and virtuous member of a uniquely raffish family, and life at his court jogged on in an eminently respectable way*'.⁴

Games of chance were banned from the palaces, the royal family retired to bed at a time when the fashionable life of society was about to begin, the Sunday drawing rooms were abolished, and members of the court were expected to attend the worship of Almighty God each Sunday.

The King was known for his great humility. He would place coals on the fire himself rather than ring for a servant to do so, with the result that his domestic staff was devoted to him. His ability to talk freely and easily with all classes of his subjects without losing his dignity became almost proverbial, while it has been suggested that the Tories at his court were weaned from Jacobitism as much by his affability and good manners as by any sympathy with his political ideas. His charity, said the governess of the royal children, Lady Charlotte Finch, was 'prodigious', and in 1789 it was said that out of his annual income of £60,000 he never gave away less than £14,000 to private charities.

These matters, of course, indicate a conscientious man, rather than a man with a profound Christian faith and piety. However, there are many illustrations of his Christian faith, apart from the testimony of Elias. Aaron Seymour, the biographer of the Countess of Huntingdon, wrote as follows:

'The habitual piety of the King was perhaps the most striking feature of his character; it was manifested at a very early period of his life, and continued with him, bright and glowing, to the last'.⁵

In his own copy of the *Book of Common Prayer*, George is said to have struck out the words in the prayer for the King, *'thy servant George, our most gracious King and Governor'*, and instead inscribed these words, *'an unworthy sinner'*.

He informed his daughter, Princess Amelia, on her deathbed, that *'it is not of yourself alone that you can be saved, your acceptance with God must depend on your faith and trust in the merits of the Redeemer'*. As he continued to speak to her about salvation in Christ, a witness observed it was *'in a way far more interesting to them both, than the highest privileges and most magnificent praises of royalty'*.

He admonished his son Frederick (Duke of York) to read the Bible he had given him morning and evening, while he wrote to his son, later William IV,

'I strongly recommend the habitual reading of the Holy Scriptures ... and you more and more placing that reliance on the Divine Creator which is the only real means of obtaining that peace of mind that alone can make a man fit for arduous undertakings'.

His granddaughter, Princess Charlotte, remembered him recommending her to the study of the Scriptures, and telling her to pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to understand its meaning. He also told her that the only means whereby a death-bed could be made easy was through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. At the beginning of his reign George forbade any compliments to be made to him from the pulpit, remarking in rebuke to Dr Thomas Wilson that he came to the Chapel Royal to hear the praise of God and not his own. He told Fanny Burney that the sermons he liked were plain and unadorned, for before God he was no more than an ordinary mortal. At his Coronation, as he approached the communion table to receive the Sacrament, he insisted on taking off his crown, stating that *'humility best becomes such a solemn act of devotion'*, adding that he looked upon himself, when appearing before the King of kings, in no other character than *'that of a humble Christian'*.

It is clear that the King knew the limitations of contemporary religion, declining to appoint a person recommended by C. J. Fox to some ecclesiastical office on the grounds, *'I don't think Mr Fox very likely to recommend a man who will do honour to that sacred profession'*. The bishops who complained about Lady Huntingdon's evangelical activities and her preachers were told, *'See if you cannot imitate the zeal of these men'*, and he added that he wished there was a Lady Huntingdon in every diocese in the kingdom. Dr Cornwallis, the Archbishop of Canterbury (1768-83), received a letter from the King in which he expressed his displeasure at the entertainments the Archbishop was allowing at Lambeth Palace, *'in a residence for many centuries devoted to divine studies, religious retirement, and the extensive exercise of charity and benevolence; I add, in a place where so many of your predecessors have led their lives in such sanctity as has thrown lustre on the pure religion they professed and adorned'*. He ended, *'may God take your Grace into his Almighty protection'*. This letter was written after Lady Huntingdon had endeavoured, without success, to approach the Archbishop about this matter. Finally she approached the King. At her interview with George he informed her *'of the very good opinion I have of you, and how very highly I estimate your character, your zeal and abilities, which cannot be consecrated to a more noble purpose'*.⁶ On another occasion he was informed by a bishop of the dangerous consequences that could befall the Church through the preaching of John Wesley, only to reply, *'Make a bishop of him, my lord, and then I'll warrant you he'll preach seldom enough'*. On another occasion he saw one of his servants dejected. After various questions he said to him, *'Thomas, it is the state of your soul that troubles you'*. Finding it was so, and that Thomas was unable to derive any benefit from the services at St George's Chapel, the King suggested that he should attend upon the preaching of a worthy Independent minister at Datchett, and added that he would not be angry if he never saw him again at St George's.⁷

The King also supported, as far as he was able, evangelical religion. He once remarked to a group of his courtiers, *'You say that Lord Dartmouth is an enthusiast, but surely he says nothing on the*

subject of religion, but what every Christian may and ought to say'. Stopped once by a disturbance, he discovered that it was an affair between the townspeople and the Methodists. The King said loudly, *'The Methodists are a quiet, good kind of people and will disturb nobody. If I can learn that any persons in my employment disturb **them**, they shall be immediately dismissed*'. He encouraged and supported those men in his employ whom he discovered to be Christians, and often appears to have talked with them about spiritual matters. One of them, a workman at Kew, was missed by the King. He discovered that he had been dismissed for refusing to work on a Sunday. *'Call him back immediately*', demanded the King, *'the man who refuses to do his ordinary work on the Lord's Day is the man for me*'. A similar story concerns an under-gardener, who had been dismissed for no other reason than that he was continually talking about his religion. *'Call me defender of the faith! Defender of the faith? and turn a man away for his religion*', stormed the King as he demanded the man be reinstated. The man attended a place of worship supported by voluntary contributions, and periodically George gave this man a guinea towards the quarterly collection.

George's family life was not easy. His own daughter said that *'he kept from the world all he suffered and went through*' with his wife's temper. Although he was fond of his children, he found it hard to communicate with them or to appreciate their individual lives. *'His simple domestic virtues and tastes, his freedom from vice, and his sincere piety and humble reliance upon God*', became an object of ridicule to his sons as well as to his brother.⁸ But others appreciated his personal qualities. Herbert Taylor, who, after 1805, served the King as his secretary, said of him, in the days of his blindness and illness, *'The patience, resignation and good humour with which he submits to so great a calamity daily increases ... It is impossible to be with our good King without finding ... cause to love and admire him*'. *'Indeed*', writes John Brooke, one of his biographers, his personal authority and the respect in which he was held were such, *'that had he not been followed by two incapable successors and a young inexperienced girl, the nineteenth century might have witnessed a reversion to a more monarchical system of government*'. His simplicity, piety and concern for others impressed a nation, and although his strong Christian faith was not often articulated in public, it is clear that the qualities he brought to the throne were founded upon his Christian life. He once asked one of his subjects as to the grounds of his hope of salvation, to receive the reply, *'the sacrifice and work of the Lord Jesus Christ*'. George replied, *'That too is the ground of my dependence*'. As we pray for the members of the royal family, may we not pray that their lives may be animated and enlightened by that faith which shone so conspicuously in the life of their worthy ancestor, George III?

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¹ Journal of the Historical Society of the Presbyterian Church in Wales, LX (1976), 101. 2John

² Brooke, *King George III*, (London, 1974), 158.

³ *ibid.*, 121.

⁴ Nesta Pain, *George III at home*, (London, 1975), 29.

⁵ *Life of Selma, Countess of Huntingdon*, (London, 1839), II, 284.

⁶ *ibid.*, II, 281 ff.

⁷ *Percy Anecdotes*, (London, 1868), II, 947.

⁸ Brooke, 442.