**JOHN STUART, 3RD EARL OF BUTE: IMAGE AND COUNTER
IMAGE IN HANOVERIAN STUDIES**

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It is as one of the more, if not most, unpopular and controversial eighteenth-century British political figure that John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute (1713-92)—the first Scotsman ever to become Prime Minister—is still generally, but unfairly, remembered. In traditional accounts he comes across as the embodiment of arrogance, venality and corruption, an image shaped mainly by the partisan distortions of contemporary opposition writers, refined in the similarly slanted narratives of nineteenth-century Whig historiography, and due partly to Namierite influence, lingering to this day.¹

Only recently, particularly over the past two decades or so, have attempts been made to present a more balanced portrayal of Bute's character, abilities, and contributions to the turbulent politics of his day. Though much of this revisionist work has appeared in article form, collectively these writings now allow us to discern the telling disjunctures between partisan contemporary judgments and assessments based on more rigorous, modern scholarly standards. The present article aims to explore the changing perception of Bute among historians since his own time, to explain the changing political orientations which those perceptions represent, and to disengage Bute from the idiosyncrasies of any specific observer: that is, to free him from generationally vindicated opprobrium and polemically conditioned repetition.

As a well-connected Scottish aristocrat, enjoying rapid political success, Bute from the outset was the object of hard-hitting public abuse fostered by disgruntled Whigs²—abuse that

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eventually drove him from office and from court. Reinforced by deep anti-Scottish sentiments which permeated English society at all levels,³ this popular hostility had its political counterpart in Bute's proscription by the nation's political leaders and concurrent censure by opposition writers—propagandists like Almon, Walpole, and Burke⁴—all joined in fervent condemnation of Bute's alleged responsibility for the upheaval and conflicts in British politics following the accession of George III. Thus, in Almon's *History of the Late Minority* (and elsewhere in the opposition literature of the period),⁵ Bute is depicted in uniformly negative, almost crude, stereotyped terms as the embodiment of "prerogative politics:" an ambitious yet mediocre courtier with a high view of regal power intent on undermining the constitution and the tenets of responsible government.⁶ "To the gratification of his [Bute's] ambitious views," wrote Almon,

is to be attributed all the divisions and distractions into which the unhappy kingdom has been plunged since his present Majesty's advent to the Crown . . . He made certain of meeting with the cordial affection of the Jacobites, and . . . he was certain of having the support of the other infatuated set of men called Tories; these with a great part of the Scots . . . formed his troop. The slavish and arbitrary doctrines which they imbibed with their milk they hoped to see soon established as the law of the land.⁷

These hostile portrayals, partisan, bordering on being deliberately contrived, eventually evolved into what John Brewer has called the "Whig case" against Bute⁸—a comprehensive recital of Bute's supposed political sins, commonly invoked in the 1760s and 1770s, on both sides of the Atlantic—to explain the nation's political difficulties and the disasters of the American war. For much of the Whig establishment, Bute, from the outset was in the fullest sense a mere "favorite," successful without true credentials for office, his position and status solely dependent upon royal support and covert patronage manipulation. These politicians saw each crisis and each

new setback as undeniable evidence confirming their theory of a conspiracy, originating with Bute and supported by the king, to create a government “designed to vaunt prerogative, unbalance the constitution and subvert liberty in the Old World and the New.”⁹ Only this system could explain the incessant political conflicts and divisions during George III’s early years and the autocratic treatment of the colonists that led to the loss of America.

Although constitutionally speaking, the Whig critique added important dimensions to contemporary political debate. On a rhetorical level it was also propaganda posing as historical truth: the portrayal of Bute’s character and actions in the most sweepingly reprehensible terms in order to justify and define opposition to the court. Opposition ideologists utilized the Bute image to legitimate their position as defenders of liberty at home and abroad against a would-be absolutist king and his all-powerful minister; to them, as to the ruling Whigs generally, Bute insidiously personified the changing agenda seemingly implicit in George III’s accession—that of ending party distinction, reasserting royal independence and widening the patronage network. They undermined prevailing Whig hegemony by challenging the basic premises—the ideological consensus—on which this hegemony was based. As royal favourite, opposition to whom the king considered a personal affront, Bute embodied an unacceptable conception of politics—became identified with Tory notions of personal government hostile to traditional Whiggery and adverse to that distinction between king and minister which was a constitutional restraint on the executive and so fundamental to the idea of responsible government and hence political stability. He likewise offered a competing source of power and influence to incumbent ministers, thereby threatening a key prerequisite of Whig aristocratic dominance. As a result, “personal grudges and group vendettas against Bute were elevated into a coherent historical account,”¹⁰ or “Whig interpretation” of George III’s reign and subsequently eighteenth-century British history in general. As such, the Whig version of events—an intricate blend of propaganda and ideology—represents a distorting mirror in which Bute’s historical reputation came to be adversely and enduringly reflected.

Indeed how far ‘Whig’ polemics established the guidelines of subsequent historical scholarship is illustrated by the work of Horace Walpole. His famous *Memoirs of the Reign of George III* were initially, in first draft, much more favorable to the King and Bute than subsequently. The American war made him hostile to the court and prompted him to insert this new attitude retrospectively into the published description of the King’s early reign. Taking a cue, William Belsham, in his *Memoirs of the Reign of George III* (published in 1795), summarily dismissed Bute “as a nobleman haughty in his manners, contracted in his capacity, despotic in his sentiments and mysterious in his conduct.”¹¹ Worse still, he accused Bute of planning a change in Britain’s system of government, a return to Tory principles of expanded royal power and ambition. Similarly Robert Huish, writing in 1821, considered Bute responsible for giving George III “predilections more befitting a despot of the Stuart line than a successor of William III.”¹² Comparable views resonated throughout the writings of most contemporary or near contemporary historians, including Charles Coote, Edward Holt and William Smyth,¹³ suggesting their dependence on the same indiscriminately hostile tradition going back to Walpole and Burke but, as Herbert Butterfield¹⁴ has shown, permeating the opposition literature long after.

More impartial, typifying a distinctively moderate interpretation of events, was John Adolphus who, in 1802, published his *History of England*, which extended from 1760 to 1783. It was a nuanced and generally sympathetic account of George III’s earlier years that set the tone for similarly supportive or Tory commentary throughout much of the Victorian period. Utilizing previously neglected sources, including Bute’s own papers and the Dodington diary, Adolphus agreed that Bute and the king had sought to alter the character of English government but only, he argued, to free regal liberty from aristocratic domination and only through the “moderate assertion of royal prerogative.”¹⁵ Here he essentially reformulated the case made by some of the earliest commentators supportive of the king and his circle. Adolphus’s sympathy for court policies also carried over to Bute, whom he absolved from the charge of conspiracy, subversion or corruption and credits with some admirable character traits but not

the attributes that made an effective politician in the shifting context of the times.

He [Bute] was not connected either by blood or familiar intercourse with the leading families in England, he was not versed in the arts of popularity or used to the struggles of parliamentary opposition; and his manners were cold, reserved, and unconciliating. Prejudices were easily exerted against him as a native of Scotland.¹⁶

Ultimately, concluded Adolphus, Bute's well-intentioned efforts proved unsuccessful partly because of his political shortcomings, but equally because of the selfish, irresponsible opportunism of the opposition organized against him, especially in the city of London. An increasingly important force in metropolitan and national politics, London by the 1760s was showing "factions and overbearing resistance to the exertion of government," while the "licentiousness of the press became unbounded and disgraceful to the nation." This party spirit, in turn, produced unduly hostile and often unfair judgments of Bute's administration "for such were the effects of a constant and acrimonious opposition that not only the prudence of his measures but the purity of his intentions were doubted."¹⁷ Obviously, the revised assessments of royal aims and actions during the 1760s, in part a reaction of growing metropolitan radicalism, had profound ramifications for historical perceptions of Bute; the more historians were partial to George III's, his world program and policies, the more they correspondingly tended to be sympathetic in their treatment of Bute.

Adolphus was the first to illustrate this tendency towards a more impartial, balanced estimate of both Bute and the king, a trend sustained by a succeeding generation of Tory writers and historians, among them Robert Bisset,¹⁸ Nathaniel Wraxall who considered Bute "a nobleman of remarkable talents and erudition,"¹⁹ Lord Brougham²⁰ and, above all, Lord Mahon whose influential *History of England in the Eighteenth Century* appeared in 1844. Using new materials, including the Hardwicke and Mitchell papers, Mahon advanced a defense of George III as the

highly principled opponent of “oligarchical abuses” but also paid tribute to Bute for his intellect, moral principles and attention to duty, seeing him as a man of undoubted potential, “unfairly maligned in a licentious press imbued with party prejudice and faction.”²¹ His preferment was in no way unconstitutional, but like Adolphus and Bisset, Mahon felt that George III’s predilection for Bute was a mistake—that the latter lacked the political experience and aptitude, not to mention temperament, to deal with the problems he had to face, especially in time of crisis and war.

Despite these shifting perspectives, personally and politically biased accounts of Bute, reminiscent of earlier opposition propaganda continued to appear at intervals. Restricted at first to relatively popular or anecdotal works, these attacks were intensified—made more persuasive and adaptable to serious scholarship—by the appearance in the 1830s and 40s of political memoirs and letters such as the *Chatham Correspondence*, the *Rockingham Memoirs*, the *Grenville Correspondence* and the recollections of Horace Walpole and Lord Lyttleton.²² These new source-materials proved prejudicial to Bute, precisely because so many of them reflected the views of his enemies and rivals—hostile evidence seemingly confirming the earlier critiques of Almon and Burke and so by way of reinforcement, once more becoming the basis for portrayals of Bute as the progenitor of arbitrary government and secret influence. Lord Russell, for instance, editor of the *Bedford Papers*, summed up the situation in the following manner:

The letters of the King, the letters of Sir Gilbert Elliot—the friend of Lord Bute—all corroborate the general view taken by Mr. Burke in his *Thoughts on the Causes of the Present Discontent*: “. . . that the project of restoring to the crown that absolute direction and control which Charles the First and James the Second had been forced to relinquish . . . was entertained and attempted by George the Third, can hardly be doubted.”²³

Despite demonstrable defects in the nature of the evidence, the new documentary publications came to influence Bute historiography most detrimentally, not least in the way in which editors inextricably entangled their materials with tendentious interpretations that inevitably shaped subsequent commentaries on George III's early reign in general—as the sinister twists injected, transformed the understandable liberationist aims of the new court into evidence of a design against the Constitution.

Contributing to this process were the changing conditions of British political life resulting from the nineteenth-century transition towards parliamentary government. By the 1860s, new constitutional conventions had developed and the “spirit of the Constitution” had changed in important ways. These developments in turn influenced English historiography at a critical point; they henceforth led historians to equate the political practices of the Hanoverian period with those of their own time—to imagine that prior to 1760, there had flourished a fully established system of “responsible government” which Bute (through George III) had somehow conspired to overthrow. In short, British historians henceforth viewed the eighteenth century through the lens of Victorian parliamentarianism—an instinctive predisposition now mutating the very structure of historical explanation. Specifically this meant that once again historical judgment of Bute was defined by contemporary political perspectives, (with all their attendant defects), augmented by the attitude of writers towards the constitutional controversies of the 1760s—attitudes not reflecting the norms of Bute's own day, but those of a later and quite different age. It also meant that the Whig charges against Bute—the early partisan imputations revived—and enlarged—in the newly published sources—were gradually (and uncritically) transmuted into a new “form of academic orthodoxy”²⁴ in which fact and legend, myth, and reality became intricately conflated and blended with contemporary political preoccupations.

Thus in their characterizations of Bute, nineteenth-century Whig historians were content, for the most part, with sweeping condemnations, making virtually no attempt to objectively assess his character, abilities, and significance on the basis of serious documentary research. Once more, therefore, Bute appeared in the

role of villain: politically inept, morally corrupt and intellectually pretentious. “He was a man of some literary and artistic taste,” wrote W. E. Lecky, “but of very limited talents, entirely inexperienced in public business, arrogant, reserved . . . and with extreme views of the legitimate power of royalty.”²⁶ Similarly, in G. O. Trevelyan’s *Early History of Charles James Fox*, perhaps even more radical in its Whig tendencies, Bute is seen as bringing Britain to the brink of ruin by inviting George III to establish a system of “personal” government and in Erskine May’s *Constitutional History of England*, he appears as proto-Jacobite, wickedly attempting to destroy modern constitutionalism, now transposed from nineteenth-century Britain to the quite different world of the 1760s.²⁷ Such was the all but undifferentiated image of Bute projected by contemporary Whig historiography, reverberating through the works of such diverse historians as William Hunt, J. R. Green, Goldwin Smith, and A. Ballantyne, to name only a few.²⁸ Indeed for all its fallacies and contrivances, the Whig conception of Bute was long to endure, and with wide displacements: affecting general histories, biographies of major political figures, and specialist works on diplomatic, military and colonial themes like those of Julian Corbett, K. Hotblack, J. Holland-Rose, and Richard Lodge, among others.²⁹

Possibly the sole exception were the writings of the German historian, A. von Ruville, who not only defended Bute’s foreign—specifically Prussian—policy on the basis of new archival evidence,³⁰ but, for the first time, advanced the opinion that Bute was a diligent and, within limits, an able minister whose dedicated commitment to British national interests and achievements, (the Peace of Paris especially) had been unduly ignored. In fact, von Ruville even compared Bute favorably with William Pitt whose political opportunism he deplored, and whom he charged with initiating but not completing, potentially unpopular policies—such as canceling the Prussian subsidy—for fear this might damage his political reputation.³¹ Being non-British, with access to untapped foreign sources, von Ruville was able to sidestep the compelling attractions—and fallacies—of Whig historiography that had acquired such disproportionate ascendancy by this time. There was no need for him to disentangle historical accuracy from

partisanship except perhaps that of the still nascent German nationalist variety.

Unfortunately, the German scholar's immediate impact on the historical community at large was negligible; his conclusions were either unrecognized or challenged by contemporary writers and would not be incorporated into the mainstream of academic scholarship, and then only in attenuated form, until a much later date. It was above all with the advances of the Namierites during the 1940s and 1950s that the gross distortions of Whig historiography gave way to new, more rigorous critical standards and a revised interpretation of Georgian politics—a counter system to that of May, Lecky et al., became gradually established. Herbert Butterfield's valuable survey *George III and the Historians* (and *postscriptum* controversies) make it unnecessary to elaborate on this transformation except to note that much of the Namierite research did not center on Bute directly, nor did it modify the by then conventionally negative image of Bute in important respects. Certainly in Namier's *England in the Age of the American Revolution*, the most extravagant features of the Whig tradition—Bute's representation as the aspiring agent of royal absolutism intent on subverting British liberties—is effectively swept away. Yet the equally damaging charges of incompetence, ignorance and failure, reiterated by Whig partisans from John Almon to Hunt, were accepted virtually without question. It was Namier, in fact (evidently relying on Lord Shelburne, a notoriously biased source) who presented what, until relatively recently, was the accepted picture of Bute: an honourable but timorous, unimaginative man, well educated yet hopelessly deficient in political abilities, experience and sense: totally “unfit for a place of responsibility” to quote Namier himself. The resultant consensus in eighteenth-century historiography—what P. D. G. Thomas calls “a new orthodoxy”³²—is demonstrated by looking at works as variously dated as Richard Pares' *George III and the Politicians* (1953) where Bute is summarily dismissed as “inept,”³³ John Brewer's influential *Party Ideology and Party Politics* (1976) which affirmed the dominant image of Bute the “incompetent and unpopular sole Scotch minister,” Jeremy Black's *The Politics of Britain* (1993) where again Bute is dismissed as “weak willed” and “a broken

reed,” and John Marsden’s even more recent biography of George III, which essentially, provides a similar estimate of Bute.³⁴

Only lately have historians of eighteenth-century Britain truly taken serious issue with the Namierite approach in its implications for political ideology, extra parliamentary movements and controversial historical figures such as Bute. A major contribution of the Namier School to English political history—aside from new methodologies—was the purportedly exhaustive nature of its research (a claim no longer viable)—research as it proved, however, preoccupied overwhelmingly with structural analysis, constituencies, vested interests, and collective biography to the neglect of statesmanship, foreign affairs and ideological debate. These were all areas in which Bute was actively engaged also themes not explicable solely in terms of structure or empirical technique.³⁵ Continental archival sources—so essential for a balanced perspective—are also glaringly absent from the Namierite corpus, as they were from the works of most nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British historians.

The result has been a critical deflection of the compass, translating into an underestimation of Bute’s role in national politics and hence judgments less favorable than a more nuanced reevaluation in terms of interactive assumptions, priorities, personality, circumstances, and primary materials might suggest. Particularly illuminating here is the field of foreign policy—one of the leading topics of political activity and discussion at the time—yet an area that the Namierites, engrossed by factional intrigues and domestic struggles for power, have tended seriously to ignore.³⁶ Although diplomatic history in general has tended to be academically unfashionable for some time,³⁷ the last three decades have witnessed a gradual resurgence of interest in eighteenth-century (including British) diplomacy, with studies reflecting increasing growth in scope, areas of focus and methodology.³⁸ Since the 1970s diplomatic historians have not only expanded the range of sources consulted—supplementing the official records with the private papers of ministers and diplomats³⁹—they have also paid more serious attention to the military/naval dimensions of diplomatic action, economics, ideology and propaganda, the intellectual framework of national policy, the importance of

domestic pressures as well as the role of leading personalities, Bute included.

Thanks to this work, Bute has at length received credit—creating a more equitable historical image—for his contributions to the formulation of diplomatic, military and fiscal policies during the opening years of George III's reign. Moreover, a wealth of new manuscript evidence, unknown to, or neglected by the Namierites, has thrown new light on both the deeper motivations prompting diplomatic actions, apart from simple consequences and the sheer play of contingent forces. Although Bute was, like Pitt et al., initially inexperienced in diplomacy, he proved to be a conscientious, competent, and hardworking minister (unlike many of his contemporary peers) studying to master European affairs and, in an age of amateurism, becoming relatively proficient in implementing necessary policies with notable insight, astuteness, and even unity of purpose. He swiftly developed self-confidence once in office, gaining both the respect and loyalty of his subordinates, including the veteran under-secretary Edward Weston with whose close support he strove to improve the operational efficiency of the Northern Department atrophying under his predecessors.⁴⁰ Bute, moreover, made a favorable impression on the envoys from abroad—men, for the most part, professionally shrewd, observant and well-informed—as industrious, perceptive and capable—qualities very much at variance with his historical reputation.⁴¹

These conclusions have been confirmed by work on the critical Anglo-French negotiations for peace during the summer of 1761, demonstrating that Bute, not Pitt as traditionally believed, was the influential force throughout the deliberations. He not only formulated many of the key proposals submitted to France but, together with Devonshire, helped maintain the degree of cabinet harmony, amidst deep conflicts of opinions and personalities, essential for effective decision making.⁴²

This view aligns with a growing revisionist trend—one that, while recognizing Pitt's singular articulation of national interests, has questioned his reputation, motives and achievements, especially his alleged sole responsibility for Britain's rise to imperial greatness—the "heroic" view of Pitt given classic

expression in the writings of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians committed to the triumphant ethos of empire. A number of works over the past two decades, spawned by Richard Middleton's iconoclastic, *The Bells of Victory*, have steadily eroded the long accepted notion of Pitt "the absolute war minister," finally giving hitherto marginal figures—Newcastle, Ligonier, and Anson, to name just a few—more deserved historical recognition.⁴³

Bute has also benefited from this revisionist scholarship to the extent that his record as diplomat has been reassessed in connection with Russia and more controversially, Prussia—Britain's ally during the Seven Years War. Here the Earl's negative reputation stems mainly from the shift, successfully executed during the years 1761-63, towards retrenchment: a move away from his predecessors' dispirited continental interventionism towards more popular maritime and colonial objectives—a policy held by contemporaries and later historians to be responsible for Britain's post-war diplomatic problems, especially her prolonged isolation after 1763. Here again, judgments of Bute's foreign policy, as with so many aspects of his career, were for generations distorted by the bitter controversies over the reign of George III generally, another example of the extent to which partisan dimensions have shaped the Earl's historical standing. Condemnations of Bute's policy both served as surrogate for debate about George III's alleged constitutional designs and were related clearly to it: adverse judgments of one inevitably entailed censure of the other.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Whig historiography accepted without question, the fabrication of Prussian propaganda, reiterated by most German historians, to the effect that Bute's progressive dissolution of Britain's wartime alliance with Prussia, constituted a base betrayal of a loyal ally at the moment of greatest need, as well as precipitating British postwar isolation. A series of more recent studies, however, have not only vindicated Bute from the charges of desertion traditionally leveled against him, they have also reexamined his foreign policy within a wider interpretative framework, with reference to unresolved problems predating his political advent, the interplay of domestic and foreign pressures, the exigencies of intra-alliance politics and, finally, in relation to the transformations throughout the European system as a whole

towards the close of the Seven Years War and beyond. This research, combining new evidence from European, American, and British archives, has led certain scholars to conclude that the negative aura surrounding Bute's foreign policy for so long, owed less to faults of personality, (however real) character or misguided statesmanship, than to domestic/political and financial exigencies, international reconfigurations, alliance complications and above all a gradual systemic eastward shift in the pattern of European alignments which seriously diminished Britain's continental stature and influence after 1763 and hence the opportunities for effective diplomatic action abroad.⁴⁴ Similarly, the desire to harmonize the conflicting needs of government economy and American security, prompted Bute's administration to impose the cost of postwar defense upon the colonists—a decision leading to an imperial crisis that ended in revolution, but one probably inevitable, given the state of British finances in 1763 and the Bourbons' known plans for revenge. Bute's awareness of the transitory nature of peace and the appreciation that an enlarged empire demanded new fiscal and protective provisions was a sound response to altered realities, though much criticized by contemporaries.⁴⁵ From this perspective, Bute's diplomacy has been judged basically effective in difficult circumstances: he adapted to domestic pressures, fiscal exigencies and international dynamics, its overall objectives were achieved. There is increasing recognition that on many diplomatic issues, Bute merely brought to successful completion policies initiated earlier by the Pitt-Newcastle administration but left incomplete. Indeed, many historians would now agree that what Bute himself considered his major achievement—the Peace of Paris with France—was in fact an honorable, advantageous settlement: rich compensation for Britain's global victories and eloquent testimony to Bute's concerns for British imperial security.⁴⁶ The consensus of contemporary political opinion concurred: treaty terms passed in both the Lords and Commons by decisive majorities and received formal ratification on 10 February 1763. What opposition there was to the peace again derived largely from personal antagonisms against Bute by political rivals who fanned spurious public hostility against him and his policies. Even in the military realm, Bute's leadership in retaining and supporting the essential elements of

Pitt's wartime strategy yielded further triumphs, including the capture of St. Lucia, Martinique and Havana, the key to Spain's West Indies possessions. This suggests that the contrasts between Bute's ministry and that of his immediate predecessors, certainly in foreign/military affairs, were less dramatic than usually assumed—an important conclusion with vital implications for Bute's historical status.

The growing prominence of social/cultural/intellectual history—after World War II—has also led to a gradual reorientation of scholarly interest on those facets of Bute's career previously overlooked or ignored by earlier Namierite scholars working in the narrow confines of English political/constitutional history. One such area is his role as scholar/scientist patron of learning and other contributions to the intellectual life of his day, contributions made possible by the immense fortune he acquired upon the death of his father-in-law, Edward Wortley in 1761.⁴⁷ Deeply interested in education, Bute provided generously for Scotland's leading universities and colleges. At Edinburgh, for instance, he founded the Professorship of Rhetoric and Belle Lettres, appointed to the professorship of botany, Dr. John Hope, an accomplished scholar known for his taxonomic studies, and established the Regius Chair of Natural History. He also endowed several new Chairs at Glasgow. Similarly, in 1786, Bute donated his personal scientific library of 1,300 volumes to Marischal College, Aberdeen, made additions to the college museum, and supplied money to improve the observatory together with telescopes and other instruments of the highest quality. These gifts, and his general enlightened patronage, were to be of prime importance in the emergence of Aberdeen as a vital center of practical astronomy and medical education.

He was, moreover, instrumental in establishing the great Royal Botanical Garden in Edinburgh and helped to advance into university chair positions outstanding individuals, who collectively exerted a powerful influence on the course of Scottish cultural development. At Glasgow he secured the scholar John Miller as the Regius Professor of Civil Law and supported William Leechman as professor of ecclesiastical history.

As patron of literary and artistic merit his beneficiaries included Samuel Johnson, Tobias Smollett, Thomas Sheridan, Allan Ramsey the painter, Robert Adam the architect, William Robertson the historian and the playwright John Home. Contrary to widespread belief at the time, Bute did not show undue partiality to Scotsmen but dispensed his patronage according to merit rather than national or personal considerations.

A gifted scholar himself, deeply devoted to flori-culture, Bute published a splendid work in nine volumes in 1785, entitled *Botanical Tables Containing the Different Families of British Plants*, combining 654 hand-coloured plates, many derived from actual field work. Another privately printed work, "The Tabular Distribution of British Plants," in two parts—the first containing the genera, the second the species—is often attributed to him. Two of the groups classified by Linnaeus and Sir William Jones, *Stewartia* and *Butea* were named after him; and to him also, Albrecht van Haller inscribed his valuable *Bibliotheca Botanica* (1771) and John Hill his *Vegetable System* (1759-75). Other authors who dedicated botanical works to him included William Curtis, George Edwards and Samuel Pullein.⁴⁸

His best known role in botany, however, was in connection with the development of Kew Gardens first laid out as a private garden by Frederick, Prince of Wales in 1730, then after his death, remodeled into a botanical centre by his widow, Princess Augusta—with Bute's assistance. In 1754, Bute leased a house in Kew Green expanded to accommodate his botanical library, from where he supervised the garden alterations. Sir William Chambers was commissioned to design new buildings including the orangery, the pagoda and numerous temples. Bute also appointed William Aiton (1731-93), head gardener in 1759, with responsibility for establishing the herbaceous plant garden to be designed on the Linnean system. Bute closely supervised and coordinated these operations as well procuring trees and plants through his contacts from around the world. In this work Bute established the foundation on which his successor Sir Joseph Banks would subsequently build.⁴⁹

Bute's place in the history of science is further consolidated by his erudite patronage of such noted naturalists as

Peter Woulf, John Strange, the anatomist Dr. William Hunter, and the taxonomic recorder James Robertson, all of whom were instrumental in enhancing the quality of botanical exploration, scientific teaching and research. There is also ample evidence of a keen interest in mineralogy, sound acquaintance with current theories of the earth and the experimental arrangement of minerals based on chemical analysis. It was due to the depth, seriousness and durability of his commitment to virtually all aspects of natural history that, for his contemporaries, Bute stood out among other noble patrons and amateur scholars and should as such be recognized and enduringly remembered. Among his achievements, moreover, ranks a remarkable interest in the acquisition of rare books—an interest he communicated to the future George III, thereby essentially helping to establish The Royal Collection.⁵⁰

What, finally, can we conclude about Bute's status in the current historiography of eighteenth-century Britain, remembering that a full-length scholarly biography still remains to be written and that he remains a controversial character, one who has been judged politically more than historically in the past and may continue to be so even in the future. This is likely because the significance of his career is inextricably connected, as John Brewer once observed, with the political controversies and issues that he raised and embodied.⁵¹ Hence, Bute's historical importance transcends his brief tenure of high political office; in fact, "the few months in which he officially led the nation have to be placed in the context of his entire political career and the broader epoch in which he lived."⁵²

Bute's seeming fate, to be the progenitor of political conflict, was largely shaped by fortuitous factors: the interaction of domestic and external developments that would eventually transform the pattern of British politics and institutions. It was his misfortune to assume office amidst the crisis conditions of war and following the accession of a new king whose quest for enhanced executive power proved politically destabilizing, creating bitter conflict with a political establishment devoted to the *status quo* and consequently the appearance of a constitutional crisis in which Bute became the central focus. Enjoying power and status through court favor alone, Bute was a disturbing presence to the ruling elite,

disliked and distrusted, he fostered ministerial instability as those directing government policy had to confront the threat to their political security he represented.⁵³

Personifying the changing agenda implicit in George III's ascension—that of ending party distinctions and reasserting royal independence—Bute undermined Whig hegemony by challenging the premises on which this hegemony was based. As royal favourite, opposition to whom the king considered a personal affront, Bute embodied an unacceptable conception of politics, one reminiscent of Tory notions of personal government, hostile to traditional Whiggery, and averse to that distinction between king and minister which was a constitutional restraint on executive power and so fundamental to the notion of responsible government. Determined to preserve this distinction, the crown's opponents, allegedly observing constitutional propriety, maintained it was Bute, not the king, who was responsible for a system of government that disregarded the precepts of political responsibility. In this way, regardless of the facts of the case, Bute became a political scapegoat, held culpable for the conflicts between George III and the nation's political leaders. Moreover, his nationality—Scotsmen then being much disliked in England—made Bute a prime focus for disparate social and economic grievances which enabled the opposition to mobilize public hostility against him, added popular disapprobation to their own indictment of his political involvement, and by bringing him into further disrepute, sapped much of the strength necessary for the political conflicts in which he was engaged.

From these conflicts, so prominent a feature of the 1760s, ultimately emerged new political alignments and doctrines, culminating in the evolution of an organized party system and concomitant legitimization of opposition of mutually reinforcing developments that would profoundly affect the future relationship between George III and his ministers. The constitutional questions explored in this process—notably those of ministerial responsibility and the parameters of royal power—expanded into an evolving public debate, prolifically articulated in the press, a debate yielding important innovations in contemporary political arguments and of crucial significance for the long term development of the British

constitution. At the same time, the widespread controversy surrounding Bute's career gave focus to a variety of social and political discontents which in turn fostered the growth of extra parliamentary radicalism dedicated to political change and reform. The importance of Bute to the historian, then, lies partly in the fact that he was a potent if unwilling catalyst of these developments, his presence and actions evoking responses and counter-responses that collectively altered the basic patterns of Georgian political life.

But ultimately Bute is more than a symbol of the aberrations conventionally associated with George III's early reign. Though brief and turbulent, his tenure as Secretary of State and as Prime Minister was not without success. Although his plans for domestic political reform remained unfulfilled, Bute showed himself generally capable of leading a ministry in time of stress and war. For all his limitations, Bute implemented a coherent political strategy, one that consolidated Britain's imperial achievement and projected a minimalist continental policy at a time of intensifying national concern over the financial consequences of the Seven Years War. His contributions to British diplomacy during a highly critical phase were significant, showing undoubted qualities of statesmanship, as was his management of the Treaty of Paris, which established British dominance overseas. Altogether, modern research has shown, Bute was a responsible, cautious minister who maintained his concentration on the most important issues and had a clear sense of political priorities.⁵⁴ This accomplishment commands all the more respect when one remembers his psychological aversion to governing and the multitude of problems confronting him from the outset. No doubt he lacked the populist charisma of William Pitt, the self-serving oratory of Henry Fox, the consecrated Whig credentials of Newcastle or Devonshire—but yet he proved true to his convictions—a rare quality for a political figure in any age.

The lack of support from cabinet colleagues, his personal unpopularity, bitter factionalism within the Whig ranks, a hostile press and an inherently fractious government, all might have unsettled a more experienced minister. That Bute's concern for king and country prompted him to struggle on amidst political purgatory, reveals qualities of courage, tenacity and altruism not

usually associated with the sordid enterprise of politics. "I follow one uniform system," he wrote to Henry Fox shortly before his resignation, "and that is founded on the strictest honour, faith and duty."⁵⁵

NOTES

¹ On the historiographical dimensions of Bute's negative reputation see H. Butterfield, *George III and the Historians* (London: Collins, 1957); H. Butterfield, "Some Reflections on the Early Years of George III's Reign," *Journal of British Studies* 4 (1965), 78-101; John Brewer, "The Misfortunes of Lord Bute: A Case Study in 18th Century Political Argument and Public Opinion," *Historical Journal* 4 (1973), 3-43; John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 52-89, 102-135; and K. W. Schweizer, ed., *Lord Bute: Essays in Reinterpretation* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1988); introduction; K. W. Schweizer, *Statesmen, Diplomats and the Press* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002) ch. 1.

² On the disaffection of the old Whigs with Bute's swift political advancement see: P. Brown and K. W. Schweizer, eds., *The Devonshire Political Diary 1759-1762* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1982); F. O. Gorman, "The Myth of Lord Bute's Secret Influence," in: Schweizer, *Lord Bute*, pp. 57-81; John L. Bullion, *George III, National Reform and North America* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), 169-181, 208-219, 333-344, 349-359; J. Black, *George III* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Bute to Newcastle, Feb. 12, 1761, BL Add MSS 32918 ff 465-66; Bedford to Devonshire, Aug. 17, 1761, Chatsworth MSS 286/8; Bute to Lord Henley, Dec. 26, 1761 Bute MSS/Mt Stuart 730.

³ Brewer, "The Misfortunes of Lord Bute," 4-22; K. W. Schweizer, "Lord Bute and Anti-Scottish Feeling in 18th Century English Political Propaganda," *Scottish Colloquium Proceedings*, 2/9 (1974), 23-33; K. W. Schweizer, "English Xenophobia in the 18th Century: The Case of Lord Bute," *Scottish Tradition* 22 (1997), 6-25; K. W. Schweizer, "Lord Bute (1713-1792)," in: *Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004) v. 53, pp. 173-179; A. Rounce, "Stuarts Without End: Wilkes, Churchill and Anti-Scottishness," *18th Century Life* 29 (2005), 20-43.

⁴ John Almon, *The History of the Late Minority* (London, 1766); J. Almon, *Memoirs of John Almon: Bookseller of Piccadilly* (London, 1790); Horace Walpole, *Memoirs of the Reign of King George the Third* (London, 1845); Edmund Burke, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (London, 1770).

⁵ John Almon, *A Review of Lord Bute's Administration* (London, 1763); *Le Montagnard Parvenue: Or the New Highland Adventurer in England* (London, 1763); John Butler, *An Address to the Cocoa Tree, From a Whig* (London, 1762); *The Butiad or Political Register* (London, 1763); *A Letter to the Earl of Bute* (London, 1771); *North Briton*, 2 (12 June), 16 (18 Sept. 1762); 38 (19 Feb. 1763); *Considerations on the Present Dangerous Crisis* (London, 1763).

⁶ Almon, *A Review of Lord Bute's Administration*, 76-77; Almon, *A History*, 10-27; *A Letter to the Earl of Bute*, 10-11, 62-63.

⁷ *A Letter to the Earl of Bute*, 11-26; *Political Register*, I (1767), 6-8; *An Address to the Cocoa Tree*, 7-13, 15; *A Letter from a Member of the Opposition to Lord Bute* (London, 1763), 13-14.

⁸ Brewer, "The Misfortunes of Lord Bute," 23-43.

⁹ J. Brewer, "The Faces of Lord Bute: A Visual Contribution to Anglo-American Political Ideology," *Perspectives in American History* 4 (1972), 98; J. Brooke, ed., *Horace Walpole: Memoirs of King George II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) xxv-xxxii; J. Brooke, "Horace Walpole and King George III," in *Statesmen, Scholars and Merchants*, ed. A. Whiteman, et al., (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1973), 263-275.

¹⁰ Schweizer, *Lord Bute*, 57.

¹¹ William Belsham, *Memoirs of the Reign of George III to the Session of Parliament Ending A. D. 1793* (London, 1795), v. I, 7; Almon, *The History*; Butterfield, *George III and the Historians*, 22.

¹² Robert Huish, *Memoirs of the Reign of George the Third*, (London, 1821), 261.

¹³ Charles Coote, *History of England* (London, 1802); Edward Holt, *The Public and Domestic Life of His Late Most Gracious Majesty, George the Third* (London, 1821).

¹⁴ Butterfield, *George III and the Historians*, 69-75; K. Schweizer, ed., *Lord Bute*, ch. 3.

¹⁵ John Adolphus, *History of England from the Accession of George the Third* (London, 1802), I, 14-15; *Annual Register* (1762), 46. Concerning Bute's elevation in the new reign "another noble person had been in an employment near [George's] person; and having formed his mind with

much attention and success to these virtues which adorn his station, deserved and obtained a very uncommon share of his confidence.”

¹⁶ *Annual Register*, I, p. 15; Butterfield, *George III and the Historians*, 42-50, 61-65.

¹⁷ Butterfield, *George III and the Historians*, I, 127-8.

¹⁸ Robert Bisset, *The History of the Reign of George III to the Termination of the Late War* (London, 1803).

¹⁹ N. Wraxall, *The History of the Reign of George III* (London, 1820), 223.

²⁰ Lord Brougham, *Historical Sketches of Statesmen Who Flourished in the Time of George III* (London, 1855).

²¹ Lord Mahon, *History of England from the Peace of Utrecht to the Peace of Versailles* (London, 1844) IV, 312-16.

²² W. Stanhope and J. H. Pringle, eds., *The Correspondence of William Pitt, Earl of Chatham* (London, 1838-40); Lord Albemarle, *Memoirs of the Marquis of Rockingham and his Friends*, (London, 1852); Lord John Russell, *The Correspondence of John, Fourth Duke of Bedford*, (London, 1842-6); W.J. Smith, *The Grenville Papers* (London, 1852-3).

²³ Russell, *The Correspondence of John, Fourth Duke of Bedford*, vol. I, p. xxix.

²⁴ Butterfield, *George III and the Historians*, 151.

²⁶ G. O. Trevelyan, *The Early History of Charles James Fox*, (London, 1880), 95-6.

²⁷ Thomas Erskine May, *The Constitutional History of England* (London, 1861), I, 9-36.

²⁸ H. W. Hunt, *The Political History of England* (London, 1903), vol. 10; J. R. Green, *A Short History of the English People* (London, 1902), vol. 4; Goldwin Smith, *The United Kingdom: A Political History* (London, 1890); A. Ballantyne, *Lord Carteret: A Political Biography* (London, 1887).

²⁹ Julian Corbett, *England in the Seven Years War* (London, 1918); J. Holland Rose, “Frederick the Great and England, 1751-1763,” *English Historical Review* 29 (1914), 257-275; Richard Lodge, *Great Britain and Prussia in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1923); K. Hotblack, *Chatham, Colonial Policy* (London, 1917); E. Charteris, *William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland and the Seven Years War* (London, 1925); F. Harrison, *Chatham* (London, 1925); F. Harrison, *Chatham* (London, 1905); and more recently, J. Black, *The Politics of Britain 1688-1800* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 41, 89.

³⁰ Albert von Ruville, *Die Auflösung des Preussisch – Englischen Bündnisses vom Jahre 1762* (Berlin, 1892); Albert von Ruville, *William Pitt und Graf Bute* (Berlin, 1895); Albert von Ruville, *William Pitt, Earl of Chatham* (London, 1907).

³¹ L. Namier, *England in the Age of the American Revolution* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1963), 134.

³² P. D. G. Thomas, "George III and the American Revolution," *History* 14 (1989), 16-29; G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (London, 1967), 131-133; Butterfield Papers (Cambridge University Library) File 76/Namier.

³³ R. Pares, *George III and the Politicians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 66-67.

³⁴ J. Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976), ch. 3; J. Black, *The Politics of Britain*; J. Brooke, *King George III* (London, 1972), 47-49; J. Marsden, *The Wisdom of George III* (London, 2005).

³⁵ Butterfield, *George III and the Historians*, 208-15; H. T. Dickinson, "Party Principle and Public Opinion in 18th Century Politics," *History* 3 (1976), 231-7; F. O'Gorman, "Fifty Years after Namier: The 18th Century in British Historical Writing," *The Eighteenth Century* 20 (1979), 99-120; K. W. Schweizer, *Frederick the Great, William Pitt and Lord Bute* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1991).

³⁶ H. M. Scott, "British Foreign Policy in the Age of the American Revolution," *International History Review* 6 (1984), 114; K.W. Schweizer, "British Foreign Policy in the 18th Century," *History of European Ideas* 14 (1997), 275-282; H. Butterfield, "British Foreign Policy, 1762-1765," *Historical Journal* 6 (1963), 131-140; K. W. Schweizer and M. Schumann, "The Revitalization of Diplomatic History: Renewed Reflections," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 19 (2008), 149-186. The only work on diplomacy ever sponsored by Namier directly was F. Spencer, ed., *The Fourth Earl of Sandwich: Diplomatic Correspondence 1763-1765* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961).

³⁷ A fact elaborately deplored by Gordon Craig in his "Presidential Address to the American Historical Association," G. Craig, "The Historian and the Study of International Relations," *American Historical Review* 88 (1983), 1-12; K. W. Schweizer and J. Black, "The Value of Diplomatic History: A Case Study in the Historical Thought of Herbert Butterfield," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 17 (2006), 617-631; K. W. Schweizer, "A Case for Diplomatic History: Reflections from the

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³⁹ L. Scott, "Under Secretaries of State 1755-1775," (MA Thesis, University of Manchester, 1950); K. W. Schweizer, "Edward Weston (1703-1770): The Papers of an 18th Century Under Secretary in the Lewis Walpole Library," *Yale Library Gazette* 71 (1996), 43-48; K. W. Schweizer, "A Handlist to the Additional Weston Papers," *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 51 (1978), 99-102; Weston to Bute, Nov. 9, Dec. 2, 1761. Bute MSS; Bute to Weston, Jan. 6, 1762, Feb. 23, 1762 (Weston MSS); Weston to Mitchell, March 31, 1761, B.L. Add MSS, 6823, f 121; J. Black, *British Diplomats and Diplomacy 1688-1800* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001), 1-18.

⁴⁰ K. W. Schweizer, *Lord Bute*, 14, note 55; J. C. Sainty, *Officials of the Secretaries of State, 1660-1782* (London: University of London, Institute for Historical Research, 1972), 146-177; "Memorandum," Mar. 21, 1761. BL Add MSS 32920, f. 381.

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Relations During the Seven Years War (New York: Garland Publishing, 1986); H. Scott, *British Foreign Policy in the Age of the American Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990) ch. 1; J. Black, *Pitt the Elder*.

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⁵⁵ B.L. Add MSS 51379. f160.