



**Brendan Simms, Torsten Riotte, eds.** *The Hanoverian Dimension in British History, 1714-1837*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xi + 337 pp. \$79.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-84222-8.



**Andrew C. Thompson.** *Britain, Hanover and the Protestant Interest: 1688-1756*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2006. 256 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84383-241-6.



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## When Hanover Came to Britain

Many historians of Britain (and indeed, many Britons) celebrate that nation's "splendid isolation" from what they often deem "the continent," a.k.a. Europe. Scholars ranging from J. D. B. Clark to Linda Colley frame the formation of the United Kingdom as a "modern" state and a "modern" nation over the course of the eighteenth century as a process either unique to the British Isles or one that occurred as a (more often than not, positive) reaction to political and religious developments occurring

across the English Channel. Few of these historians acknowledge that from 1715 until 1837, the British monarch also was the elector (after 1806, king) of Hanover, and that for most of this period the interests of that electorate/kingdom played a significant role in British politics and foreign policy, just as Ireland and Scotland had while they were in personal union with England. Those who note this union refer to these rulers as "The Hanoverians" (as a bevy of titles of works on eighteenth-century

Britain attest to), but by and large, they minimize any influence that the actual or ancestral homeland of these rulers had in Great Britain besides the bequeathing of their dynastic name or, more negatively, the involvement of a reluctant “Blue Water” power in “European” wars of little significance to her.

Two recent works aim to reinsert Hanover into “British” history and historiography in the eighteenth and early centuries. In their 2006 compilation, Brendan Simms and Torsten Rott reject the interpretation of Hanover as a millstone, a distraction from the “island story” that has dominated the limited scholarship devoted to the British-Hanoverian union. They and ten contributors analyze this connection from a multitude of perspectives and thematic approaches. After an introductory chapter by Simms that articulates the importance of Hanover to “British” politics, diplomacy, and culture, the next five chapters flesh out these themes in a more or less chronological fashion. Jeremy Black argues in the first chapter that the rises and falls of the utility of the Hanoverian connection in British politics under the reigns of George I and II themselves testify to the importance of Hanover in creating a unified “British” national interest that at times included, at others excluded, the electorate. Simms next postulates that William Pitt the Elder was “never a pure ‘blue water’ colonialist” who focused solely on imperial interests at the expense of Hanover and continental concerns (p. 31). Despite several public attacks on the Hanoverian connection, Pitt is portrayed here as a pragmatist who saw the defense of Hanover in the Seven Years’ War as vital to British domestic and global interests. The following three chapters stress the continued importance of Hanover to British politics between 1760 and the end of the union in 1837. George III is revealed as an avid “defend[er] of Hanoverian integrity as part of the Holy Roman Empire” (p. 64). Later, Britain rejected an alliance with Prussia in 1805 against Napoleon, largely because the king refused to accept the price Frederick William II demanded in exchange: the surrender of Hanover. The union continued to enjoy salience in British politics and society under George III’s successors. The granting of religious liberty to Catholics in Hanover in 1819 and William IV’s 1832 endorsement, as king of Hanover, of the repressive Six Articles in the German Confederation figured into the debates surrounding emancipation in the late 1820s and the Reform Bill of 1832 in Britain, respectively.

The second half of the volume reflects a switch from a chronological approach to the union to a more thematic one. We learn that Hanover’s University of Göttingen

“provide[d] the expertise in natural sciences, oriental studies and philology needed by *England* which lacked the academic institutions necessary to make sense of the scientific exploits in the decades following the Seven Years Wars” (p. 133) and of the increasing utility of such knowledge in Britain’s amassing of a global empire. The rise and fall of Hanover’s reputation in Britain, as reflected in contemporary pamphlets and speeches, reveals how it came to be used as a foil for British exceptionalism, particularly after Jacobitism ceased to be a serious threat to the Hanoverians from 1745 onward. George III, traditionally considered “British” in comparison to his father and grandfather, arranged the marriages of his daughters to various German princes in no small part to shore up Hanover’s position within the Holy Roman Empire/German Confederation. Even the eighteenth-century rise of the Royal Navy, that quintessential symbol of British power and superficially a conspicuous rejection of continental in favor of imperial interests, is attributed to the defense of Hanover. Richard Harding argues that Britain in part amassed such a powerful maritime force to defend Hanover against possible Russian threats to British trade in the North and Baltic Seas in the 1720s, and later as a force to deter continental powers (France in particular) from conquering Hanover, by threatening counterattacks elsewhere should such a course of action be pursued. The French saw Hanover as “British.” The British were well aware that the territory was “vulnerable to attack and therefore a potential hostage” from France (p. 299), and they consequently sought alliances with European powers as a countermeasure. The French used this perceived threat to their diplomatic and strategic advantage by threatening invasion to force Britain’s hand, at least until the 1790s. Through these seemingly disparate themes, a common argument emerges: far from being a marginal entity whose end occasioned little discussion and even less lament, the British-Hanoverian union was in fact central to Britain’s development throughout its duration in a number of key ways.

Andrew C. Thompson, a contributor to Simms’s and Rott’s volume, takes a narrower focus in his monograph. In it, Thompson prefers to focus on the religious elements behind the personal union, both in its inception and in its first few decades of existence. He counters historians of the period (Black in particular) who privilege economic and/or diplomatic explanations for British policy in this period, with religion playing a decidedly subservient role from 1648 onward. Thompson points out that the first two Hanoverian kings “saw themselves as

defenders of the faith” (p. 80), and that Britain-Hanover “played the role of balancer within the European state system partly to preserve their territorial stability but also to ensure that Protestantism survived” (p. 40). He argues that the birth and the continued maintenance of this union had much to do with the common goal of defending the “Protestant interest” in Europe, particularly against European powers that aimed to achieve a “universal monarchy”—France and Austria in particular. In this light, even alliances with non-Protestant powers can be seen as ways of providing “the best defence for the protestant interest” when necessary (p. 116). Thus, when Karl Philipp, the elector of the Palatinate, violated the terms of the Peace of Ryswick and declared that the sharing of the Heiliggeistkirche in Heidelberg between Catholics and Protestants was to end in 1719 (the so-called Palatinate crisis), George I swiftly acted in his self-anointed capacity as “defender of the faith” to ensure that confessional balance would be maintained in the Holy Roman Empire as the best way to maintain the Protestant interest throughout Europe. Similarly, in 1724, when several Protestants were executed for their part in desecrating a Jesuit *Gymnasium* in Thorn, Prussia, George I worried that Catholic powers, particularly Austria, would use this incident to advance their cause in the empire. He quickly acted, both at the 1727 Imperial Diet at Regensburg and through diplomatic channels with other European powers, to create imperial and European alliances that would preserve the religious status quo seen as essential to the physical, commercial, and religious security of Britain-Hanover. By focusing on the strength of the shared Protestant bond, at least until the rise of Prussia beginning in the 1750s destroyed even the veneer of confessional unity, Thompson argues that defending Hanover was essential to the defense of Britain and its continued status as a European power.

In two ways, both volumes make impressive contributions to the historiography on the British-Hanoverian Union and the wider field of eighteenth-century diplomatic studies. First, to answer Simms’s rather modest claim in his introductory chapter, these volumes succeed in his stated “attempt” to “[make] an ‘additive’ contribution to the secondary literature” on the union (p. 4). Second, they make a qualitative input to the history of the period as well. Their nuanced observations on how the mere consideration of Hanover in debates surrounding the emergence of supposedly quintessential “British” institutions and events such as the Royal Navy, the Church of England, “splendid isolation,” the (First) Reform Bill, and British foreign policy in the eighteenth century, even when the electorate/kingdom was used as an absolutist

“continental” foil, reveals just how central this connection was to British history. Champions of the “other” in British history, in particular historians from Tom Nairn to Colley, focus on either England or France as occupying that role, but virtually none discuss Hanover in such a role. The authors involved in these volumes do so in a straightforward and altogether convincing manner.

Even so, one is left to wonder how central this union was to British domestic and foreign policy, particularly from the 1760s onward. Simms and Riotte implicitly agree with the strictures they critique by focusing disproportionate attention on the first two “German” Hanoverians, especially when compared with the analyses of the personal union in the nineteenth century. Only two chapters squarely focus on this period, both early in the book. The contributors of the more thematically organized chapters, save one, explicitly avoid this era in their analyses. Remarkably, scant mention is made in their work of the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, and the ways in which the consequent reduction of the number of states in its replacement (the German Confederation), the elimination of the traditional role of the elector of Hanover as a guarantor of confessional stability and a powerful voice in choosing the emperor, and the emergence of the Prussian-Austrian rivalry in the new confederation all factored into the marginalization of Hanover not only in Germany, but in Britain as well.

Thompson avoids this problem altogether by pointedly ending his analysis in 1756. Despite his convincing and logical argument that confessional politics played a significant role in binding Britain and Hanover together, however, he neglects to provide more than a passing mention of Jacobitism and the threat to the union it posed. The Stuarts had significant support in Britain for most of the period Thompson studies. Their wide appeal, and, more importantly, their more legitimate dynastic claim to the throne of Britain, surely led many to defend the union in a religious and in a political sense as the best means of countering the repeated threats to the stability of the Act of Settlement. Furthermore, while Thompson prefaces his chapters with the importance of Heidelberg and Thorn in defending Protestantism in Germany, he quickly diverges from these incidents without fully explaining what the resolutions to each were at the Imperial Diet or in wider diplomatic circles, and how they impacted the union and its popular perception in Britain. These criticisms aside, however, both works successfully (re)insert Hanover as an essential force in the formulation of British politics, culture, and foreign policy at a key stage in their developments.

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