Geoffrey Holmes and the Public Sphere: Augustan Historiography from Post-Namierite to the Post-Habermasian

BRIAN COWAN

This article attributes the relative lack of attention to the 'public sphere' in Geoffrey Holmes's work to the pervasive influence of Lewis Namier and the Namierite conception of political history. Holmes's *British Politics* can be understood as a product of what might be called the revisionist's dilemma. Because the main thrust of the argument of this work was to challenge the Namierite interpretation of the structure of politics in Anne's reign, Holmes could not fail but to replicate the structures of the original Namierite paradigm. Nevertheless, Holmes's demolition of the Namierite view of Augustan politics also opened up new possibilities for further research; it ultimately widened our understanding of the 'political' and it prepared the ground for the remarkable interdisciplinary dialogue between literary historians, intellectual historians, and political historians. The article concludes with a discussion of how Holmes's successors began to build on his work in ways that can help explain why the Habermasian public sphere paradigm emerged to the foreground of current scholarship in a field where it had been ignored for three decades. Historians are now beginning to build a detailed post-Habermasian understanding of the ways in which the public sphere affected the structures of politics in later Stuart Britain. Work along these lines may well finally help explain the transformation of British politics from an age of Stuart revolutions to the age of Hanoverian oligarchy.

Keywords: Geoffrey Holmes; Lewis Namier; Jürgen Habermas; public sphere; historiography; Queen Anne; revisionism; Namierism

There is a certain perversity to the title of this article: Geoffrey Holmes wrote in an age when the concept of a 'public sphere' was not part of the Augustan historian's lexicon and he never used or referred to the concept.[1] Although Holmes and Jürgen Habermas were born within a year of one another in 1928 and 1929 respectively, their scholarly labours did not coincide. One might presume that there is nothing to say about the topic. It would be absurd to expect a historian to be capable of such profound powers of prolepsis as to be able to anticipate the concerns of a future generation of scholars.

Geoffrey Holmes did not write about the public sphere, nor indeed did he even use the term, because the terminology and concerns of a German philosopher trained in a continental tradition of critical social theory were not part of the scholarly agenda of the historian of Augustan Britain when Holmes was writing from the 1960s through to the early 1990s. The belated translation of Habermas's 1962 *Habilitationsschrift, Strukturwandel der Öffenlichkeit* into English as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989 did not have an immediate effect on historical studies of later Stuart and early Hanoverian Britain.[2] The first sign that it would do so began with the 1992 publication of a collection of essays edited by Craig Calhoun entitled *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, which featured contributions by historians of Germany and France and an essay on 17th-century England by the historical sociologist David Zaret.[3] Soon thereafter, the 'public sphere' gained increasing prominence in the British historian's lexicon, particularly after the publication of influential books and articles by David Solkin, John Brewer and Lawrence Klein on the 18th century, as well as Steven Pincus and Joad Raymond on the 17th century.[4] Given Professor Holmes's untimely death in 1993, he was not able to see the development of this new narrative theme and research agenda in the field which he dominated for three decades.

Yet there is a sense in which one can speak of studies of the Augustan 'public sphere' long before its emergence as an influential catchphrase in historical scholarship. Most historians who have used the term have not felt wedded to the Marxist teleology and socio-economic determinism, the particular chronology of the emergence of a public sphere, or the focus on the origins of the bourgeois public sphere in literary and private life found in Habermas's original formulation of his thesis. It has been used instead as a means of characterising and conceptually organising proliferating studies of the emergence of public opinion as a factor in political action, the efflorescence of print culture and especially the periodical press and political propaganda, and the development of new spaces of public sociability such as coffee houses, club life, and commercialised leisure spots.

When considered in this broader, if less analytically precise, sense, it is clear that studies of the Augustan public sphere have been around for quite a long time. Political writers and observers in Queen Anne's reign were acutely aware of the problems posed by the influence of public opinion on contemporary politics and they commented extensively on the growing importance of print propaganda, newspapers, coffee houses and the like

---

[2] Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Darmstadt and Neuwied, 1962); Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA, 1989).

[3] *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA, 1992), especially the essays by Geoff Eley, Keith Michael Baker and David Zaret.

[4] David Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, 1993); John Brewer, 'This, That, and the Other: Public, Social, and Private in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', in *Shifting the Boundaries*, ed. Dario Castiglione and Lesley Sharpe (Exeter, 1995), 1–21; Lawrence Klein, 'Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century: Some Questions About Evidence and Analytic Procedure', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, xxix (1995), 97–109; Steven Pincus, ' "Coffee Politicians Does Create": Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture', *Journal of Modern History*, lxvii (1995), 807–34; Joad Raymond, 'The Newspaper, Public Opinion, and the Public Sphere in the Seventeenth Century', *Prose Studies*, xxi (1998), 109–40. Also noteworthy as an 'early adopter' of the public sphere catchphrase was Dror Wahrman, 'National Society, Communal Culture: An Argument About the Recent Historiography of Eighteenth-Century Britain', *Social History*, xvii (1992), 43–72.

in their society.[5] For many historians of the 'age of Swift' or the 'age of Defoe', these were crucial aspects of understanding their political culture.[6]

This was a social and political fact of the age that did not escape Holmes's attention. The opening chapter of Holmes's classic *British Politics in the Age of Anne* includes a rich discussion of the ways in which political partisanship infused every aspect of the early 18th-century public sphere, including the clubs, coffee houses and periodical publications that were the touchstones for Habermas's public sphere, and the collection of primary sources he edited with Bill Speck, *The Divided Society*, also includes a wealth of documentation for the importance of the public sphere for understanding Augustan politics.[7] Holmes's monograph on *The Trial of Doctor Sacheverell* devotes some attention to the ways in which Sacheverell's reputation was forged and debated 'out of doors' beyond the parliamentary context of the trial.[8] And his inaugural lecture 'The Electorate and the National Will in the First Age of Party' argued that Augustan elections were more representative of public opinion than those that followed in the later 18th and 19th centuries.[9] Despite these significant caveats, it remains the case that the bulk of Holmes's prodigious labours in British political history was not devoted to exploring propaganda, print culture, or the influence of public opinion. Holmes's vision of British politics in the 'age of Anne' was overwhelmingly focused on the history of parliament and the queen's ministries.[10]

This article attributes the relative lack of attention to the 'public sphere' in Holmes's work to the pervasive influence of Lewis Namier and the Namierite conception of political history. It is ironic that Holmes is probably best remembered as the historian who decisively refuted the neo-Namierite perspective on Augustan politics; yet like so many other such 'revisionist' studies, Holmes's work remained largely stuck within the parameters of a debate established by his adversaries.[11] Even though he challenged and ultimately superseded the Namierite paradigm, Holmes could not escape the research agenda and methodological preferences implied by Namier and his fellow travellers.

It would be premature at best, and uncharitable at worst, however, to presume that Holmes's work and that of fellow historians working on 'British politics in the age of

---

[5] Brian Cowan, 'Mr. Spectator and the Coffeehouse Public Sphere', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, xxxvii (2004), 345–66.

[6] David H. Stevens, *Party Politics and English Journalism 1702–42* (Chicago, 1916); William Laprade, *Public Opinion and Politics in Eighteenth Century England* (New York, 1936); Michael Foot, *The Pen and the Sword: Jonathan Swift and the Power of the Press* (1957); in G.M. Trevelyan, *England Under Queen Anne* (3 vols, 1930–4), consideration of these public sphere institutions is largely relegated to vol. 1, ch. 4.

[7] Geoffrey Holmes, *British Politics in the Age of Anne* (1967, rev. edn 1987), ch. 1, esp. 20–4, 28–33; Geoffrey Holmes and W.A. Speck, *The Divided Society: Party Conflict in England 1694–1716* (1967), esp. 40–5, 66–76, 124–31.

[8] Geoffrey Holmes, *The Trial of Doctor Sacheverell* (1973); the social context was further detailed in Geoffrey Holmes, 'The Sacheverell Riots: The Crowd and the Church in Early Eighteenth-Century London', *Past and Present*, no. 72 (1976), 55–85.

[9] Geoffrey Holmes, *Politics, Religion and Society in England, 1679–1742* (1986), 1–33.

[10] Holmes's significant contributions to social history in *Augustan England: Professions, State and Society 1680–1730* (1982) should not be ignored, but remained separate from his political histories. Geoffrey Holmes, 'The Achievement of Stability: The Social Context of Politics from the 1680s to the Age of Walpole', reprinted in Holmes, *Politics, Religion and Society*, 249–80, was a sole attempt to assimilate his political and social histories.

[11] For discussion of a similar dilemma faced by revisionist historians of early Stuart England, see Peter Lake, 'Retrospective: Wentworth's Political World in Revisionist and Post-Revisionist Perspective', in *The Political World of Thomas Wentworth Earl of Strafford 1621–1641*, ed. J.F. Merritt (Cambridge, 1996), 252–83.

Holmes' entirely ignored the political culture of publicity.[12] The article thus concludes with a discussion of the ways in which Holmes's successors began to build on his work in ways that can help explain why the Habermasian public sphere paradigm emerged to the foreground of current scholarship in a field where it had been ignored for three decades after the first publication of *Strukturwandel der Öffenlichkeit* in 1962. It will be argued that Holmes's demolition of the Namierite view of Augustan politics also opened up new possibilities for further research; it ultimately widened our under-standing of the 'political' and it prepared the ground for the remarkable inter-disciplinary dialogue between literary historians, intellectual historians, and political historians that has characterised the study of Augustan politics in our current 'age of Habermas'.

1

The first thing to note when considering the impact of 'Namierism' on Holmes's history is that there was always some difference between the published histories of Sir Lewis Namier and the many other works often labelled as 'Namierite'. Like most such 'isms', there have always been many varieties and styles of Namierism, but the word and the concept took off because they managed to describe in a rough and ready way a distinctive manner of thinking about the past.[13] And like these other 'isms', there has often been a great deal of confusion and debate surrounding the precise meaning of the term and the relationship between the work of the master and his disciples. Namierism has been variously associated with a variety of different historical arguments and research methods: a challenge to an older, triumphalist 'whig' interpretation of British history; a narrow focus on high politics, especially the history of parliament and the ministries of the crown; a rejection of the role of ideas and/or principles in political action; a predilection for the study of the private papers and correspondence of elites as primary source materials; a methodological preference for individualism and prosopography; and perhaps most curiously with both static structural history and detailed narrative *histoires événmentielles* of high political vicissitudes. The last of these historical methods was attacked most famously by Lawrence Stone who denounced revisionist historians of the 17th century as practising 'pure neo-Namierism, just at a time when Namierism is dying as a way of looking at eighteenth-century English politics'.[14] There is a basis for all of these associations in Namier's own work, although his attempt to write a detailed narrative of English politics in the age of the American revolution was famously a non-starter: the narrative of *England in the Age of the American Revolution* ends just before 1763, thus missing the outbreak of the American war by over a decade.[15] Despite the prominence of concepts such as 'structure' and 'society' in Namier's work, his zealous

[12] Stephen Taylor, 'British Politics in the Age of Holmes', *Parliamentary History*, viii (1989), 132–41.

[13] Linda Colley, *Namier* (New York, 1989).

[14] Lawrence Stone, 'The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History', *Past and Present*, no. 85 (1979), 21.

[15] Colley, *Namier*, 32.

focus on elite politics has often obscured the similarities between his largely synchronic historical vision and that of his French contemporaries in the *Annales* school. Lucien Febvre was born a decade before Namier in 1878, and Marc Bloch only two years before in 1886.[16]

It is in the work of Namier's followers and fellow travellers where his impact was really felt. Namier's challenge to the whig view of 18th-century British history was hardly novel, and this in fact accounts for the strength and popularity of his work, and ultimately for the transformation of his work into 'Namierism' – a distinctive style of methods, priorities and prejudices behind historical research that flourished in the middle decades of the 20th century.[17] This was the climate in which Robert Walcott composed his now much maligned study of *English Politics in the Early Eighteenth Century*. 'It is surely unjust to Sir Lewis Namier to father upon him Professor Walcott's failure to grasp the full dimensions of the political crisis of Anne's reign', wrote Gareth Bennett in a positive review of Holmes's *British Politics*. This may be true enough, although there is no doubt that Walcott thought Namierism offered the best means of understanding Augustan politics, and Namier himself certainly welcomed the extension of his methods and interpretative framework back into the pre-Hanoverian age.[18]

While the sustained criticism of Walcott's work from not only Holmes but also J.H. Plumb, Bill Speck, Henry Horwitz, and just about every other political historian of the period would leave one to think that Namierism was dead on arrival in the study of Augustan politics, its influence was far more pervasive than one might think at first glance. The substance of the challenge to Walcott's 'Namierite' interpretation of the period really focused on only one aspect, albeit a crucial one: his denial of the usefulness of 'party' as a means of understanding the political divisions and actions of Anne's reign. And in order to make this case, Holmes had to challenge Namierism on its home ground, the history of parliament.[19]

In choosing to meet the Namierite challenge head-on as it were, Holmes's own history remained largely parliament centred, and alternative sites of political action were largely relegated to the sidelines. The chapter on 'the managers, the queen, and the royal closet' in *British Politics* surely gives the queen her due mention – she is not a cipher in Holmes's account – but it does tend to downplay the importance of the royal court and 'bedchamber politics', particularly outside of its need to maintain parliamentary 'managers', in Anne's reign.[20] The most strident challenge to Namierite parliament-fixation came from historians such as J.C.D. Clark who believed that the court remained a vibrant political locus in the 18th century.[21] While initially dismissive of the importance

---

[16] Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School 1929–1989* (Stanford, 1990).

[17] Colley, *Namier*, 47–50; Linda Colley, 'The Politics of Eighteenth-Century British History', *Journal of British Studies*, xxv (1986), 364–5.

[18] *English Historical Review*, lxxxiv (1969), 359, referring to Robert Walcott, *English Politics in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1956); Lewis Namier, *Personalities and Powers: Selected Essays* (New York, 1965), 32.

[19] Holmes, *British Politics*, 33.

[20] Holmes, *British Politics*, 209, 210, 216, 414–15.

[21] J.C.D. Clark, *Revolution and Rebellion: State and Society in England in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1986), and contrast Robert Bucholz, *The Augustan Court: Queen Anne and the Decline of Court Culture* (Stanford, 1993).

of public sphere politics as 'shallow' and 'constricted,' the revival of interest in court culture has recently been reconciled with the public sphere.[22]

The contrast between Holmes's parliament-focused concept of politics with an older account of the crucial last four years of Anne's reign, and one entirely unconcerned with the Namierite challenge, is telling. Michael Foot's *The Pen and the Sword* (1957) offered an account of Augustan politics which revolved around two pivots, the royal court and the 'court' of public opinion. Foot's narrative is hardly as sophisticated as Holmes's work, based as it is on a much smaller and selective base of primary source materials, but it is remarkable how little Holmes's *British Politics* resembles Foot's and how much, in fact, it resembles Namier's. Swift and Defoe are bit players in Holmes's account of the Augustan political scene, and virtually no attention is given to the workhorse partisan journalists of the age such as Abel Boyer and Charles Leslie for the tories, or John Tutchin and George Ridpath for the whigs. Whereas Foot managed to make Jonathan Swift a key player in the downfall of the duke of Marlborough, he appears in *British Politics* as either a wry observer on partisan politics or occasionally as a pithy encapsulator of tory views on the war and finance. To the extent that there is anyone like a 'protagonist' in Holmes's structural history, it could only be a parliamentary manager like Robert Harley, with perhaps Sidney Godolphin, and to a lesser extent the whig junto lords, in supporting roles.

British Politics is also distinctive, and rather Namierite, for its lack of narrative. Like Namier's pathbreaking early studies of *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, which were thought to be necessary to clear the ground for writing the full history of the British imperial problem in the age of the American revolution, Holmes's *British Politics* was conceived as a prolegomena to a detailed 'history of domestic politics during the life of Robert Harley's ministry of 1710 to 1714', a work which remained famously unpublished.[23] Holmes's *characterisation* of the structure of Augustan politics could not have been more different from Namier's, but the way in which he chose to study what he called 'the character' and 'the workings' of politics owed a lot to the Namierite vision of the historian's task. There was perhaps more truth than originally intended to J.P. Kenyon's pronouncement that Holmes's *British Politics* stood out as the 'only historical work of our time comparable with Namier's *The Structure of Politics*'.[24]

British Politics can be understood as a product of what might be called the revisionist's dilemma. Because the main thrust of the argument of this work was to challenge the Namierite interpretation of the structure of politics in Anne's reign, Holmes could not fail but to replicate the structures of the original Namierite paradigm. There is a similarity here in the problems faced by revisionist historians of the early Stuart era.[25] The work of Conrad Russell, who was born in 1937, less than a decade after Holmes,

[22] J.C.D. Clark, *The Memoirs and Speeches of James, 2nd Earl Waldegrave 1742–1763* (Cambridge, 1988), 18; J.C.D. Clark, 'The Re-Enchantment of the World? Religion and Monarchy in Eighteenth-Century Europe', in *Monarchy and Religion: The Transformation of Royal Culture in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Michael Schaich (Oxford, 2007), 67; Hannah Smith, *Georgian Monarchy: Politics and Culture, 1714–1760* (Cambridge, 2006).

[23] Holmes, *British Politics* (rev. edn), p. lxvii. Holmes later turned to narrative history in *The Trial of Doctor Sacheverell*. Holmes's typescript draft for his study of Harley, 'The Great Ministry' is on deposit at the Institute of Historical Research.

[24] J.P. Kenyon, 'Honouring an Inspiration', *Times Literary Supplement*, 4–10 Mar. 1988, 252.

[25] Compare Peter Lake, 'Retrospective', and Brian Cowan, 'Refiguring Revisionisms', *History of European Ideas*, xxix (2003), 475–89.

and was thus part of the same generation of historians that came of age in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, was also self-consciously revisionist with regard to the established wisdom regarding his primary field of research – the political history of early 17th-century England. Like Holmes, Russell's brand of revisionism ended up contending with its opponents on its home ground, as it were, and like Holmes, that home ground was parliamentary history. For all of his insistence that parliament was an event and not an institution, and that the court, the counties, and the 'British problem' were the main loci for politics in the early Stuart era, Russell devoted most of his career to early Stuart parliamentary history.[26] While our understanding of early Stuart politics will never be the same as a consequence of Russell's unrelenting revisionist critiques, his main historiographic legacy may well be remembered as having provided the demolition work necessary in order to begin the construction of richer, 'post-revisionist' histories of court culture and politics; of relations between the London metropolis and local communities throughout England and, indeed, the rest of Britain and Ireland; and of the political consequences of the religious debates and divisions that wracked pre-civil war England.[27]

Holmes's *œuvre* was rather more wide-ranging in its scope than was Russell's. Unlike Russell, he managed to move beyond parliamentary and even political history; indeed his later work witnessed what might be called a turn to social history.[28] But his political history writings never fully realized, or developed much further, the expansive vision of the topic Holmes laid out in his impressive first chapter of *British Politics*.

The political significance and workings of the Augustan public sphere remained underdeveloped in Holmes's writings, even when he turned his attention to what was perhaps the most prolific, albeit short-lived, public controversy of the 18th century, the Sacheverell affair. Whereas Holmes remarks upon the published version of Sacheverell's famous 5 November sermon as 'a short-term best-seller' with 'no equal in the early eighteenth century' – it is likely to have had a print run of at least 100,000 copies – he devotes little attention in his monograph to the pamphlet and periodical wars provoked by the sermon itself.[29] One cannot say that Holmes was unaware of the public sphere in the age of Sacheverell: his account draws heavily on the newspapers and periodicals, the pamphlets and treatises, and the public prints and ephemera generated by the Sacheverell controversy. For example, Holmes read carefully the regular reports of the Sacheverell affair provided by John Dyer in his manuscript newsletters which provided an account of the proceedings to readers throughout England. But these products of the Augustan public sphere were used as *contextual* sources to draw upon as Holmes narrated the rise and fall of the Sacheverell controversy, and as such they recede into the background of his book. There is very little direct engagement with, or analysis of, Sacheverell era

[26] For an incisive critique, see Peter Lake, 'Review Article', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, lvii (1994), 167–97. Russell's brand of parliamentary history owed much to the Namierite tradition.

[27] See *Politics, Religion and Popularity in Early Stuart Britain: Essays in Honour of Conrad Russell*, ed. Thomas Cogswell, Richard Cust and Peter Lake (Cambridge, 2002).

[28] Holmes, *Augustan England*, and Holmes, *Politics, Religion and Society*, chs 10–12.

[29] Holmes, *Trial of Doctor Sacheverell*, 75. Much of Holmes's understanding of the bibliographic context derived from the research of William Speck, later published as Henry Sacheverell, *The Perils of False Brethren*, with bibliographic note by W.A. Speck (Exeter, 1974), and F.F. Madan, *A Critical Bibliography of Dr. Henry Sacheverell*, ed. W.A. Speck (Lawrence, KS, 1978).

propaganda as *texts* themselves, each with their own particular political arguments and requiring historical explanation. The public sphere can be found in the endnotes, but rarely in the text itself, of Holmes's *Trial of Doctor Sacheverell*.

<div align="center">2</div>

It is worth comparing Holmes's careful criticism of the Namierite interpretation of politics in Anne's reign with the rather more thorough-going challenge to Namierite history in John Brewer's *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III*, a work published just a few years after Holmes's *Sacheverell*. As its title suggests, this book put the popular press and political ideology at the centre of its understanding of political structures in a period which was most obviously Namier's home ground. Brewer's work directly challenged Namier's and Namierite histories with their 'strong preoccupation with the workings of Westminster and a singularly narrow view of politics'.[30] Here was a work in which pamphlets, broadsides, newspapers, ballads, prints and cartoons, clubs and coffee houses, riots and demonstrations, all took centre stage. In other words, this was a history which revolved around explaining how political arguments were constructed and construed in the 'public sphere'. Brewer demonstrated just how different a 'post-Namierite' history of 18th-century Britain might look in a way that Holmes's studies of Anne's reign never quite achieved, and it is striking just how Habermasian that history looked well before the notion of a public sphere had become a catchphrase in the standard scholarly vocabulary.

Historians of Britain's 'long 18th century' did not need to read Habermas in order to discover, discuss and explain the public sphere, as Brewer's early work attests.[31] One could argue that this, in fact, accounts for much of the recent success of the Habermasian public sphere notion in recent work on the 18th century. The Habermasian public sphere gave a name to something that post-Namierite historians were already familiar with, and indeed had already begun to explore and analyse intensively. This is especially true since most historians who have used the concept have tended to modify its meaning and theoretical framework well beyond that originally articulated by Habermas himself. Peter Lake and Steven Pincus have recently argued that much of the reason for the growing popularity of the public sphere concept in Tudor and Stuart histories can be attributed to attempts to argue against and beyond the paradigms and preferences of revisionist historians of the early modern period, and their definition of this revisionism is decidedly Namierite – it focused on high politics above all and privileged the study of manuscript rather than printed sources, much like Namier did.[32] This argument could be extended

---

[30] Brewer, *Party Ideology* (Cambridge, 1976), 9. Brewer's supervisor, J.H. Plumb, had earlier criticized the Namierite view of politics on the same grounds in his 'Political Man', in *Man Versus Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Six Points of View*, ed. James Clifford (Cambridge, 1968), esp. 12.

[31] Brewer's later work developed seamlessly into a more obviously Habermasian view of the 18th century, see his ' "The Most Polite Age and the Most Vicious": Attitudes Towards Culture as a Commodity, 1660–1800', in *The Consumption of Culture 1600–1800: Image, Object, Text*, ed. Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (1995), 341–61; and *The Pleasures of the Imagination: The Emergence of English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (1997).

[32] Peter Lake and Steven Pincus, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere in Early Modern England', *Journal of British Studies*, xlv (2006), 270–92, esp. 271–2; see also, *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, ed. Peter Lake and Steven Pincus (Manchester, 2007). I am grateful to Alex Barber for discussions on this matter.

to the historiography of the 18th century as well: as discontent with the Namierite interpretation of history grew amongst historians working on his home ground, they increasingly turned their attention to studying the organs of public opinion and the sites of civil society that Habermas had identified as the primary institutions of his bourgeois public sphere. Namier, or more accurately, the reaction to Namier's historical vision, laid the groundwork for studying the 18th-century public sphere.

One of the most remarkable developments in 18th-century studies has been the blurring of boundaries between histories of high and low politics – what Holmes at one point referred to as the 'political' and 'sub-political' nations, as well as between studies of literary culture and intellectual histories of the highly articulate works of 'political thought'.[33] Augustan historiography after the publication of Holmes's major works has been transformed by an interdisciplinary revolution that made the public sphere a major object of concern well before the Habermasian notion became a scholarly catchphrase in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Much of this can be attributed to the rise of the self-consciously interdisciplinary new cultural history in this era as a paradigm for virtually every subfield of historical study.[34]

Publications in literary and intellectual history in particular began to open up new ways of viewing the public sphere in the age of Anne. In his 1972 book on *Grub Street*, the literary historian Pat Rogers chided Holmes for mistakenly thinking that Augustan Grub Street was fictional, whereas the street really did exist in London, although it operated more often than not in the discourse of the time as a synecdoche for the whole world of early 18th-century print culture.[35] Rogers's *Grub Street* was designed to illuminate the social conditions of authorship that obtained during the life of Alexander Pope, but it also signalled the beginning of an era of substantial interdisciplinary collaboration between scholars in departments of literature and history that would produce an image of 18th-century politics quite different from the Namierite version.[36] Harry Dickinson's 1974 collection of primary sources for the Everyman's University Library was framed in explicit opposition to the Namierite approach. The century witnessed, Dickinson argued, a 'battle to inform, educate and harness public opinion', and for this reason 'any attempt . . . to understand eighteenth-century politics must involve more than just a study of the structure of politics. It needs to examine both the content of the political debates of the period and the ways in which the public participated in these debates.' Dickinson's subsequent survey of 18th-century political thought, *Liberty and Property*, delivered an extended account along these lines.[37]

One of the most important works of this era to demonstrate the importance of the public sphere in the age of Anne was Alan Downie's *Robert Harley and the Press*, a work

---

[33] Holmes, *Politics, Religion and Society*, 271–2.

[34] *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989). For the impact on intellectual history, see Brian Cowan, 'Ideas in Context: From the Social to the Cultural History of Ideas', in *Palgrave Advances in Intellectual History*, ed. Brian Young and Richard Whatmore (Houndmills, 2006), 171–88; compare Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?* (Cambridge, 2004).

[35] Pat Rogers, *Grub Street: Studies in a Subculture* (1972), 18–19.

[36] Two important recent revisions of Rogers's work include Brean Hammond, *Professional Imaginative Writing in England 1670–1740: 'Hackney for Bread'* (Oxford, 1997); and Christine Gerrard, *Aaron Hill: The Muses Projector 1685–1750* (Oxford, 2003).

[37] *Politics and Literature in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. H.T. Dickinson (1974), p. xxii; H.T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (1977).

which in many ways fulfils the unrealized promise of Holmes's first chapter of *British Politics*. Holmes himself did not disparage this line of research. On the contrary, he encouraged and welcomed it.[38] Here was a study in which Holmes's establishment of the centrality of partisan whig/tory divisions could be taken as read and thus used as the basis for exploring the ways in which the politician Robert Harley managed to use the popular press for partisan advantage.[39] In his own professional turn from the study of unadjectival 'history' to literature, Downie's career has mirrored the growing interdisciplinarity of 18th-century studies in the past quarter century.[40] It is not entirely ironic that Professor Downie has gone on to become, in recent years, one of the most vociferous critics of the use of the Habermasian 'bourgeois public sphere' concept in 18th-century studies. For Downie, there is no need for a theory so divorced from state-of-the-art research on Augustan state and society, especially when so much non-Habermasian, but post-Holmesian, work on 'the emergence of public opinion as a force in the state' has already laid the ground for an alternative model for understanding the public sphere.[41] Scholars hardly need Habermas to discuss the impact of public opinion on politics, when post-Namierite scholars have been engaged in developing a far more nuanced model.[42]

It is in the work of Holmes's successors that one can see the full fruition of his refutation of the Namierite characterisation of 18th-century politics, and it is here where the historical study of the public sphere *avant la lettre* began to take off. The 1980s and 1990s saw a rush of publications exploring the role of the crowd, the press, and public opinion in shaping 18th-century political culture. Works by Marie Peters, Nick Rogers, Paul Monod, Christine Gerrard, Bob Harris, and Kathleen Wilson established an understanding of 18th-century politics beyond Westminster in which public politics figured prominently.[43] By and large, these works were published well before the public sphere concept took hold in scholarly discourse, yet it could be argued that it was the expanded concept of politics and political culture expounded in works such as these that allowed for the idea of a developing 'public sphere' to take hold with such ease.

[38] See, e.g., his review of J.A. Downie, *Robert Harley and the Press* (Cambridge, 1979) in 'The Politics of Persuasion', *Times Literary Supplement*, 18 Apr. 1980, 428.

[39] J.A. Downie, *Robert Harley and the Press: Propaganda and Public Opinion in the Age of Swift and Defoe* (Cambridge, 1979); see also, James Richards, *Party Propaganda Under Queen Anne: The General Elections of 1702–1713* (Athens, GA, 1972).

[40] After studying early 18th-century history with Bill Speck at Newcastle in the early 1970s, Downie says he 'found the questions [he] was wanting to ask about the political literature [of the period] were not being asked by historians' (personal communication). He began his post-doctoral career with a research fellowship in the English department at the University of Wales, where Pat Rogers was also a professor. I am grateful to Professor Downie for discussing his early career trajectory with me.

[41] J.A. Downie, 'The Myth of the Bourgeois Public Sphere', in *A Concise Companion to the Restoration and Eighteenth Century,* ed. Cynthia Wall (Oxford, 2005), 77; J.A. Downie, 'How Useful to Eighteenth-Century English Studies is the Paradigm of the "Bourgeois Public Sphere"?', *Literature Compass*, i (2003), 1–19.

[42] J.A. Downie, 'Public Opinion and the Political Pamphlet', in *The Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660–1780*, ed. John Richetti (Cambridge, 2005), 549–71.

[43] Marie Peters, *Pitt and Popularity: The Patriot Minister and London Opinion During the Seven Years War* (Oxford, 1980); Nicholas Rogers, *Whigs and Cities: Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole and Pitt* (Oxford, 1989); Paul Monod, *Jacobitism and the English People, 1688–1788* (Cambridge, 1989); Christine Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole: Politics, Poetry and the National Myth 1725–1742* (Oxford, 1994); Robert Harris, *A Patriot Press: National Politics and the London Press in the 1740s* (Oxford, 1993); Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995).

3

The study of British politics in the age of Anne today could hardly be more different than it was when Holmes composed *British Politics*. Whereas Holmes felt compelled to engage with Namierite historiography on its home ground, and to a large degree on its own terms, historians working after Holmes's achievements have expanded their concept of the political to include not just public sphere institutions such as print culture, urban coffee houses and village parish pumps, but they have also reinvigorated the study of other sites of political action neglected by Namierite histories such as the established church and dissenting meeting-houses. Nevertheless, there remains a number of important unanswered questions that have not been adequately addressed by these post-Holmesian histories of the Augustan public sphere.

Perhaps the most important has been the question that loomed large in Holmes's day. J.H. Plumb and Holmes phrased the problem in terms of the 'origins of political stability'. Plumb noted a 'contrast between political society in eighteenth- and seventeenth-century England. In the seventeenth century men killed, tortured and executed each other for political beliefs; they sacked towns and brutalized the countryside. They were subjected to conspiracy, plot and invasion . . . by comparison, the political structure of eighteenth-century England possesses adamantine strength and profound inertia.'[44] One need only compare the striking difference between the fates of Algernon Sydney and that of Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke, to observe the difference. Sydney was executed for treason in 1683, while Bolingbroke died of cancer having had the luxury of working on editing his voluminous writings for the benefit of posterity in old age.[45] The contrast is as vivid today as it was 40 years ago; the question: 'how did this transformation happen?' remains a good one, and it remains incompletely answered.

Plumb tried to explain the change in terms of the rise and consolidation of a whig oligarchy, particularly under the adept management of Sir Robert Walpole. Holmes sought the answer in terms of changes in the demographic and economic structures of English society, although he agreed with Plumb that the 1720s seemed to mark a watershed moment of transition. Neither of these propositions has managed to withstand extended scrutiny, and historians as diverse as Stephen Taylor, John Brewer, Jonathan Scott, Tim Harris, and Steven Pincus have all preferred to emphasize the transformative impact of the Glorious Revolution of 1688–9 on British political society.[46] The

[44] J.H. Plumb, *The Origins of Political Stability: England 1675–1725* (Boston, 1967), p. xviii; compare Taylor, 'British Politics', 137–8, which has also inspired the reflections in the following paragraphs. See also the debate on Plumb's arguments by Clayton Roberts, Stephen Baxter and Norma Landau in *Albion*, xxv (1993), 237–77. Plumb's own liberal prejudices are set in context in David Cannadine, 'Historians in the "Liberal Hour": Lawrence Stone and J.H. Plumb Re-Visited', *Historical Research*, lxxv (2002), 316–54.

[45] Jonathan Scott, 'Sidney, Algernon (1623–1683)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* at *http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25519* (accessed 25 Nov. 2007); H.T. Dickinson, 'St John, Henry, Styled First Viscount Bolingbroke (1678–1751)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* at *http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/24496* (accessed 25 Nov. 2007).

[46] Taylor, 'British Politics'; Stephen Taylor, '*Plus Ca Change . . .* ? New Perspectives on the Revolution of 1688', *Historical Journal*, xxxvii (1994), 457–70; John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (Cambridge, MA, 1990); Jonathan Scott, *England's Troubles: Seventeenth-Century English History in European Perspective* (Cambridge, 2000); Tim Harris, *Revolution: The Great Crisis of the British Monarchy 1685–1720* (2006); Steven Pincus, *England's Glorious Revolution: A Brief History with Documents* (New York, 2006). While still insisting on the important turning point marked by 1688, Pincus's *First Modern Revolution*

establishment of the protestant succession and the consequent transfer of the rhetoric of anti-popery from a domestic to an international stage; the institutionalisation of parliamentary government and a fiscal-military state; and ultimately the Anglo-Scottish union and the rise of an Irish protestant ascendancy in these accounts were the real watershed developments in British politics, and they were all dependent upon the changes wrought by the Glorious Revolution. The work of Walpole and his whig oligarchs was just a matter of tidying up after the revolutionary decades between the 1690s and 1720.

One recent exception to this trend has been Mark Knights's remarkable study of *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain*, which cautions against exaggerating the Glorious Revolution as a key turning point.[47] Knights posits instead the existence of a 'later Stuart' political culture which persisted from the Restoration until the rise of Walpole in the 1720s. Knights's work is significant, then, in reviving the chronology for the development of a distinctively different 18th-century political culture from that which had been posited by Plumb and Holmes.

While Knights relies on the works of Plumb and Holmes on the importance of partisanship on parliamentary elections and the electorate after the Glorious Revolution, his account of the structure of later Stuart politics is substantially different, and so is his explanation for the emergence of a rather different, relatively more stable, and ostensibly more 'polite' political culture in the age of Walpole and his successors. Unlike Holmes's *British Politics*, Knights's study puts the public sphere at the centre of his analysis. His book tells the story of the emergence of both a quantitatively larger and more extensive public sphere of politics in the later Stuart era. The rise of this 'practical' public sphere substantially and permanently altered the ways in which British politics would be conducted in the 18th century. But Knights simultaneously explores the anxieties and concerns raised by the emergence of the public 'as a collective fiction with an enlarged role as a legitimizing power and as an umpire'. This 'normative' public sphere was far less readily accepted, and indeed the continued intensity of later Stuart partisanship, Knights suggests, ultimately provoked attempts to contain and restrain it. In this way, 'the practice of politics . . . helped to establish the languages of politeness, reason, interest and sociability' that have been a major concern for historians of 18th-century thought and culture.[48] It also helped pave the way for the oligarchical practices of the Walpolean whigs in the years after the passing of the Septennial Act in 1716. The 'origins of political stability' in the age of Walpole, such as it was, lay in the fears of excessive partisanship provoked by the ferocious debates that raged in the later Stuart public sphere.[49]

[46] (*continued*) (forthcoming) will also argue *in extensa* for the continually contested nature of the meaning of the Glorious Revolution in 18th-century political culture. I am grateful to Steve Pincus for discussing his work in press.

[47] Mark Knights, *Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain: Partisanship and Political Culture* (Oxford, 2005), 3.

[48] Knights, *Representation*, 5, 336; on politeness, see Lawrence Klein, 'Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century', *Historical Journal*, xlv (2002), 869–98. On the distinction between a normative and a practical public sphere, see Brian Cowan, 'Publicity and Privacy in the History of the British Coffeehouse', *History Compass*, v (2007), 1180–213, and Brian Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse* (New Haven, 2005).

[49] Knights is, rightly, less sanguine about the actual stability of 18th-century politics than Plumb was; see Knights, *Representation*, 336 n. 4.

With studies such as Knights's, we are now beginning to build a detailed post–Habermasian understanding of the ways in which the public sphere affected the structures of politics in later Stuart Britain. Furthermore, this work has developed a much more convincing explanation for the transformation of the political world of Algernon Sydney into that of Henry St John, Lord Bolingbroke. Nevertheless, Knights is better at explaining the failings of, and reactions to, the partisan public sphere than he is at developing a positive account of the emergence of polite culture in the 18th century. While some progress has been made in that direction, primarily by intellectual historians focusing on politeness as a discourse, the rise of an 18th-century 'culture of politeness' itself remains as elusive, and as ill-defined, as the supposed achievement of political stability.[50]

Finally, it is worth remarking that the narrative history of early 18th-century Britain has remained seriously underdeveloped in the decades since Holmes wrote his major works. The promise of the foundation work laid in *British Politics* has gone largely unfulfilled in the succeeding decades. There is no doubt that Holmes's unpublished history of the Harley ministry would have made a significant contribution in this respect, and indeed his own work on the Sacheverell trial remains one of the most detailed political narratives of the period to date.[51] We still need detailed studies of important early 18th-century crises and debates such as the 1701 'Kentish petition', the convocation controversies, and the debates over occasional conformity.[52] With regard to the public sphere, most political histories of Anne's reign have tended to be either biographical or thematic in approach; while these genres have their merits, they are no substitute for a revised narrative of the ways in which politicians, both high and low, and their various publics interacted. This new narrative, or perhaps a series of related narrative histories, would offer the best means by which future historians might begin to explain the ways in which the end of the long and revolutionary 17th century also marked the beginnings of the long and fraught, but resiliently oligarchic 18th century.

---

[50] Compare Lawrence Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994); Nicholas Phillipson, 'Politics and Politeness in the Reigns of Anne and the Early Hanoverians', in *The Varieties of British Political Thought 1500–1800*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock, with the assistance of G.J. Schochet and L.G. Schwoerer (Cambridge, 1993), 211–45; and see Markku Peltonen, 'Politeness and Whiggism, 1688–1732', *Historical Journal*, xlviii (2005), 391–414.

[51] See, however, Victor Stater, *High Life, Low Morals: The Duel that Shook Stuart Society* (1999) and Daniel Szechi, *1715: The Great Jacobite Rebellion* (New Haven, 2006).

[52] Andrew Starkie, *The Church of England and the Bangorian Controversy, 1716–1721* (Woodbridge, 2007) attempts a study of this sort for one great early Hanoverian fracas.