THE 2nd MARQUIS of ROCKINGHAM

&

THE AMERICANS

Stephen Cooper

Introduction

The official guide to Wentworth Woodhouse, published in 2013, tells us that the owner of Wentworth Woodhouse in the late 18th century, Charles Watson-Wentworth, 2nd Marquis of Rockingham, was 'a committed Whig' who was Prime Minister of Great Britain in the 1760s and again in the 1780s. Further, "His contributions to British affairs of state are marred by his association with the loss of the American colonies during his time as Prime Minister".

There was a little more to it than this! Rockingham was indeed leader of the most important section of the Whig Party for almost twenty years, at a time when British politics were turned upside down by the accession of George III and then by the American Revolution; but he was only briefly Prime Minister. For most of the time, he was in opposition to George III's governments - before the days when the legitimacy of an official 'Opposition' was recognised. While in office in 1766 he repealed the hated Stamp Act, and thereafter consistently argued in favour of reconciliation with the Americans, but he failed to persuade a majority of the House of Commons to his way of thinking. As a result, there was a long and bloody war. He took office again in 1782 on condition that George III recognise American independence, but died before the terms for peace could be negotiated.

Rockingham was therefore the champion of a lost cause. We are left wondering what would have happened, if he had continued to hold office during the late 1760s, or if he had lived longer. Would he have been able to avoid war with the Americans altogether – as he certainly wanted to do? Could the Thirteen Colonies have been kept within the British Empire? These are among the most interesting of counterfactual questions.

I

In Government

The pecking order of British aristocracy is Duke, Marquis, Earl, Viscount, Baron, and Wentworth Woodhouse has been the home of two Earls of Strafford in the 17th century, two Marquisses of Rockingham in the 18th and seven Earls Fizwilliam in the 19th and 20th centuries. The last one died in 1979; but if you stand in front of the East Front of Wentworth Woodhouse and admire the splendid view, you are really looking at the home of the 2nd Marquis of Rockingham 1730-1782, pretty much as it was in 1760, the year George III became King of Great Britain, Ireland, and an Empire which included the thirteen American colonies, as well as of Canada (including Nova Scotia and Quebec, captured from the French in 1759).

Arthur Young (1741-1820), the well known writer on agriculture and economics, described the House and Park as 'one of the most exquisite spots in the world', and as 'in every respect one of the finest places in the kingdom'. He complimented the 2nd Marquis both for the part he had played in building the place, and for his taste:

> Nature has certainly done much at Wentworth, but art has heightened, decorated and improved all her touches; in such attempts no slight genius is requisite.

You might not know that "Wentworth Woodhouse was a political and economic powerhouse, and Rockingham's associates – who included Edmund Burke, Charles James Fox and the Duke of Portland – did much to forge modern Britain and champion political values still relevant today." (Cruikshank). After all, Wentworth Woodhouse was (and is) the biggest house in England, and impresses the general public by its mere size; but there is much more to know. The 2nd Marquis of Rockingham was in fact born here, in 1730, and this was his favourite residence – though he had several. Moreover it was also a seat of power, since for most of his career as a politician, Rockingham controlled the representation of Yorkshire in the House of Commons, though he sat in the House of Lords .

Rockingham was also brought up in Yorkshire, though he was educated at Westminster School and at Cambridge University, and visited Italy during his Grand Tour of Europe in the late 1740s. While there, he pursued an interest in the classics – Ancient Greek & Latin, Greek and Roman history and mythology, and Palladian architecture and sculpture; and where he started collecting statues, books, medals and miniatures. For centuries, knowledge of the two 'dead' languages was considered 'an absolute necessity for a gentleman', while an understanding of classical principles of building and design is still essential to an understanding of Wentworth Woodhouse and its Park.

While on the Grand Tour, Rockingham visited Florence, Siena, Rome[1], Lucca Naples, Turin, Milan, Bologna, Venice and Mount Vesuvius (showing an interest in geology and vulcanology). He also met King George II of Great Britain in Hanover, the Austrian Empress Maria Theresa in Vienna, and King Frederick II of Prussia in Prussia. If travel broadens the mind, we can say that Rockingham's mind was expanded, at a young and impressionable age. Ironically, when he returned to England, his father advised him to avoid 'vicious pleasures [which] ever destroy the Bodily Constitution and choke the Intellectual Spirit'. The advice came too late, since we know that he had been treated for VD whilst in Padua, though both the diagnosis and the circumstances remain obscure.[2]

In 1750 Rockingham inherited his father's estates, in Yorkshire, Northamptonshire and Ireland, together with houses at Wentworth, Malton, Higham Ferrers, Newmarket and London, as well as in Ireland.[3] There was a party in Wentworth Park to celebrate the occasion, when 10,000 guests attended and around 3,000 were admitted to the House. At that time there were 54 full-time staff at the house, though this had increased to 88 by 1767.[4]

Rockingham's name will forever be associated with his secretary Edmund Burke, who justified his master's politics and career in terms of a new definition of 'party'. Previously, the word had been almost synonymous with 'faction' (and George III for one continued to think in this way); but Burke defined it as 'a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed,'[5]which is pretty much how we see things today.

---

[1] Where he witnessed the annual Curse Against the Heretic; but commented on the decline of Jacobitism.

[2] The disease may account for the fact that his marriage, though apparently happy, was childless, and for his early death at the age of 52 Bloy, 32 & Appendix 2.

[3] Rockingham owned 4 Grosvenor Square (now the Italian Embassy) and rented a house in Wimbledon: The Georgian Group Journal, vol XIV, 2004: *The Marquis of Rockingham's House at Wimbledon*, Elspeth Veale.

[4] At that time, the Wentworth estates covered 14,206 acres, and Wentworth Park 1,784, while the Irish estates comprised 54,000! Bloy, 5. For the party (and what was consumed, see Bloy, 36. This included 110 dishes of beef, 55 of mutton, 70 of veal, 40 of chicken and 104 of pork). For staff see Bloy, 38.

[5] Owen, 283.

Rockingham was much more than just an idle aristocrat. In 1752, he opened a coal mine at Elsecar.[6] This was the same year in which he married Mary Bright – who was also involved in politics (like the more famous Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire); and his successors in the late 18th and early 19th centuries became famous for their involvement in agriculture and industry, canals, turnpike roads and railways, as well as for their interest in politics and generosity to charitable causes.

Rockingham was both rich[7] and powerful; and, in his day, the landed aristocracy basically controlled Parliament, including the House of Commons, because of the notorious system of 'rotten boroughs' and through its connections and influence with the local gentry. The country had been ruled by the Whigs ever since George I of Hanover came to the throne in 1715, despite the two brief and unsuccessful Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745 (in which Rockingham had a walk-on part as a teenager).

When we speak about 18th century British politics, there is a great danger of thinking about it in terms of the modern system, where political parties are tightly organised, the Prime Minister has to be the leader of the largest party in the House of Commons and there are generally only two parties which matter. None of these features of the modern scene was present in Rockingham's time. He was only ever the leader of his own group of Whigs, and - since everyone aspiring to office called himself a Whig - his two governments were therefore coalitions. The figures for the House of Commons in 1767 are revealing

Rockingham 'Whigs'	67 MPs
'King's Friends'	73
Bute's followers	43
Chatham's followers	72
'Tories'	73

In the General Elections of 1768 and 1774, Rockingham's party increased its representation in the Commons to 89 and then around 100 (including supporters); but in 1780, this fell to 60 MPs, no doubt as a result of the polarisation caused by the American War of Independence, when many rallied to the government side out of simple patriotism.[8]

The East Front of Wentworth Woodhouse (begun by the 1st Marquis rather than the second) is a classic piece of Palladian architecture; but also a political statement:

> If a house dominated the land, exuded power, voters would be impressed and – more to the point – if huge and vote-winning entertainments were to be given, the house had to be big to accommodate guests and to provide sleeping

[6] Bloy, 102.
[7] His income was about £40,000 a year in 1750: Bloy, 5.
[8] Bloy, Chapter 6.

> quarters for those who had travelled far – and of course for their servants. It's now hard to estimate, but it's reasonable to assume that an event like this could result in two or three hundred people sleeping within the house for a night or two. (Cruickshank)

Meanwhile, what of America? Edmund Burke M.P. (most famous in this country as the author of *Reflections on the Revolution in France*) was the 2nd Marquis's Private Secretary between 1765 and 1782. As such he made two speeches on America, the *Speech on American Taxation* of 1774, and the *Speech on Moving Resolutions for Conciliation with the Colonies* of 1775. In the second of these he spoke of the 'remarkable growth' of the American colonies since 1700, in terms of population, trade and wealth. (The first American Census of 1791 recorded some 4,000,000 people. The population of England and Wales in 1801 was 9,000,000.) Burke thought that we now had to take the Americans seriously, whereas in 1700 they 'served for little more than to amuse [us] with stories of savage men, and uncouth manners'.[9]

More importantly, Burke wrote that: "the fierce spirit of liberty is stronger in the English Colonies probably than in any other people of the earth." He gave six reasons, including (1) English descent; (2) longstanding government by popular assemblies; (3) the strong Dissenting tradition in the northern colonies; (4) the slave-owning mentality in the South (which made the white value their liberty all the more!); (5) education; (6) the remoteness of the Colonies from Westminster and London.

II

The Dispute with George III, 1760-5

As Macaulay's schoolboy used to know, 1759 was the 'year of victories', in India and in Canada, which established 'the first British Empire', courtesy of Pitt the Elder, General Wolfe and Clive of India. By that date, the young Marquis of Rockingham was master of all he surveyed, though he was only 30 years of age, and he occupied a leading position in Yorkshire, and even nationwide; but then George II died and was succeeded by George III. In time, the Whigs developed the view (expressed in Dunning's famous motion of 1780) that in the early 1760s "the Influence of the

[9] Interestingly, we know that Rockingham kept deer from America in the menagerie at Wentworth, while he also had a moose in the garden of his London house in Grosvenor Square: Bloy, 83.

Crown has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished".[10] Or, as Dan Cruickshank put the matter:

> The 2nd Marquis perceived in George III a wayward and autocratic propensity that threatened, if fanned by the power-eager Tories, a slide back towards a form of arbitrary monarchy largely ungoverned by parliamentary democracy.

In response, Rockingham resigned his post of Lord of the Bedchamber. In turn, George III and removed him from his the offices of Lord Lieutenant of the West Riding of Yorkshire, Lord Lieutenant of the City and County of York, and Vice-Admiral of the North.[11] The King's view of the position was quite different from that taken by the Whigs: he (and many MPs) thought that, under George II, there had been 'a wicked cornering of power' by the King's ministers, and especially by the dominant Whig Lords; and the monarch was now fully entitled now to resume his traditional powers, which included his own choice of ministers.

As Owen pointed out, there were two views of the (unwritten) British Constitution, which ultimately became enshrined in two view schools of historiography: the 'Whig' view which originated with Rockingham and Burke, and passed via Lord Macaulay to Erskine May and the two Trevelyans (George Otto and and George Macaulay) to Herbert Butterfield and W.R.Fryer; and the 'Tory' view, which was handed down via Adolphus, Croker, and Albert von Ruville, to Lewis Namier, Richard Pares and Romney Sedgwick.[12]

What was the position with regard to the American Colonies? George III has had a particularly bad press there, and is (so I understand) generally regarded as a tyrant; but at the time there was little difference in the U.K. between the King's attitude and the attitude of the majority of MPs. They thought that it was the first duty of the colonists to obey the wishes of Her Majesty's government, of whatever complexion. However, there were two fundamental sources of conflict – American expansion to the West of the Appalachian Mountains, and British taxation of the colonists; and one could well take the view that it was inevitable that the two sides would fall out, sooner or later, over these questions.

The position with regard to westwards expansion was that a Royal Proclamation of 1763 placed a limit on this; but, while this might be acceptable to the 'settled' majority, it was highly unpopular with a vocal minority. Meanwhile, the British government thought it appropriate that the Colonists should pay a fair share of the cost of defending the colonies against native American uprisings and the

---

[10] Owen, 228.

[11] Rockingham became Lord Lieutenant again between 1765 and 1782. Bloy gives an account of his involvement in the suppression of the food riots of 1756 and 1766, in recruiting and the Militia Act of 1757, in the prosecution of offenders guilty of coining and clipping in Halifax, and in the defence of Hull against attack by John Paul Jones in Chapter 4 of her thesis.

[12] Owen, 278.

possibility of French incursions, whereas the Americans protested that it was a fundamental constitutional convention that there should be "no taxation without representation"; and they could not accept that the idea that they were already 'virtually' represented in the British House of Commons', when in fact they had no MPs.

Rockingham's stance on these issues was a conservative one. He did not want any fundamental change in the relationship between the King and Parliament, or in the relationship between Britain and the Colonies. The problem with this approach was that the majority of the House of Commons agreed with the King; and this was the fundamental reason why Rockingham spent most of his life in political exile. But, one has to ask whether he was all that disappointed by this, indeed whether he was really that interested in politics at all. Looking around Wentworth Woodhouse, its Park and the surrounding estate, one can understand that there were considerable compensations for not having the cares of office on one's shoulders.

III

The First Rockingham Administration, 1765-6

Dan Cruickshank regards Rockingham as a principled idealist; but Sir Lewis Namier famously wrote that "Men went into politics to make a figure; and no more dreamt of a seat in Parliament in order to benefit humanity than a child dreams of a birthday cake in order that others may eat it." However, I find it difficult to condemn Rockingham on this basis, since he was one of the richest men in Britain, and really didn't need the financial rewards of office. In addition, he had a seat in the House of Lords from 1751 and didn't need to stand for election to the House of Commons thereafter.

Rockingham was Prime Minister for about a year between 1765 and 1766, and is most famous for presiding over the repeal of the Stamp Act, which was the immediate source of American grievances. Enacted in 1765, it had levied a stamp duty on every document in the British colonies, including newspapers, which were the most effective way of at producing propaganda opposing the tax. The cry of 'no taxation without representation' had been raised, and attracted widespread support from that time. Benjamin Franklin also opposed the measure on the ground that Americans already contributed heavily to the defence of the Empire. He argued that the colonial assemblies had raised, outfitted and paid 25,000 soldiers to fight France in the Seven Years War of 1756-63 and spent many millions in both the French and Indian Wars. The American 'Sons of Liberty' were formed in 1765.

They used public demonstrations, boycotts, violence, and threats of violence to ensure that the British tax laws were unenforceable. Nine colonies had sent delegates to the Stamp Act Congress in New York City in October 1765.

Rockingham predicted that the attempt to tax the Americans, rather than letting them raise their own revenue (as they had long been allowed to do) was a mistake; and he became something of a hero in the American colonies when he presided over the repeal of the Stamp Act; but he was only able to do this because his government also enacted the Declaratory Act of March 1766 – declaring that Parliament retained full power to make laws for the colonies "in all cases whatsoever". Anything less would have been unacceptable to the majority in the House of Commons, and to King George III.

Despite becoming Prime Minister at a very young age, Rockingham had many interests, apart from politics. He was a collector of art, but was better known as a devotee of the racecourse. He had the gigantic stable block built at Wentworth for 84 horses; and he had a stud-farm in the Park. Somewhat unjustly, Horace Walpole (builder of Strawberry Hill and diarist) wrote that 'this lord loves only horses'. Rockingham's wife did not disapprove of racing; but she did write of her hopes that her husband would restrict himself to gambling "just upon *the turf*, for there is always a possibility of some sort of pleasure in that; but not the smallest in other sorts".

In 1762 Rockingham commissioned Stubbs to produce a series of portraits of his horses, one of which was *Whistlejacket*;[13] and the artist spent some months at Wentworth Woodhouse. The horse won many races in the North of England, including a four-mile race at York in August 1759, after which he retired to stud. He is mentioned in Act IV of Oliver Goldsmith's play *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) when an elopement is planned: "I have got you a pair of horses that will fly like *Whistlejacket*".

There must have been many entertainments at Wentworth Woodhouse in the 2nd Marquis's day; but we have the following account from his father's time, which shows how lavish expenditure on such events could be:

> [January 1732] I gave a large entertainment to all my tenants in the neighbourhood & their wives & some neighbouring gentlemen also came … the number of guests was about one thousand…two hundred and twenty five dishes were served including: of beef 43, of Pork 30, Venison pasties 24, Turkeys 15, Geese 21, Apple and Mince pies 16, Boar's Heads 4. (Cruickshank)

Rockingham also took comfort in society. This was a great age for clubs, of all kinds. The Rockingham Club had been formed in 1753 and the Marquis hired James Stuart to paint portraits of William III and George II for the club rooms. The club

[13] Named after a contemporary cold remedy containing gin and treacle.

held monthly meetings and a list written in June 1754 showed it had 133 members. This was a time when London was said to have 3,000 clubs, including the Lazy Club (where members were supposed to arrive in their nightshirts), the Club of Ugly Faces, the Tall Club, the Surly Club and the Farters' Club.

What does one do in clubs? Talk – and not just about politics. This is the age of Dr Johnson; but it is also the age of the phlegmatic Englishman. There is a story about a man who had eaten at the same tavern for twenty-five years. Over those years he and his neighbour in the next cubicle had never spoken. Eventually the man plucked up the courage to call out:

> 'Sir, for twenty-five years we have been neighbours at dinner, and yet we have never spoken. May I enquire your name, Sir?'
>
> To which his neighbor replied:
>
> 'Sir, you are impertinent.' (Ackroyd)

The Marquis was also a member of White's Club. In 1764 his sister Lady Harriet embarrassed the whole family by eloping with a footman, named Sturgeon. Rockingham was so shocked he considered retiring from politics. Meanwhile, a fellow member at White's made him blush by suggesting over a fish dinner that Rockingham should help himself to some sturgeon.[14]

Rockingham kept in touch with American affairs, even after losing office in 1766. In particular he received information about what was going on across the Atlantic from three American friends, Joseph Harrison the customs collector at Boston, James Delancey who led the majority in the New York Assembly, and Governor Wentworth of New Hampshire. On 24 May 1771 Benjamin Franklin arrived at Wentworth from the Rectory of Thornhill, the home of Rockingham's kinsman and fellow Whig, Sir George Savile.[15]

IV

---

[14] Nevertheless, Rockingham paid his sister an allowance every quarter out of his Irish estates: Bloy, 46.

[15] Savile is commemorated in the Rockingham Monument or Mausoleum, at the bottom of Wentworth Park, along with Edmund Burke, Admiral Keppel, Charles James Fox, The Duke of Portland, John Lee, Lord John Cavendish and Frederick Montagu.

In Opposition, 1766-1782

After the repeal of the Stamp Act, and Rockingham's fall from power in 1766, the British Government changed its approach in America. It still wanted to raise revenue there, it would now do so by levying indirect taxes, or customs duties, by means of the Townshend Revenue Act. However, this was open to the same objection as had been raised to the Stamp Act; and any goodwill generated by Rockingham's repeal of the latter was soon dissipated. For their part, the Rockingham Whigs might sympathise with American objectives, but could not approve of their methods, especially when the Americans turned to active resistance. (The Boston Tea Party took place in 1773).

Rockingham's 'line' in the American question was put by his secretary Edmund Burke, in his *Present State of the Nation* (1768). Burke argued that the implied right to legislate for the Colonies, set out in the Declaratory Act of 1766, should be used prudently, for the good of the empire, and not exercised in such a way as to vex the Colonists. When they started to boycott British goods and officials, and even engage in armed resistance, he did not approve; but at the same time, he accurately predicted that the British would find it impossible to subdue the American rebellion, and that the attempt to do so would ruin British trade. This view was not popular – it was perhaps seen as 'talking the country down'.

The Rockingham Whigs stayed out until 1782. Rockingham reckoned there were about 170 MPs who were sympathetic to his point of view; but he could never quite 'pull off' a return to government; and indeed his Whigs now became known as the *enfants perdus* – the lost children – of politics. They fought the General Elections of 1768, 1774 and 1780; but had no real 'programme' in the modern sense. They were not a modern political party, with central control, whipping in Parliament, and party discipline outside it. Even Rockingham's followers thought it was wrong in principle to form a 'General Opposition', dedicated to imposing its will on the King on every issue.

Rockingham was in the fortunate position of not needing the rewards of office; and he was able to endure the long absence from power; but it demoralized some of the Whigs, who even thought of giving up politics altogether. At one point Burke thought of accepting an offer to put the affairs of the East India Company in order. On the other hand, Rockingham wrote in the late 1760s, from Wentworth:

> Since I came home I found so much real private business and so much amusement in riding about inspecting, farming, and other occupations that I own I took up such an indolence of mind that I dreaded to write on political matter. Indeed for the last ten days I have had company constantly with me…. I am to set out for York Races tomorrow…"

V

The American War of Independence, 1776-1783

1776 is famous as the year of the Declaration of Independence; but it was also the year the St Leger was first run, in Doncaster. Five ran and the winner was an unnamed filly owned by Rockingham, whom he later named *Allabaculia*. The St Leger became one of the five Classic races in England, eventually rivalling the Derby in terms of popularity.

Returning to the American problem, the Prime Minister Lord North had proposed a number of legislative measures to punish the Bostonians, following the Boston Tea Party. These were known as the Coercive Acts in Great Britain, and the Intolerable Acts in the Colonies. By shutting down the Boston government and cutting off trade, North hoped to damage both the economy and undermine the morale of the Americans. Instead, his policy eventually resulted in open war. There were clashes between British regular troops and colonial militiamen at the Battles of Lexington and Concord in April 1775. The rebel leaders were declared traitors by the Crown and a year of fighting ensued.

Rockingham's first words on the violence at Boston were:

> The conduct of the Americans cannot be justified; but the folly and impolicy of the provocation deserves the fullest arraignment; and notwithstanding all that has passed, I can never give consent to proceeding with actual force against the colonies.

But the reputation of the Rockingham Whigs took a hit in Britain, when the cold war turned hot. Many British MPs blamed the Marquis and his friends for the crisis, taking the view that they had been guilty of appeasement when they repealed the Stamp Act, and this had encouraged the Americans to further aggression. In his Speech on Conciliation in 1775 Burke reveals the depth of hostility towards the Colonists in Britain, by referring to two solutions to the problem which were being talked about in Westminster at that time.

One solution was for the British to abolish slavery in the southern colonies Burke's reason for rejecting this is interesting, because it reflects the facts that, whatever else they were, the Whigs were not Liberals in the modern sense: 'this has had its advocates and panegyrists; yet I never could argue myself into any opinion of it. Slaves are often much attached to their masters. A general wild offer of liberty would not always be accepted. History furnishes few instances of it.' The second solution proposed by some British politicians was to stop the Americans from

spreading out of the Thirteen Colonies and into the West. Burke's view here is again of interest:

> Many of the people in the back settlements are already little attached to particular situations. Already they have topped the Appalachian Mountains. From thence they behold before them an immense plain, one vast, rich, level meadow; a square of five hundred miles. Over this they would wander without a possibility of restraint; they would change their manners with the habits of their life; would soon forget a government by which they were disowned; would become hordes of English Tartars; and, pouring down upon your unfortified frontiers a fierce and irresistible cavalry.

In 1776 the Radical Englishman Tom Paine published *Common Sense*, in which he rejected any further ideas of conciliation and called for independence. He argued for the removal of the influence of Lord North, and his 'detestable *junto*', while recognising that the Americans had no real complaint to make about the administration of the Marquis of Rockingham.

The colonies duly declared for independence in July 1776. The declaration contains a long list of 'abuses and usurpations, designed to bring the colonies back under despotic rule'. The 'Indictment of the royal government' included the complaint that George III had 'excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.' It concluded that 'A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.'

The Americans complained about the behaviour of the British Parliament as well as of the King "Nor have we been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. They have been deaf to the voice of justice and consanguinity."

Rockingham remained sympathetic; but he was no Radical. He could not support the movement for independence, or other new schemes of government. His said: "Our object has always been to try to preserve a friendly union between the colonies and the Mother Country"; but the only victory scored by the Whigs in the late 1770s was a legal one. In 1778 Admiral Keppel was tried for desertion after the battle of Ushant. Rockingham suspected that the prosecution was politically motivated. The trial was held in Portsmouth and Rockingham took a house there, where Keppel lived, and which became a sort of temporary H.Q. for the Whigs. The Admiral's acquittal was the occasion for a national celebration; and Rockingham determined to erect a column, with a gigantic figure of Keppel on top, on the horizon of Wentworth Park. The column was built, but without the figure.

The War with the Americans went from bad to worse. In early 1778, France signed a treaty of alliance with the United States and Spain and

the Dutch Republic soon joined in on the American side, while Britain remained friendless. Thought the Whigs were largely ineffective, opposition to the war gradually increased, and in June 1780 this contributed to the disturbances in London known as the Gordon riots. In late 1781, news of Lord Cornwallis's surrender to George Washington's forces at the Siege of Yorktown reached London. Lord North's government disintegrated and he resigned as Prime Minister when the House of Commons voted, by 234 to 215 in February 1781, that there should be no more offensives in America.

VI

The Second Rockingham Administration of 1782

Eventually Lord Shelburne negotiated a transfer of power, and Rockingham saw the King. His policy was not to accept office unless the King agreed to his choice of ministers and his choice of policies, including no veto on the independence of the Colonies, and some measure of 'economic' (rather than radical) parliamentary reform. Historians disagree as to whether George III really agreed to these terms.[16]

At any rate, it seems that although Rockingham became Prime Minister, it was really Shelburne who pulled the strings; and the Marquis found that he was in the unenviable position of being a minority in his own Cabinet. The historian John Owen pointed out that the new Cabinet was equally divided between Rockingham's supporters and those of his rival Shelburne, while the final member was a royal observer whose first loyalty would to George III, rather than to any politician.[17]

In any event, Rockingham died after only fourteen weeks in office. The Treaties of Paris, by which Britain recognised the independence of the American states and returned Florida to Spain, were signed in 1782 and 1783. Britain had little choice but to concede the independence of the Thirteen Colonies, but the peace treaties also conceded American control of a vast hinterland, stretching West from the Appalachians to the Mississippi. The treaties were negotiated and signed by others, and we can never know what Rockingham would have thought of them. We are therefore left to wonder about what would have happened if he had lived longer, or been a more skilful politician. Would there ever have been a USA, with 50 states in the Union? Or was it inevitable that, sooner or later, the colonies would go their own way, given that 'dominion status' within the Empire - which both sides might conceivably have settled for - was as yet unheard of?

[16] The traditional view is that he did; but the better view seems to be that he considered Rockingham's stance to be an unacceptable infringement of the royal prerogative; and thought that Rockingham should take office, on terms to be decided later.

[17] Owen, 236. (Owen pointed this out to me in Oxford in the late 1960s, during a difficult tutorial.

There are some favourable verdicts on Rockingham's career. Horace Walpole, who had always deprecated him, wrote after his death that the Marquis "triumphed without the shadow of compromise of any sort, this is most religiously true, he deserves all praise and all support." The *Annual Register* for 1782 alluded to the public measures he "was said" to have stipulated "with the court" before consenting to form an administration. But there have also been some very unfavourable verdicts. Rockingham's modern American biographer, Ross J.S.Hoffman delivered Wrote this in 1973:

> [The] Rockingham administration was flawed from the start by the long-enduring jealousies of Rockinghamites and Chathamites, weakened by lack of royal confidence, facing the same Parliament which had so reluctantly withdrawn its support from North, and facing too the prospect of having to do many disagreeable and unpopular things in the liquidation of an unsuccessful war.

In the following year, John Owen wrote this:

> A shockingly poor speaker, an inept politician, dedicated more to the race-track than to the Cabinet board, he originally had no clear ideas of importance on any political issue.[18]

Rockingham's fame, such as it has been, was posthumous – the result of the esteem which his successor at Wentworth and in the House of Lords, the 4th Earl Fitzwilliam, had for him. On 23 December 1824 Fitzwilliam wrote to Lord Grey deploring current authoritarian measures in Ireland:

> I am old enough to have lived through the American business from its first commencement to the ultimate result, and remembering how this unfortunate country was led on from one little step to another, I know our only chance of salvation must be stopping the very first. Having lost thirteen provinces to compliment the overbearing prejudices of a king, shall we throw away half our empire to compliment the rash folly of an heir presumptive—are we never to grow wise, does experience work nothing in our favour?

On the whole, then, historians have judged Rockingham severely; but it seems to me that some of these criticisms are unhistorical. It is wrong to judge Rockingham is by modern standards, rather than by the standards of his own day. He was an 18th century Whig, not a 19th century Liberal, and he lived at a time when the monarch was still expected to rule, as well as to reign, albeit with the support and advice of Parliament.

---

[18] Owen, 180.

Specifically, there are three criticisms which need to be examined carefully, if we are to do the man justice. First, it is often said that he was a poor speaker and an inept politician. ('The central difficulty of Whig politics was to get Rockingham to speak, or to stop his private secretary Edmund Burke, from speaking'). But, in his defence it could be argued that Rockingham had Edmund Burke to both write and deliver his speeches; and that all prominent politicians in the modern age use speech writers. However, one has to concede that this only takes us so far, because it was important that Burke was only in the House of Commons, whereas Rockingham was in the Lords, which already put him at one remove from the backbench MPs whom it was so important to influence.

On the charge of ineptitude, Owen's example (of Rockingham putting himself in a minority in 1782) is very telling; but Owen would have been the first to admit that the way in which ministers were appointed in the 18th century differs markedly from what happens now. In those days, the monarch had a real choice of Prime Minister (and was not confined by convention to the leader of the largest party in the Commons); but he also chose the other ministers too; and Rockingham's biggest problem was that George III preferred Shelburne, and his associates, to Rockingham and his. In 1867 Walter Bagehot (author of the *The English Constitution*), characterised the UK as a republic in all but name; but this was very far from being the case in the 1760s and 1770s.

From the British point of view, Rockingham is also accused of being half-hearted about parliamentary reform; and it is true that he disliked John Wilkes's brand of Radicalism, just as he opposed the Yorkshire reformer Christopher Wyvill; but this was because he was a Whig of the 'old school', who believed in 'economical reform' - in reducing the alleged power of the Crown in the House of House of Commons - rather than in changing the distribution of seats, or extending the franchise. He was neither a Radical, nor a democrat (indeed 'democracy' remained a dirty word in Britain as late as 1884).[19] By modern standards, he was intensely conservative, socially and politically. His reason for opposing George III for so many years was that he saw the King as departing from early Hanoverian traditions concerning the relationship between monarchy and Parliament. His idea of 'reform' was to go back, not forward.

From the American point of view, it is said that Rockingham's support for the American cause was only half-hearted; but this view again ignores the realities of British politics. At all times prior to 1782, George III and the majority of the House of Commons, took the view that the Americans should, ultimately, do as they were told; and should not (and could not) expect to elect MPs to the Westminster House

---

[19] The Rev. Christopher Wyvill headed the Yorkshire Association and took part in the petitioning movement of 1778-9, which advocated more regular elections than the Septennial Act provided for, and other alterations to the Constitution. It failed for lack of sufficiently wide support. Rockingham's policy of economical reform was embodied in, for example, the Civil Establishment Act of 1782, which reduced the amount voted by Parliament for the Civil List. The Rockingham Whigs thought that George III used this to buy votes in the House of Commons: Owen, 225, 237.

of Commons. Rockingham himself was opposed to independence for the American colonies, until such time as it became inevitable, because of military defeat. He agreed with George III that in theory, the Americans owed the monarchy a duty of obedience. He simply took the view that it was best to leave them alone in practice, and not attempt to impose new taxes. If this is regarded as being 'half-hearted', then he is guilty as charged; but there is a very strong plea in mitigation.

Perhaps the last word on the Marquis's place in British political history should go to his successor's biographer, E.A.Smith:

> By the end of the American War there was an identifiable political group that claimed for itself the sole right to the title of 'Whig' and the function of representing the true national interest, and which based its claim not only on organised connection but on shared political experience, a set of avowed political principles and a political programme for the immediate future. This was the group led by the second Marquis of Rockingham.

In other words, Rockingham's main achievement was to keep the main body of the Whig party in the House of Commons together, throughout the long years in opposition, when he could not offer his MPS the rewards of office; and when he had no real power to dragoon them.[20]

In relation to American history, Dr Marjorie Bloy summarized the position very well in 1986:

> Rockingham's policy towards America and his opposition to government measures and its conduct of the war made him unpopular in England, except amongst his staunchest followers but he does appear to have been vindicated by events. He was the man who had the foresight and imagination to envisage events as they subsequently developed. He has never received the recognition of his efforts.[21]

[20] In 1773 Burke expressed the view that, without Rockingham, the party would cease to exist: Bloy, 276.

[21] Lastly, we should mention Ireland, where Rockingham was not only a benevolent landlord, but where – in contrast the position in America - he was able to enact several measures designed to relieve the desperate situation of Irish Catholics in particular, during his second administration in 1782: see Bloy, Chapter 7. But again, he would not have been in favour of any Radical measures.

Acknowledgements & Bibliography

My thanks to David Allott, Tours Director at Wentworth Woodhouse, for letting me see his collection of materials relating to the 2nd Marquis and explaining the immensely rich archive of the Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments in Sheffield (which I do not pretend to have explored); and to Melvyn Jones, for his helpful suggestions over many years.

Arthur Young, *A Six Months Tour Through the North of England*, London, 1771
Edmund Burke, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770); *Speech on American Taxation* (1774); *Speech on Moving Resolutions for Conciliation* (1775)
Tom Paine, *Common Sense*, 1776
Lewis Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, 1930
Lewis Namier, *England in the Age of the American Revolution*, 1930
Herbert Butterfield, *George III and the Politicians*, 1957
Paul Langford, *The First Rockingham Administration*, 1973
Ross J.S. Hoffman, *The Marquis*, *A Study of Lord Rockingham, 1730-1782*, 1973
John B. Owen, *The Eighteenth Century, 1714-1815*, 1974.
E.A.Smith, *Whig principles and party politics, Earl Fitzwilliam ad the Whig Party, 1748-1833*, 1975
R.B.Wragg, *Rockingham's Travels,* Transactions of the Hunter Archaeological Society, edition 1, 1983, Sheffied
Marjorie Bloy's unpublished PhD thesis, *Rockingham and Yorkshire, the Political, Economic and Social Role of Charles Watson-Wentworth, the Second Marquis of Rockingham*, University of Sheffield, 1986
Dan Cruickshank, *The Country House Revealed,* 2011
Official Guide to Wentworth Woodhouse (The Team), 2013
Peter Ackroyd, *Revolution*, 2016