

How enlightened was George III?

The King, the British Museum and the Enlightenment

Robert Lacey

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Robert Lacey set out to debunk what he sees as the ‘myth’ of George III as the greatest of all royal patrons of the British Museum. As is well known, the king assembled one of the great book collections of the eighteenth century. After his death, his son, George IV, attempted to sell it, but, perhaps swayed by the offer of government funding for the rebuilding of the Queen’s House, he was persuaded to present the books to the Museum. There the collection joined the Old Royal Library, which had been given to the Museum by George II as one of the foundation collections. The ‘King’s Library’ is now the appropriate symbolic centrepiece of the British Library building. Sometimes explicitly and more often implicitly, historians have assumed that George III had always intended that the books should go to the British Museum, but, as Lacey showed, there is no real evidence that this was what he ever envisaged. The collection was instead a working library suitable for an enlightened monarch and assembled mainly with the aim of assisting that particular monarch in the task of governing his kingdom. To clinch his argument, Lacey revealed his latest discoveries from the Royal Archives. Like those of all British monarchs, the will of George III has never been released to historians. That remains the case. However, the Royal Archives have disclosed to Lacey what George III’s will says about his book collection. When the king drew up the will in 1770, he specified that most of the books should go to his eldest son, then still a young boy. Thirty-eight years later, by which time he was only too aware of his son’s manifold vices, he attempted to have that provision altered. His revised wishes were that the books should still go to his heir, but that they should then be retained as a library for the use of their successors. For reasons that remain unclear, this second will was never signed. The king’s intentions could not have been clearer. In the discussion that followed, Peter Barber suggested that George III may have decided against leaving his books to the

British Museum after it began selling off the duplicates from the Old Royal Library. He also pointed out that the duke of York's disapproval of his brother's sale of the library may have been because he knew that this was contrary to their father's intentions. As William IV, the younger brother would create the third Royal Library, a collection that continues to fulfil the function that this paper had argued George III always intended.

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