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Chesterfield, Scarbrough, and the Excise Bill: a new Manuscript Source*

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A previously unpublished history of the Excise Crisis, written by Lord Chesterfield in 1761 and kept among his 'loose papers' after his death, provides an intriguing view of how members of the house of lords exerted influence on the Court – if not on the first minister – during this tumultuous period in 1733. Chesterfield recounts how the earl of Scarbrough, his closest friend, appealed to Queen Caroline to abandon the proposed Bill, which would have enriched the civil list and thereby increased support for the royal household. Scarbrough informed the queen that the soldiers in his regiment would not fire upon their fellow subjects, and that he would not lead them into such an action. Sir Robert Walpole dropped his scheme the next day. Chesterfield concludes his narrative by speculating about the queen's attitude towards her subjects, and by confessing that he was wrong to have opposed Walpole's scheme almost three decades earlier.

The Excise Bill that Sir Robert Walpole introduced into parliament in 1733 was a financial scheme and therefore properly the business of the house of commons, but members of the house of lords were, if anything, even more vehement in their opposition to the Bill, and they had means to exert their views. As Clyve Jones has argued, 'individual members of the Lords, as well as the increasingly coherent body of the opposition in the House, had an immense impact upon the outcome of the crisis'. This was achieved, he writes, 'through three interrelated spheres of influence':

> first, the influence of peers over individual MPs to oppose the scheme in the Commons, many of whom owed their seats to aristocratic interest; second, their influence upon the court; and third, not to be underestimated, their influence upon public opinion through print, newsmongering and gossip, particularly amongst the political and social elite, which created a climate inimical to the excise and to Walpole's administration.[1]

The focus of Jones's study centres on how the political muscle flexed by peers over a bill the first minister eventually had to remove from consideration soon led to an increasingly active role for leaders of the opposition in the upper house as they targeted additional issues, particularly the accounts of the South Sea Company. It is useful, however, to return to Jones's second 'sphere of influence' – pressure placed by peers on members of the Court

*I wish to thank Robin Eagles and Richard Gaunt for their helpful comments on this article.

[1] Clyve Jones, 'The House of Lords and the Excise Crisis: The Storm and the Aftermath, 1733-5', *Parliamentary History,* 33 (2014), 168.

of St. James's – because a previously unknown document written by Lord Chesterfield provides us with an intriguing glimpse of how this form of political pressure had been exerted.

Philip Dormer Stanhope, the 4th earl of Chesterfield, was among the most adamant of the aristocrats in his opposition to the Bill, and his intransigence eventually led to his dismissal as lord steward. He consulted with other peers about the Bill, and he instructed his three younger brothers – who served as MPs for Derby, Nottingham, and Buckinghamshire – to oppose it in the Commons (thereby embodying Jones's first sphere of influence).[2] Chesterfield entitled his narrative an 'Anecdote, how the Excise Scheme came to be so unexpectedly dropped' (1761), and he begins by summarizing what was popularly understood about the motives behind the scheme at the time. The imposition of excises would require multiple officers whose powers 'to favour or distress whom they please' were essentially an extension of the power of the Crown over trading within the country; this, in turn, would exert influence on the election of members to the house of commons.[3] The truth, however, was quite different, he writes: fraud within the current system was 'enormous, and intolerable', and the new act would only apply to tobacco and wine.[4] But that was not how the public understood it, for they feared that it was a general excise – a comprehensive tax – 'or at least … the sure fore-runner of one'. Chesterfield is persuaded, however, that Walpole only wished to increase the public revenue, which was part of his responsibility as first lord of the treasury. Walpole sold his plan to George II and Queen Caroline by showing them figures which suggested that the scheme would generate an additional £100,000 a year in the civil list, on which the Court depended. But the 'universal fear and fury' the scheme had excited convinced Walpole that he should withdraw it from consideration in the Commons. The queen, however, was adamant in her refusal, and 'laughed at his apprehensions of popular clamours'. The first minister was therefore in a difficult predicament.

Here is the text of the earl's 'Anecdote' in full:

> I shall not now enter into the Nature of the Excise scheme; it was for the time the principal, or rather, the only subject of all conversations, and the Number of polemical pamphlets written for and against it, have left few people uninformed. Excise is an unpopular word, and connected as it was with an unpopular Minister, kindled such a flame in the nation, as I never saw upon any occasion either before or since. It was very near having the most fatal consequences.
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> The scheme was laid, and the bill brought into the House of Commons by S[i]r Robert Walpole, the duration of whose power, and the increase of whose riches, had already made him the most envied and consequently the most unpopular Man in the Kingdom; No wonder then that he was accused of the deepest and most dangerous designs of beggaring and enslaving the Nation.

[2]See P. Langford, *The Excise Crisis: Society and Politics in the Age of Walpole* (Oxford, 1975), 70.

[3]This manuscript is located at the Lilly Library, Indiana University (Bloomington, Indiana): Chesterfield mss. II (no further cataloguing detail is available). I have transcribed the manuscript with the kind permission of the Lilly Library, where I held an Everett Helm Visiting Fellowship.

[4]Walpole withdrew the excise on wine when introducing the Bill in parliament, but it was his original intention to include it, which was prominently reflected in the paper wars. It was often subsequently referred to as the Tobacco Bill.

The popular deduction was this. Excises require Many officers, these officers are appointed by the Crown, they must necessarily have great powers, they can favour or distress whom they please, consequently the Crown will have absolute power over all the trading part of the Kingdom, which will be rigorously exerted in all Elections of members of Parliament, and in all other cases where the Crown can increase it's [*sic*] power or it's [*sic*] profit.

But the truth of the case was something different from this party representation of it. The frauds in the dutys upon the exports and imports, were grown most enormous, and intolerable, particularly in the Articles of Wine and Tobacco, the only two commoditys that were made Excisable by the Bill, though it was always represented, as enacting a general Excise, or at least as the sure fore-runner of one.

S[i]r Robert Walpole, I am persuaded, had no other view in this Scheme than the increase of the publick revenue, which by his Post he was at the head of; but whether it was either rightly calculated or timed, I will not pretend to determine, but in the main, it was certainly a right one, and I am convinced would have gone smoothly at the beginning of his Ministry. Fond of this child of his old age, he presented it to the King, or rather to the Queen, and to engage them to adopt it, showed them that by his dexterous management it should increase the civil list, near one hundred thousand pounds a year, and this he called greasing the wheels of his scheme. Accordingly the King who was extremely greedy of any pecuniary advantages, and the Queen who had not the least aversion to them, not only adopted but fondled the child.

The Bill was brought into the House of Commons, re[a]d twice, and dropped. The debates, the animosities, and the tumults which it occasioned are so fresh in every body's memory, that I shall not touch upon them but proceed to relate the true reason of dropping it, which few men know at all, and no man so particularly as myself.

When S[i]r Robert Walpole saw the universal fear and fury which his Scheme excited, he was wise enough to desire to drop it, and proposed it to the Queen, but he had at first engaged her approbation and support of it, by motives too strong to be easily set aside. She insisted upon the performance of his promise with regard to the increase of the civil list, and laughed at his apprehensions of popular clamours, insomuch that he was obliged extremely against his will, to continue to push it in the House of commons. In the mean time the tumults, the mobs, the fury increased, to such a pitch that it was thought necessary, privately to order both Horse and foot Guards to load their pieces with ball, and be ready to march at a minute's warning.

Richard Earl of Scarbrough the honestest man and the truest Patriot in the Kingdom was at that time Colonel of the second Regiment of foot guards. He received those orders with the utmost concern, foreseeing and dreading the consequences either way, and immediately went to Court, and desired a private Audience of the Queen, without having communicated his design to any mortal. He told her that he thought himself obliged in conscience, and in duty to the King and her to represent to her the fatal consequences of persisting in a measure, which the unanimous voice of the whole nation cryed so loudly against. That he had been equally surprised and concerned at the orders which he had that morning received, that by what he had heard from such of his officers as he had talked with upon that subject, he had reason to believe that the private men of his Regiment would not march against their Countrymen upon this occasion, but that in all events he must freely declare to her Majesty, he would not lead them on for such a purpose, let the Consequence to himself be what it would; and that moreover he was persuaded that that would be the case of many more Regiments and Colonels in the King's service; He concluded with conjuring her to have the Scheme dropped before it was too late.

The Queen, he told me was exceedingly struck with this unexpected declaration, she changed colour, paused a while to stifle her anger, and then told him that she believed he was mistaken in his opinion of the Excise scheme, or imposed upon by others (meaning as I believe me) who wished to create confusion. Here he interrupted her, by saying that he did not enter into the fitness or unfitness of the Scheme in itself, that he had never declared his opinion upon it one way or another, and that no mortal living knew whether he should vote for or against it, if it ever came up to the House of Lords, but that what he came to represent to her Majesty, was the inexpediency (and as he apprehended) the fatal consequences of pushing it, were it ever so right in itself, at the price of the lives of so many of the King's subjects. Much more passed between them in this Audience the detail of which would be tedious, and the substance of which will naturally occur to every sensible reader. The Queen exerted all her art to gain Lord Scarbrough over, and he with a respectfull firmness, persisted in his former declaration. The consequence of this conversation was, that the next day S[i]r Robert Walpole came to the house of Commons, and in a very able speech, dropped the Excise scheme, full as much I believe, to his own, as to the satisfaction of the Publick.

This Anecdote, I had the very next day from Lord Scarbrough, who was Veracity itself. He told it me under the seal of the utmost secrecy, assuring me that he neither had, nor ever would communicate the particular circumstances to any body but myself. I scrupulously observed the secrecy I promised him, but now that all the parties concerned are dead, and the affair itself become matter of mere curiosity, I think myself at liberty to put it down in writing, and leave it amongst my idle loose papers. They may perhaps inform some, and can hurt none.

One question naturally arises from this Fact. Would the Queen then have pushed this matter to the utmost extremity by the Military power could she have depended upon it, at the risk of a civil war? In my opinion she would. Nay more, I think she would gladly have taken this opportunity of trying one bold stroke for absolute power. She had both obstinacy and courage, joined to the highest notions of absolute Monarchy, and the most avowed contempt possible for the people, or what is commonly called The Publick.

Having spoke favourably, in this account, of the Excise Scheme in itself, I owe it to truth to confess that I was a warm opposer of it, thinking very unfavourably of it at the time. Few people have a judgement strong enough, at least I own that I had not, not to be byassed [*sic*] by party spirit, connections and habits. I was at that time in opposition to the

> Court, whose measures I most sincerely disapproved of, I conversed chiefly with those of the same sentiments, I heard but one side of the question, and being naturally warm, I was violently and honestly against a scheme, which I then thought, was founded upon the very worst principles, and productive of the most fatal consequences.
>
> Let those who have strength of mind enough to be superior to prejudices, connections, and habitudes, throw the first stone at me, if they please.

This would seem to be the end of Chesterfield's secret history – 'which few men know at all, and no man so particularly as myself' – but it is worth pausing over his two intriguing codas. He asks, in the first place, whether the queen would have 'pushed this matter to the utmost extremity' if she could have counted upon the military completely backing the Crown. Would she have risked a 'civil war'? In the Earl's opinion, 'she would. Nay more, I think she would have taken this opportunity of trying one bold stroke for absolute power', having nothing but 'the most avowed contempt possible for the people'. And this explains, at least in part, the vehement, malicious lines of verse that Chesterfield wrote following the queen's death, and which can now be ascribed to him for the first time:

> Here lies unpitied, both by Church and State,
> The subject of their flattery and hate;
> Flatter'd by those on whom her favours flow'd,
> Hated for favours impiously bestow'd;
> Who aim'd the Church by Churchmen to betray,
> And hoped to share in arbitrary sway.
> In Tindal's and in Hoadley's paths she trod,
> An hypocrite in all but disbelief in God.
> Promoted luxury, encouraged vice,
> Herself a sordid slave to avarice.
> True friendship's tender love ne'er touched her heart,
> Falsehood appear'd in view disguised by art.
> Fawning and haughty, when familiar, rude;
> And never civil seem'd but to delude.
> Inquisitive in trifling, mean affairs,
> Heedless of public good or orphan's tears;
> To her own offspring mercy she denied,
> And, unforgiving, unforgiven died.[5]

Chesterfield later wrote a much more even-handed 'Character' of the queen, but it also contains his worries concerning her assault upon the Constitution.[6] Together, these three documents – the anecdote, the character sketch, and the poem – provide much more light

[5]This poem is part of the Chevening Estate collection at the Kent History and Library Centre in Maidstone: U1590/C412A/7. These lines were printed without an attribution to Chesterfield by Dr Doran in *Lives of the Queens of the House of Hanover* (2nd edn, 2 vols, 1855), i, 384–85. I have transcribed this copy of the poem with the kind permission of the Board of Trustees of the Chevening Estate.

[6]The 'Character' of Queen Caroline is part of the Lilly Library Chesterfield mss. II; it has been published most accurately by Colin Franklin, *Lord Chesterfield: His Character and 'Characters'* (Aldershot, 1992), 101. It is curious that Chesterfield only glancingly refers to the Queen's cultural accomplishments, which are articulated at some

on the long-term animosity that characterised their relationship, and on the Earl's fear of the royal couple accumulating even more political power.

Chesterfield concludes his narrative by drawing attention to the fact that he has now spoken favourably of the excise scheme whereas he was originally, in 1733, 'a warm opposer of it'. How can he reconcile these two facts? He was convinced, at the time, that the scheme was 'founded upon the very worst principles, and [was] productive of the most fatal consequences'. But he now confesses that he was wrong: 'let those who have strength of mind enough to be superior to prejudices, connections, and habitudes, throw the first stone at me, if they please'. This is an intimate and remarkable conclusion to a document that historians have never before had the opportunity to read and assess. Part of what is of interest here is the issue of trust, a word that Chesterfield rarely used but is nevertheless an essential facet of his political thinking and of his understanding of gentlemanly 'honour'. Scarbrough trusted Chesterfield to keep his secret. Chesterfield kept that trust for almost 30 years, and it clearly influenced his warm and admiring portrait of Scarbrough in the lengthy 'Character' he wrote about him.[7] Queen Caroline appears to have trusted what Scarbrough told her – and presumably conveyed this to Robert Walpole, who in turn trusted what she told him. On such trusted 'declarations', Chesterfield informs us, momentous decisions are made.

Chesterfield's and Scarbrough's opinions during the crisis are well-known, and Scarbrough's audience with the Queen was almost certainly but a single strand in the tangled web of reasons and circumstances that influenced both the Court and the first minister as they finally capitulated to public resistance. Lord Bolingbroke, for example,[8] was convinced that the essays in *The Craftsman* had been instrumental in blocking the measure: 'the defeat of it hath been acknowledged to be owing, in a great measure, to our writings'. Considering only the Lords, we know, for example, that one of Chesterfield's close colleagues, the earl of Stair, had his own *tête-à-tête* with the queen but, according to Lord Hervey, Stair's 'bold truths' made no headway with Her Majesty whatsoever.[9] Chesterfield's own narrative is corroborated by an entry in Hervey's memoirs in which he mentions that Scarborough told Walpole that the clamour was so great that, in his opinion, the administration ought to yield, that dislike of the scheme was universal, and that even the soldiers, believing that the price of tobacco would rise, were ripe for mutiny 'even under the walls of the palace'.[10] Hervey attempted to tell George II 'the truth' about those in 'near and high stations', but the king was not convinced: 'It is a lie; those rascals in the Opposition are the greatest liars that ever spoke. … Scarborough never has mentioned the excise to me at all' and has kept out of his way.[11]

length by J. Marschner in *Queen Caroline: Cultural Politics at the Early Eighteenth-Century Court* (New Haven and London, 2014), and to a lesser extent by M. Dennison, *The First Iron Lady: A Life of Caroline of Ansbach* (2017). Chesterfield, on the other hand, was on very warm terms with the other major female political figure of the time, Sarah, dowager duchess of Marlborough, who left him a significant monetary legacy as well as her largest diamond ring (which he wore with great pleasure).

[7] Franklin, *Lord Chesterfield's Character and 'Characters'*, 118–20.

[8] Quoted by Isaac Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and His Circle: The Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole* (Cambridge MA, 1968), 24.

[9] Lord Hervey, *Some Materials Towards Memoirs of the Reign of King George II*, ed. R. Sedgwick (3 vols, 1931), i, 135–45.

[10] Hervey, *Materials,* 154.

[11] Hervey, *Materials,* 159–60.

That may be so, but Scarbrough certainly did approach the queen. In his memoir of Chesterfield, Matthew Maty adds another strand to this tale in one of his footnotes (and it may fairly be said that his footnotes are more interesting than the biography which they support): 'The Queen, finding that the excise bill was strongly opposed by the whole nation, applied, among others, to lord Scarborough for his advice. His answer was, that the king must give it up. *I will answer for my regiment*, said his lordship, *against the pretender, but not against the opposers of the excise*. Upon which her majesty, with tears in her eyes, said, *we must then drop it*'.[12] Compared with the earl's own account, Maty's appears to be consistent in its tenor but at odds in its details: instead of Scarbrough approaching the queen, she calls for him (among others), and the language Scarbrough uses in his 'declaration' to her – and the tears in her eyes – seem to be somewhat melodramatic. Maty notes that his source is a letter from the bishop of Waterford, Chesterfield's former chaplain and one of his closest friends. It is certainly possible that the earl mentioned the incident with Scarbrough in conversation with Waterford sometime after 1761, but there is no trace of this episode in his many letters to him. Chesterfield's 'Anecdote' therefore emerges as the most trustworthy account of this aspect of the crisis – and perhaps the most thoughtful.

Chesterfield's short memoir of this particular moment in parliamentary history sheds fresh light both on Scarbrough's standing within the Court and cabinet at the time and on the close relationship between the two earls. Scarbrough's friendship with Chesterfield was puzzling to some of their contemporaries. Lord Hervey wrote in his memoirs that 'Lord Scarborough was an honest, prudent man, capable of being a good friend, and Lord Chesterfield a dishonest, irresolute, imprudent creature, capable only of being a disagreeable enemy'.[13] One of Chesterfield's biographers has speculated that Scarbrough was probably one of the few people who could pierce his friend's elegant and intimidating exterior, 'the laced and brocaded straight-jacket of his sophistication'.[14] Chesterfield believed that he knew his friend just as well. In his 'Character' of Scarbrough, he wrote about the 'intimate and unreserved friendship in which we lived for more than twenty years'. The 'most secret movements of his soul were without disguise communicated to me, and to me only'. Scarbrough had, in the highest degree, 'the air, manners, and address of a Man of quality, Politeness and ease, and dignity without pride'. He was never proud of his birth or rank, 'that common narrow notion of little minds, that wretched mistaken succedaneum of merit'. He did, however, zealously protect his character, which was universally respected. The only people who could consider him their enemy were 'such as were weary of always hearing of *Aristides the Just*'. Chesterfield concludes by writing that this portrait, far from being full and finished, is simply a small tribute 'to the memory of the best man I ever knew, and of the dearest friend I ever had'.[15]

Hervey maintained that Scarbrough was very much under Chesterfield's thumb at Westminster, telling the king that 'I long ago told you Lord Chesterfield governed him as

[12] *Miscellaneous Works of the Late Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield*, ed. Matthew Maty and J. O. Justamond (2 vols, 1777), i, 295. Maty's note is mentioned by Raymond Turner, 'The Excise Scheme of 1733', *EHR*, 42 (1927), 34–57, but curiously not by Jones, 'The House of Lords', nor by Langford in *The Excise Crisis*.

[13] Hervey, *Materials*, 74.

[14] Samuel Shellabarger, *Lord Chesterfield* (1935), 101.

[15] Franklin, *Lord Chesterfield: His Character and 'Characters'*, 118–20. After Scarbrough's death, Chesterfield commissioned the artist Thomas Worlidge to draw a double portrait of the two friends: Lilly Library, Chesterfield mss. I.

absolutely as he does any of his younger brothers'.[16] Chesterfield's 'Anecdote' places such a suggestion in serious question, for the document reveals what a pivotal role Scarbrough actually played at the time, even though he chose to keep his private efforts concealed. That role was also noted by Lord Egmont in his diary, who quoted Horatio Walpole as saying that one of the reasons for his brother 'giving up the Bill was the falling away of friends in the House of Lords; and particularly the going off of the Earl of Scarborough, who was the very man who last summer pressed the resolution of this Excise, because it would be the most grateful thing that could be to the nation'.[17] Horatio added that Scarbrough 'was an honest man, but was become fearful of this great clamour'. As Robin Eagles has demonstrated in great detail, moreover, it took some time for Scarbrough to join the opposition against Walpole's government even though his closest friend was often at the head of it.[18] It was Chesterfield who lost his place at Court because of his opposition to the Bill, not Scarbrough, who managed to keep within the good graces of both the king and the first minister throughout his political career.

We know why Chesterfield kept his thoughts secret for almost three decades, but we might also ask why his account of the Excise Crisis has remained unknown for more than 250 years. His manuscript is among those 'idle loose papers' he left in his library at Chesterfield House when he died in 1773. Some of the other documents he left behind are well-known, particularly the 'Characters' of his contemporaries, some of which were published in the 1770s, and it is puzzling that this manuscript did not find its way into print as well, for the public was eager to read what was reported to be a political memoir of his own times. As early as 1737, long before Chesterfield became a member of cabinet, Hervey told George II that three men were writing histories of his reign: Bolingbroke, Carteret, and Chesterfield. The king's famous response was that Chesterfield was 'a little tea-table scoundrel, that tells little womanish lies to make quarrels in families'.[19] Hervey told the queen that he thought that Chesterfield's memoirs will have 'a great deal of wit in them'. His style is excellent in short works, he added, although it would pall in a longer one.[20] Hervey was clearly misinformed, although such was Chesterfield's reputation as a wit and as a leader of the opposition that many people at Court and in parliament may have *feared* that he would write such a memoir.

Matthew Maty believed that he was doing so at the time Chesterfield was elected a fellow of the French Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres in 1755. Thinking that the Academy might wish to have an account of the earl's life, Maty asked Chesterfield whether he would furnish him with biographical materials. The earl declined to do so, but Maty was nonetheless convinced that Chesterfield himself had 'some intention of this

[16] Hervey, *Materials*, 155.

[17] HMC, *Manuscripts of the Earl of Egmont: Diary of the First Earl of Egmont* (3 vols, 1920–23), i, 359–60. Egmont's diary includes an important discussion of the Excise Crisis and a useful portrait of Scarbrough himself (ii, 33–34). In addition to Eagles's article on Scarbrough, cited below (n. 19), see Edith Milner, *Records of the Lumleys of Lumley Castle*, ed. Edith Benham (1904), although much of her account is taken from Hervey's memoirs. HMC, *The Manuscripts of the Earl of Carlisle* (1897), provides information about Scarbrough's position on bills later tabled in the Lords.

[18] History of Parliament Trust, London, unpublished article on Richard Lumley, 2nd earl of Scarbrough, by Robin Eagles. I am grateful to the Trust for allowing me to see this article in draft.

[19] Hervey, *Materials*, 755–56.

[20] Hervey, *Materials,* 755–56.

kind, and was perhaps at that very time employed in the undertaking'.[21] His suspicions were based in part on his conversations with the bishop of Waterford, who expressed surprise 'that nothing should have been found among the late earl's papers concerning the history of his own times'. Waterford told Maty that Chesterfield 'repeated to him more than once, that he was writing it, as far as his memory (which was a good one) would furnish him with matter'. One of the earl's cousins, moreover, told the bishop that Sir William Stanhope had been shown the manuscripts by his elder brother, who told him 'that by his will he had left him the publication of them; and then added, *publish them as soon as you dare*'.[22]

Horace Walpole read Maty's memoir quite carefully, noting in the margin at this point that 'I have, can have, no doubt but Lord Chesterfield had written, or at least begun, his Memoirs of his own time. His relation, Mr. Charles Stanhope, elder brother of Lord Harrington, told me so positively'.[23] Walpole then intriguingly adds that 'Lady Hervey told me more than once that she had seen and read them'. Everyone expected to hear that the earl had left his memoirs when he died, 'but his friends said he had burnt them a little before his death, being offended at Sir John Dalrymple's history, and saying he would leave no materials for aspersing great names'. Dalrymple had published his *Memoirs of Great Britain and Ireland* in 1771, just two years before Chesterfield's death. Still, Walpole writes, 'I question whether they are not extant. Several Characters, which made part of them, certainly do exist'. Maty, moreover, 'seems to hint that the account of the Earl's embassy to Holland, written by himself, is not destroyed'.

Chesterfield referred to this project twice in his letters, both of them dating from 1755. In a letter to Waterford from Blackheath, he said that he had hoped his relocation to the countryside would improve his health and spirits, thus enabling him not only to 'discharge my epistolary debts, but also to amuse myself with writing some essays and historical tracts'.[24] But he was soon disappointed: after only ten days at 'Babiole' (now the Ranger's House) he suffered a major attack that he thought would prove fatal; and although he had now recovered, 'I have more properly crawled, than walked among my fellow vegetables, breathed than existed, and dreamed than thought'. A few weeks later, he wrote in a similar vein to his close friend Solomon Dayrolles:

> I have brought down with me a provision of pens, ink, and paper, in hopes of amusing myself, and perhaps entertaining or informing posterity, by some historical tracts of my own times, which I intended to write with the strictest regard to truth, and none to persons myself not excepted. But I have not yet employed my pen, because my mind refused to do its part; and in writing, as well as in other performances, whatever is not done with spirit and desire, will be very ill done. All of my amusements are therefore

[21] *Miscellaneous Works of the Late Philip Dormer Stanhope*, i, 265.

[22] *Miscellaneous Works of the Late Philip Dormer Stanhope*, i, 265.

[23] *Horace Walpole's marginal notes written in Dr Maty's miscellaneous works and memoirs of the earl of Chesterfield*, ed. R.S. Turner (2 vols, 1777), i, 39–40.

[24] *The Letters of Philip Dormer Stanhope 4th Earl of Chesterfield*, ed. B. Dobrée (6 vols, London and New York, 1932), v, 2146.

reduced to the idle business of my little garden, and to the reading of idle books, where the mind is seldom called upon.[25]

The phrase 'strictest regard to truth' finds its echo in some of the 'Characters', and although the character sketches were often written when one of his contemporaries had recently died, it is possible that Chesterfield contemplated embedding them in his projected history.

The only previously known description of political life that Chesterfield offers us occurs in his 'Character' of Lord Bute, with a sketch of his administration, which was first included in Lord Mahon's edition of Chesterfield's letters in 1845.[26] In addition to Chesterfield's skillful delineation of the earl of Bute's character and early career, we have a prolonged reconstruction of the negotiations that concluded the Seven Years' War and of the palace intrigue that hindered the elder Pitt from forming a new government. This extended narrative was written in 1763, long after Chesterfield had been at the centre of British political life, and it is therefore all the more interesting because it places him in the role of a knowledgeable outsider, bringing his own experience to bear on events that may never be fully understood. 'I wrote it by snatches', he tells us in an opening paragraph that Mahon omitted, 'upon the information which I from time to time received, and upon my own conjectures arising from them'.[27] As he writes about Pitt's two meetings with George III in the closet, he remarks that the 'particulars of what passed at either, or both of these audiences, I am sure I do not know, though everybody else does to a tittle'. In his opinion, 'these political *tête-à-têtes*, like amorous ones, *à huis clos*, leave room only for conjectures, but none for certainty; and the performers only are able to tell, what, by the way, they never do tell, the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth'. Chesterfield will nevertheless 'hazard my conjecture, but merely, and with humble doubt as a conjecture',[28] as he walks us up the back stairs of St. James's Palace, where three powerful figures – Pitt, Bute, and the king – fought their corner.

In the case of the Excise Crisis and Chesterfield's account of it, we do in fact have a first-hand account, leaving us with less need for conjecture – and these two narratives, considered together, do suggest that the earl was still seriously considering a prolonged history of his times during the early 1760s. They remained 'loose papers', however. Maty did not include them in the *Miscellaneous Works* that were authorised by Lady Chesterfield and issued in 1777 and 1778. Lord Mahon almost certainly saw the anecdote about the Excise Crisis when he decided to include the longer set piece about Lord Bute, but he decided not to include it in his fifth volume when it appeared in 1753. The manuscripts remained the property of Evelyn Philip Shirley, who inherited them from Lovell Stanhope, one of Chesterfield's two executors. In the front papers of the manuscripts, Shirley has written that they were 'found at the House of my Grandfather, the late Arthur Stanhope Esq. at his death in 1836 & rebound as at present in 1851'.[29]

[25] *Letters of Philip Dormer Stanhope,* v, 2148–49.

[26] *The Letters of Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield*, ed. Lord Mahon (5 vols, 1845–53), ii, 470–82.

[27] Franklin, *Lord Chesterfield's Character and 'Characters',* 45.

[28] Franklin, *Lord Chesterfield's Character and 'Characters',* 45.

[29] Lilly Library, Chesterfield mss. II.

Arthur Stanhope was the nephew of Lovell Stanhope, and the manuscripts remained within Shirley's family until they were sold, probably in the early 20th century. In 1931 they belonged to Dr A.S.W. Rosenbach, the great Philadelphia collector, and he presumably sold them in turn to Arthur A. Houghton, Jr., of New York, who owned them by 1953.[30] Houghton put them up for auction in 1979,[30] and by 1993 the London dealer Colin Franklin owned them, at which time he published the 'Characters' for the first time without omissions or bowdlerisation. Franklin did not, however, include the 'Anecdote' on the Excise Bill nor the narrative about Lord Bute's administration.[32] The manuscript collection was sold to the Lilly Library at Indiana University in 1993, and it is there that the two manuscripts devoted to political history remain, together with a fascinating account – not quite a 'Character', although it has sometimes been considered one – of the mistresses of the first two Georges.[33] We should remember that Chesterfield married the illegitimate daughter of George I and his mistress, Ehrengard Melusine von der Schulenburg, and he therefore enjoyed first-hand knowledge of the intrigues at Court as well as those in parliament and Whitehall.

[30] S.L. Gulick, *A Chesterfield Bibliography to 1800* (2nd edn, Charlottesville, 1979), 5 n.

[30] Lord Chesterfield, *Characters (1778, 1845)*, ed. A.T. McKenzie (Los Angeles, CA, 1990), xii n.

[32] Oddly, Franklin, *Lord Chesterfield's Character and 'Characters'*, does not even mention the 'Anecdote' about the Excise Bill (although he owned it at the time), and he does not consider the narrative about Lord Bute's administration to be a 'Character', although it certainly includes such a character sketch within it.

[33] Franklin, *Lord Chesterfield's Character and 'Characters',* 91–97. Franklin confusingly stitches this narrative to the end of 'The Character of King George ye 1st' whereas it is clearly a separate entity in Chesterfield's manuscript (Lilly Library, Chesterfield mss. II). It is an intimate and amusing view of the dramatic change between the Court of Queen Anne and that of the first two Georges. See also Hannah Smith, *Georgian Monarchy: Politics and Culture, 1714–1760* (Cambridge, 2006), for an interpretation of the intersection of Court and parliamentary culture.