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EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

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IN EARLY EIGHTEENTH-
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JEREMY BLACK

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NOTE ON DATES

Unless otherwise stated all dates are given in old style, the British calendar of the period. Most European countries conformed to new style, which was eleven days ahead. New style dates are marked (ns).

PREFACE

There is not an evening, that there is not some paper cried about the street, good or bad of Robert hatch, Robert hangman, Robert the Coachman etc. or something of this kind, which shows what a spirit he has to fend himself against.

(Dowager Countess of Portland, 1730¹)

The most puzzling aspect of Sir Robert Walpole's political life is the extraordinary longevity of his ministry. Walpole was the leading minister of the Crown from 1721 until 1742 without a break. This contrasted with the periods before and after, which were characterised by ministerial instability. The longevity of Walpole's ministry is inextricably involved with the question of the stability of Britain in this period, and this notion of stability provides the key concept through which various aspects of Britain in this period can be discussed. Walpole's ministry raises the question whether a stability of ministerial personnel necessarily denoted an underlying stability in the economy, popular politics, religious feeling, constitutional concerns and national and regional relationships.

My work has greatly benefited from the studies of other scholars and from my own research. I am most grateful both for the former and to those bodies that have funded the latter, especially the British Academy. I would like to thank Stephen Baskerville, Ian Christie, Eveline Cruickshanks, Grayson Ditchfield, Richard Harding, Philip Woodfine and an anonymous reader for commenting on earlier versions and Linda Heitmann

Preface

and Janet Forster for wordprocessing three of them. This book is dedicated to Jonathan Riley-Smith, my Director of Studies at Cambridge, and to Reg Ward, Professor of Modern History in my early years at Durham.

Newcastle, June 1989

J.B.