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A Royal Affair

Stella Tillyard

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The Impact of Modernism

Aristocrats: Caroline, Emily, Louisa and Sarah Lennox 1740-
1832

Citizen Lord: Edward Fitzgerald 1763-1798

A ROYAL AFFAIR

George III and his
Troublesome Siblings

Stella Tillyard

Chatto & Windus

LONDON

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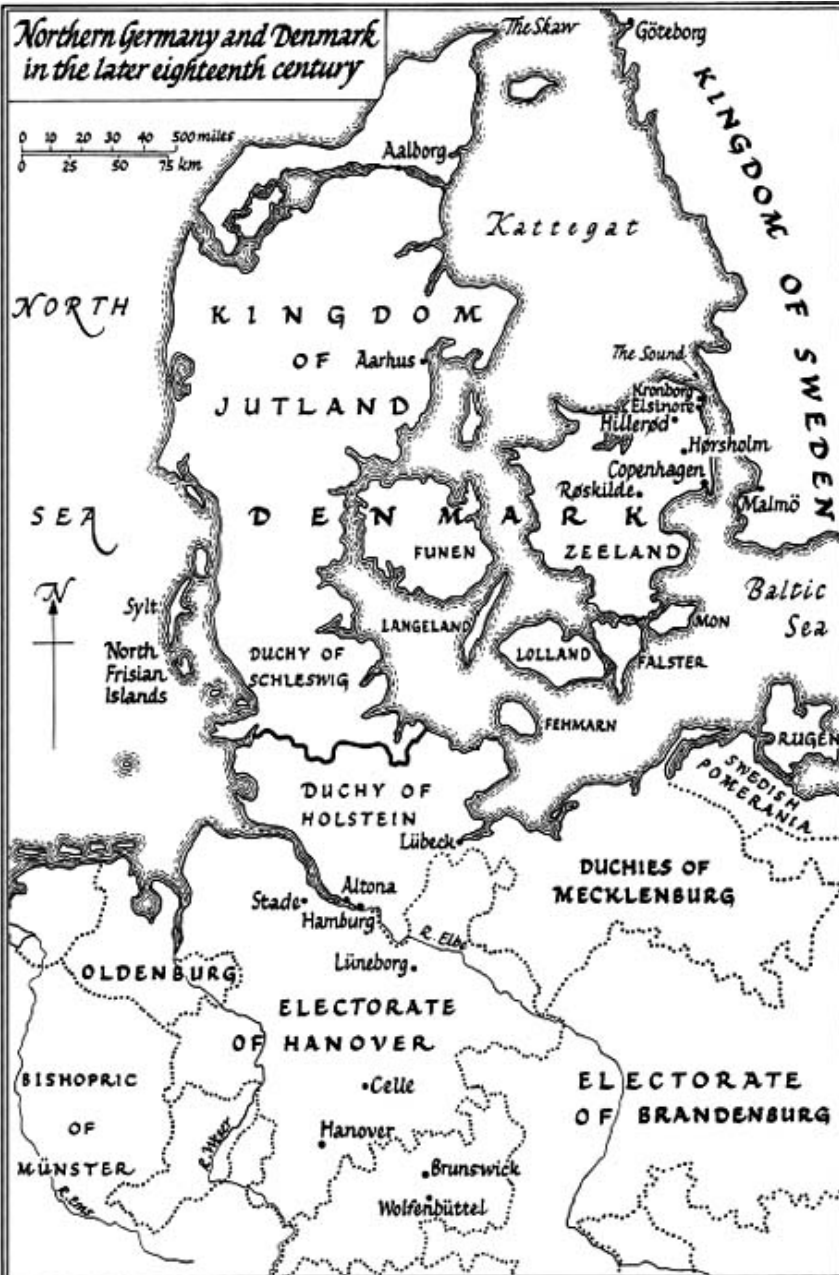
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Introduction

'I have no other hope, I repeat it again, but in your friendship for me, and am persuaded that with the principles you have you will never abandon so near a relation, and one who is so sincerely attached to you, as is your most affectionate sister, Caroline M.' Thus, at the end of 1774, in a desperate moment, wrote Caroline Mathilde, Queen of Denmark, to her brother George III of Great Britain. Her emotional appeal to George III as her brother and as head of her family was necessarily political as well as personal, and laid bare a complex dilemma at the heart of all constitutional monarchies. The King was both the head of a state and a private man, but nowhere was the dividing line explicitly drawn between his private life and his public one. What rights, for instance, did the monarch have by virtue of his public position to defend his private honour? To what extent, too, was the royal family not a private entity at all, but an extension of the state, living out defined roles within it? How far might Parliament's reach extend into the family now that it paid for its upkeep, and need there be any control of what the press could investigate, speculate upon and report?

All through the eighteenth century the exact relationships between the monarch's private life, his public duties and his particular powers or prerogatives were a matter for heated debate and continual testing both in and out of Parliament. In the first twenty years of the reign of George III these issues dominated public life because the King himself seemed, especially to newly confident journalists and the opposition in Parliament, to be trying to push the boundaries of his powers outwards as forcefully as they were trying to

squeeze them in. In the contest between the King, the press, Parliament and an eager audience of readers who had woken up to the scandal and entertainment in stories about the private lives of famous individuals, the King's brothers and sisters were swept up in the political drama and dragged into the public gaze. Putting their lives back into the story of the first twenty years of George III's reign allows us to understand and explain in a new way the King's reactions to the series of political upheavals that culminated in the traumatic loss of the American colonies at the end of the American War of Independence in 1783.

It was not often in Britain, after the establishment of the constitutional monarchy, that the private life and character of the monarch could influence public affairs. But in the long reign of George III it did, and when it did it was almost always because the King's notion of his duty as the head of his family extended into affairs of state which Parliament watched with a jealous eye. The Royal Marriage Act of 1772, whose consequences continue to bedevil Britain in the twenty-first century, was drafted under the King's personal supervision and pushed by his ministers through a reluctant Parliament when he had failed to control his errant brothers' behaviour. More importantly, George III thought of the American war as the rebellion of ungrateful children against their father, and it was undoubtedly prolonged by his desperate desire to preserve what he saw as his family entire and together.

Although they were public figures, George III's siblings were private individuals too, even if for those brought up in courts the boundaries between public and private were porous and one seeped constantly into the other. But George's brothers and sisters came to maturity at a time when domestic life was becoming fashionable and marriages arranged solely for dynastic reasons were becoming less commonplace

among the aristocracy in which they moved. Royal marriages, though, were still diplomatic and dynastic contracts, so George's siblings Edward, William and Henry, and Augusta and Caroline Mathilde were among the first European princes and princesses who demanded, and struggled to find, married lives in which affection and love could find a place.

George III's two sisters, Augusta and Caroline Mathilde, were parcelled off as consorts for Europe's Protestant rulers, and were almost bound to be unhappy. His brothers Edward, William and Henry, allowed to stay at home but with no public roles allotted to them, were destined for idle lives and loveless unions with the daughters of allied monarchs. None submitted quietly, and this book tells the stories of their attempts, for better or for worse, to forge their own lives, and of the public consequences of their behaviour. Despite the crevasse of understanding and time that separates us from them, love, anger, joy and betrayal can leap across those barriers raw and unchanged, and I have tried to recapture and retell them.

George III was always bitterly angry when his role as father figure to his siblings was flouted, which may explain why much of the written material that could touch upon such failures has not survived. Windsor Castle, where his archive is stored, is a very incomplete repository of his private life. Pruning began in his lifetime and may have continued after his death. Much material about his siblings is lost and much of what remains is stored in far-flung collections over which the King could have no control. Much, too, is written in French or in Danish and German whose Gothic scripts defy the most persistent of researchers. This was especially true in the case of George's youngest sister Caroline Mathilde, whose tumultuous and angry life forms the centre of this book. Years before she died almost everything

compromising about her had vanished from the archives, and only thirty-seven of her letters, together with some copied correspondence from spies, remain at Windsor.

George's brothers were poor letter writers and left no independent collections. Most of the material for their lives comes from the letters and diaries of those who knew them, and from the newspapers whose greedy editors gathered everything they could find about the royal family and published it with almost complete impunity. Almost everyone with access to the newspapers must have read or listened to Prince Henry's letters to his mistress when he was sued for 'criminal conversation' in 1770, and reports of the case and evidence from all sides were reported and reprinted everywhere. Prince Edward's activities are recorded in the memoirs of his friends, the gossip of associates and most of all in the letters and journals of the woman who believed herself to be his wife. Besides what remains in The Royal Archives at Windsor in letters between the King and his brothers, and the National Archives at Kew, where the reports of hapless diplomats who had to entertain the wandering princes are stored, collections in Scotland and in the United States hold caches of invaluable material.

So it was in foreign collections that I began my search; first stop Hannover in northern Germany. Hannover – or Hanover as it was known in the eighteenth century and as I have kept it throughout this book – was both the birthplace and the site of remembered tranquillity for the monarchs who came to Britain when the Act of Settlement came into force in 1714. George III never himself went further from British shores than the waves of Weymouth and the occasional admiral's cutter took him, but he and his brothers and sisters must have been told about Hanover by their father Prince Frederick who had grown up there. When, broken in spirit by conflict at home and abroad, George planned a dramatic abdication in 1783, it was to Hanover,

‘the original patrimony of my ancestors’, as he called it, that he planned to retire.

To the first British Hanoverian, George I, the Electorate was home, his new kingdom its polar opposite. Where, in his Electorate, there was order and regularity, in London there was murky chaos; where in Hanover everything appeared at least to run for his benefit, at St James’s Palace he was quickly made to feel that he was the instrument of a wider plan. ‘The first morning after my arrival at St James’s’, he said, ‘I looked out of my window and saw a park with walls and a canal which they told me was mine. The next day, Lord Chetwynd, manager of *my* park, sent me a fine brace of carp out of *my* canal, and I was told I must give five pounds to Lord Chetwynd’s servant for bringing me my own carp out of my own canal in my own park.’ Everything in Britain, from the crown to the palaces and the money in his pocket, seemed to be conditional. No wonder, then, that the Elector was determined that he would try to go home as often and for as long as he possibly could. He belonged to Britain, but Hanover, just as surely, belonged to him.

Hanover, in the eighteenth century, as now in its newer clothes as the *Lände* of Lower Saxony, was a low-lying, sober slice of land, sloping down northwards to the Baltic and the North Sea in green waves of heath and pasture and bulging up to the south in the ore-rich Hartz mountains. It was pressed in upon to the east by the muscular power of Prussia and nudged to the west by the softer neighbourliness of the small state of Munster. The Electorate was a place of large Lutheran churches and thickset half-timbered houses, tall in the towns, two- or three-storeyed in the villages, their fronts patterned by rows of cruciform windows and announcing their dates of construction and their owners’ names in bold black across white stucco under the eaves. Their occupants – farmers, brewers, tanners,

craftsmen, small-time officials – had a reputation in the region for loyalty, stolidity and stubborn reserve. Every village had its pastor and its schoolmaster and almost every man and woman could read and write. Many, one way or another, worked for the Elector.

The capital was also a company town. With an income in Hanover of £700,000 a year, Georg Ludwig was much richer as Elector than as King of Great Britain. He was also in the satisfactory position of being much the wealthiest man in his kingdom and of having most of his nobility working for him as court officials. They had, indeed, fine houses clustered round the Leineschloss in town, and wide timber-framed palladian villas dotted through the green meadows near the summer palace of Herrenhausen. But none had the means to rival the Elector. And if the officials in the four executive councils that ran the state took much of the executive burden and some of the power away from him, Georg Ludwig retained and enjoyed the pomp and the trappings. He had his own standing army, twenty thousand strong, shouldering muskets made from local Herzberg iron; he had his estates, forests and hunting lodges, music, ceremony and women. Although Hanover had an executive that functioned independently, a civil service with its own source of funds, patterns of promotion and rewards for excellence, the relationship between the Elector, his court servants and his people seemed simply and satisfyingly hierarchical.

It was above all at Herrenhausen, so much grander than the dark medieval spaces of St James's, that Georg Ludwig insisted that court life be maintained. Mindful of his own pleasures when he returned for summer visits, and convinced of the importance of maintaining for his subjects the illusion of his presence, he continued to pour money into the sumptuous house and especially into its great garden, where the ordinary people of Hanover took the air on

Sundays and saw their prosperity reflected, with their images, in its shallow lakes.

In sinuous vegetable calligraphy, in verdant sentences punctuated by statues and fountains, the Grosser Garten wrote for the Elector and many of his subjects a story of the world as he liked it to be. Dull flat land reclaimed from the water meadows behind the palace had been transformed by his mother and her gardeners into a great painted parade ground, its blocks of squares and oblongs intersected by paths, joined by water and bounded by a glassy drainage canal. Box and linden, expertly clipped at top and sides, lined each division, and led the eye and the visitor to the garden's focal point, the Great Fountain, where underground machinery threw a powerful cannonade of bubbling water thirty-five metres into the sky. Rising high above the palace and the trees, the white column, massive and solid-looking, challenged the empyrean and invited as much wonder as the most powerful ruler could wish. In its company and all around it in the garden subservient fountains played, rising and falling in synchronised and obedient symmetry.

Order, precision and contained caprice: that was how the Elector liked it and how his son George II liked it too on his frequent long visits home. Each Hanoverian monarch took something out of Hanover along with a sense of identity, place and connectedness to the great web of northern Protestant royal families that stretched along the North Sea and right round the Baltic to the edge of Russia. George I took civil servants; George II took his mistresses and musicians. Prince Frederick took the money of Hanover's richest citizens to supplement his inadequate annual allowance, and George III took troops and the services of the Hanoverian Minister in London when he conducted negotiations he wanted to hide from Parliament. All but the last grew up there and left in its archive exhaustive records of their life in its court.

Determined to miss nothing important about George III's parents Prince Frederick and Princess Augusta of Saxe-Gotha, who came from the neighbouring duchy of Weimar to the south, my researcher and I had trawled carefully through the archive's catalogue and ordered everything we thought might be relevant. At Windsor, the documents about George III's parents fill a few slender files; in Hanover we found something different. The first morning there, coming into the cool from the blanket-like heat of August on the north German plain, we were conducted into the reading room by a pained and solemn archivist. There in one corner, was our request, looking like the crowded hinterland of a container port. Metal boxes stood one on top of the other in a great wall, too many to be tackled, too high to be reached. Across the faces of other researchers, as we passed, flitted expressions that mixed polite astonishment with just a hint of disdain.

The Hanoverian archive is beautiful in its thoroughness, in its sense of life ordered and contained, filed and written down. Every court employee in Hanover had his employment logged, salary recorded, pension paid and tabulated, his life made out for posterity in letters and numbers. No detail of royal life was too small to order, document and file. Every time George II travelled through his Electorate, uniformed and tasselled trumpeters stood tall on the verges, cleared the roads and sped him on his way. In the archives, in hundreds of single sheets, are their instructions for each journey, telling them where to station themselves and when to expect the Elector. When his son Prince Frederick was inoculated for smallpox in 1724, his English doctor wrote a daily report on his condition, recording the Prince's mood and temperature and the number of his spots. Every one is there, filed, boxed, awaiting its historian. Later, when Frederick's father was searching for a bride for him, his envoy von Schrader sent detailed descriptions of every princess he secretly observed

back to the ministers in Hanover: the Princesses of Wolfenbüttel were still children and besides had 'poorly shaped legs'; the Princesses of Plessen had no education; the Princess of Saxe-Gotha, who would eventually be chosen, had uneven teeth and a poor complexion, but she seemed fertile, had had her first period at eleven, and looked 'like the women who deliver robust children'. Mastering the complexities of the German Gothic script in record time, my partner in crime, Holger Hooch, indefatigably tackled the mountain of boxes, doggedly transcribing and translating day after day, while I worked at the documents in English and in French.

Travelling north from Hanover up through Schleswig Holstein and into Denmark, inclines fall away and the air and atmosphere become maritime. Despite the huge continental landmass to the south of Denmark, water is the nation's element and the wind, salty from the west, chilly from the east, chases all its citizens through its fields and streets. But when George III's sister Caroline Mathilde became its queen, Denmark was still a nation tied to its German neighbours. Court life and court business were conducted in German, and sometimes French, but both were often written up in Danish; monarchs and diplomats corresponded and negotiated in French. The last, again, I had reason to be grateful for; my Danish, learned week by week over eighteen months, was never going to be equal to the task of reading the Danish of three centuries ago. Two researchers, Niklas Jensen and Dan Andersen, helped me to negotiate the mass of Danish documents about Caroline Mathilde, and this book could not have been written without them.

Breaking up the niceties of eighteenth-century diplomatic French and the task of ploughing slowly through modern secondary literature about Caroline Mathilde's extraordinary life, I used my visits to Denmark to follow in her footsteps. I

walked the streets of Copenhagen, as she had famously done, travelled north to where her summer palace stood, tracked inland to Roskilde where the Danish kings are buried, to Frederiksborg where the royal portraits hang, and looked as she did from the fortress of Kronborg across to the tree-fringed shores of Sweden across the sound. Although some modern historians argue that Denmark's history is one of slow and gradual reform, its castles and its countryside tell another story. Denmark was an absolute monarchy in Caroline Mathilde's time. Its great royal fortresses, rising above the flat landscape like ocean-going liners, with sparkling lead-framed windows and spire-topped, cloud-piercing turrets, were absolutism's embodiment; splendid, dominant and untrammelled, paid for by peasant labour and by the sea. Caroline Mathilde was both absolutism's beneficiary and its creature. She took advantage of the King's authority and his madness to forge a new way of life, but in the end fell victim to the same absolute power that had allowed her such freedom. It was from the castles she lived in and the streets she walked, as much as the archive where her voice is preserved, that I was able to tell the story of her life.

When I began this book I meant to make George III not so much a central character, as the string onto which I would thread the beads of his siblings' stories, making a necklace held together by the life of the King himself. But all work changes as it takes shape, and as I went on I realised that if George had necessarily a profound influence on his brothers and sisters, their lives made a huge impact on his. That impact was not just personal, it was political as well and it was also part of my story. So George III became one of the book's subjects in his own right. He will be seen, I hope, in a new light, not just as sovereign, or the father of many children, or the king who lost America, but as one of many

siblings himself, a profoundly emotional man whose personal and political lives were never as separate as the framers of the constitutional monarchy had hoped.

Biography tends to be a vertical genre, going from parents to children, explaining its subjects by virtue of their childhoods and their relationships with their mothers and fathers. It rarely dwells for very long on brothers and sisters and the importance they can have in one another's lives. Perhaps because I am from a large family myself, my work has tended to go the other way, to be horizontal, seeking in the tangled web of brotherly and sisterly relations other clues to what makes us who we are.

Fritz ist Dode

Death came suddenly for Prince Frederick, ambushing him as he recovered from a temporary sickness, grabbing him by the throat, squeezing his life away. '*Je sens la mort*', he cried out in his third language and with accurate finality. Convulsed with spasms the Prince of Wales wrestled with the spectre, wordlessly and in vain, watched by his helpless wife and doctors. In minutes he was gone, a man who a little while before had been sitting up in bed listening to his dancing master Dunoyer play tunes on the fiddle, cheerfully demanding to see his friends. With him went the future and the hopes of his wife Augusta, the safety and bustle of a happy family home, and the childhood of his eldest son and heir. It was 21 March 1751, a little after nine o'clock on a black sharp evening in London, silent round the bed.

Eventually, someone whispered that the King must be told. Lord North, a courtier who had been idling away the evening in another part of the house, was summoned by the Princess of Wales and dispatched to St James's. Walking as fast as his dignity and fifty-year-old legs would allow him, North crossed the courtyard of Leicester House into the open space of the square in front, where the new, brightly gilded equestrian statue of Frederick's grandfather, George I, winked in the smoky darkness. Along by the royal mews at the bottom of Haymarket, acid fumes from scores of horses floated on the air. Lord North wove his way through servants out for the evening and chairmen carrying the rich home

above the litter and dirt of the street. At the palace he found George II downstairs in the rooms of his mistress Lady Yarmouth, playing cards after supper as he liked to do every day.

Accounts had it that when Lord North delivered his message, the King showed no trace of emotion or shock. 'Why, they told me he was better,' he said, and put down his cards. Walking across to Lady Yarmouth he leaned over her chair and whispered loudly, '*Fritz ist dode*', before leaving the room and breaking up the company. A few months later he declared without remorse or shame, 'This has been a fatal year to my family. I lost my eldest son, but was glad of it.' Thereafter he seldom mentioned Frederick's name.

At Leicester House, in the morning, surgeons began cutting up the Prince's body, looking into his organs for a way of explaining their failure to predict his death. The Prince's friend and creditor, George Bubb Dodington, upset at the cavalier way the doctors were flinging royal body-parts about, ordered that his discarded bowels 'be put in a box covered with red velvet and carried in one of his coaches, by such attendants as his Groom of the Stole should appoint, and buried in Henry VII's chapel in Westminster Abbey'. Soon afterwards, the rest of Frederick's corpse, emptied out, embalmed and redressed, was taken to a black-draped room in the House of Lords. His friends and relatives filed past in the muffled half-darkness and later the Prince's servants kept a vigil, standing by the waxy grey face from which all life had gone. On the morning of 13 April, the coffin was closed for its journey to Westminster Abbey. Four peers held a black pall taut over the top of the coffin and Frederick's servants walked behind it, called and following according to rank.

It was a muted procession and a short way to go. With the deep tenor of the abbey bell sounding its mournful toll over the bustle of the river and the streets, the coffin bearers left

the House of Lords, crossed Palace Yard and filed between lines of stiff and silent soldiers to the grey sheer bulk of the abbey. Instead of using the main west door and processing down the long, monument-cluttered nave, they went discreetly through the abbey's side entrance into the south-east transept. Passing the tightly crowded area where the nation commemorated its writers and musicians, the party 'turned short into Henry VII's chapel', as Dodington put it. The funeral service was perfunctory and bald, 'performed without either anthem or organ', he wrote, and added in dejection, 'so ended the sad day'.

Frederick's coffin was added to the rest of his remains in the vault under the veiny white and black marble chequered floor, in cold proximity to his mother, Queen Caroline, who had been there nearly fourteen years. In decades to come the melancholy catalogue would lengthen and a warring family would be brought together again. Silent and unable to quarrel, they would crumble to dust while the busy air worked holes in their coffins. King George II and Queen Caroline, Frederick and his wife Augusta, his brother William and sisters Amelia and Caroline, his daughters Elizabeth and Louisa and his sons Edward and Frederick: they lie forgotten, their lives squeezed into inscriptions on the slabs above them, walked over by back-packed wanderers unaware of the hatreds and the loves boxed up beneath.

When Prince Frederick's eldest son Prince George was told that his father had died, he said nothing, though an observer noticed that he swayed and 'nearly fainted'. Then, with the odd, dislocated emotion he would always show in public until he went mad thirty-eight years later, he put his hand on his heart and said, 'I feel here as I did when I saw the workman fall from the scaffold at Kew.' Shock rather than grief was what the new heir to the throne expressed. Afterwards he did his best to hide his feelings, though in the

months to come he was lethargic, as if grief was working its way through him slowly, tiring him out.

Until that March morning in 1751, Frederick's children had had happy childhoods, brought up in the country at Kew and in London at Leicester House, well away from the suffocating gloom of St James's and undisturbed by the quarrels which blighted both generations of Hanoverians that had come before them. Prince George and his seven siblings were British, nourished on Anglicanism and the sweet new mythology of Britannia. But their father and mother were German and all their four grandparents were German too. English may have been spoken at Leicester House but George II preferred his native tongue and his grandchildren were all good German speakers whose roots, snaking beneath British topsoil, were sunk deep into the bedrock that ran right under the North Sea to their ancestral land of Hanover. British-born, German-bred, Frederick's children never lost a sense of their connectedness to northern Europe and to its constellation of Protestant rulers. Joined by geography, custom, religion and the history of their own family to the Continent, their own lives were shaped by it invisibly, irrevocably and in ways that Britons sometimes never saw and often preferred to forget.

Prince Frederick, just to begin with, was not Frederick until he was twenty-one. Until then he was Friedrich Louis, born in Hanover in 1707, grandson of its Elector, Kurfürst Georg Ludwig, son of the Elector's heir Prince Georg and his wife Wilhelmine Caroline. Friedrich's contented nursery happiness with his sisters at the Leineschloss in Hanover and especially at Herrenhausen outside the town, was shattered when, in 1714, the Elector Georg became George I of Great Britain. First the Elector grumpily left for his new country. Then in October, the new Prince and Princess of Wales followed, carting their possessions across the North