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Front cover Detail from Herman Moll, 'A New & Exact MAP of the Coast, Countries and Islands within the LIMITS of y<sup>e</sup> South Sea Company...'. 1715. Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/gm71005443>

# GEORGE WILLDEY (1676–1737)

*Patriot, traitor . . . or businessman?*

**Peter Barber**

Hindsight, they say, is a fine thing. And never was it truer than in the case of Jacobitism, the movement to restore the male line of the Stuarts to the British throne after the flight to France of James II in 1688. Irretrievably lost in the romance and nostalgia of Flora McDonald and ‘Bonnie Prince Charlie’, it is often forgotten that at times it represented a real threat to the established, Hanoverian government of Great Britain.

Never was this truer than in the years 1720–21. George I and his Whig government were reeling from the consequences of the South Sea Crash.<sup>1</sup> This took its name from the South Sea Company, a joint-stock company, created to control and reduce Britain’s national debt and increase the country’s trade and profits in the Americas. People had speculated recklessly and many had lost fortunes when the ‘Bubble’ burst in the autumn of 1720. There were dark rumours – that have since proved to have substance – that the King and his mistress, the Duchess of Kendall had themselves been bribed with shares by the directors of the South Sea Company and had benefitted as the shares rose in value. And then, at the height of the crisis at the turn of January and February 1721, George I’s principal minister, James Stanhope (1673–1721), and his deputy, Secretary of State James Craggs (1686–1721), had died within days of each other. Sir Robert Walpole (1676–1745) became first minister, promising to clear the Augean stables and to restore the nation’s finances – but many people correctly suspected that he had been as deeply involved in the speculation as the King and the ministers of the previous ministry. To make matters still worse, the other great European power, France, had also been badly hit by a similar financial disaster, the Mississippi Crash, just months earlier, in 1719–20 and was now in a seriously weakened state. Its government, led by the Duke of Orleans, the Regent for the young Louis

XV, and his minister, Cardinal Dubois, were fully occupied in fending off threats to their positions from supporters of Louis XV’s uncle, Philip V of Spain, a grandson of Louis XIV and former duc d’Anjou.

There seemed to be a real possibility that, profiting from the weakness of France and of the Hanoverian government in London, Spain might lead an invasion of England to replace George I with James Francis Edward Stuart (1688–1766), the son of deposed James II. Though James’s three previous attempts to regain the throne that he felt was rightfully his, in 1708 again in 1715, and in 1719 (with Spanish support), had ended in disaster, there were many who thought his



Fig. 1 Otto Hamerani’s, James III Appeal medal inscribed Quid. Gravivs.Capta, 1721. View of London from the Thames toward New St Paul.



Fig 2 George Willdey, 1715. 96 x 66 cm. The fulsome cartouche below the portrait of the king reads: 'To His Sacred and most Excellent Majesty George By the Grace of God King of Great Britain, France & Ireland &c. This map of Great Britain and Ireland Corrected from the Newest & most Exact Observations is most Humbly Dedicated By your Majesty's Loyal and most Obedient Subject and Servant George Willdey' 1715. Courtesy of the David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.

time had come. He was regarded by many as being more 'British' than the German George I – Georg Ludwig, duke and elector of Brunswick-Lüneburg [generally known as Hanover]. Despite being Catholic James had support from many traditionally minded and influential Anglican noblemen and clergy like the capable Francis Atterbury, Dean of Westminster and Bishop of Rochester. Even Britain's longstanding allies, such as the ministers of the Holy Roman German Emperor Charles VI, in Vienna, were doubtful of George I's chances of survival, and contemplated joining Spain to overthrow the Hanoverian regime.

It was with this background that in the course of 1721 James and his advisers in Rome decided to issue a medal capitalising on the situation (Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup>

It would raise his profile, encourage his supporters and incite recruits to join him. The medal was the work of the papal medallist, Otto Hamerani (1694–1768). On one side there was a view of London seen from the South Bank, with Wren's recently completed St Pauls dominating the scene. It was the foreground however that attracted attention. It shows Britannia weeping as the horse of Hanover tramples the English lion and the Scottish unicorn while to the right three figures run off with sacks of booty. They have been interpreted as German members of the King's household perhaps including George I himself. The inscription reads 'Qvid.Gravivs.Capta' ['What is worse than being in captivity?']. It is dated 1721. The other side has a portrait of James with the inscription 'Unica Salvs' ['The Only Salvation'].

The Jacobite medal was issued in considerable numbers in copper and in silver. It was readily available and the image would have been surreptitiously circulated in print throughout Europe. But how was a British shopkeeper to advertise the fact that he had such a seditious item for sale? And it is here that we get to the map publisher, and 'toy shop' owner, George Willdey (1676? – 1737).<sup>3</sup>

Willdey is well known for making no secret of his commercial instincts. Several of the maps he published

contain illustrations advertising some of the wares available in his shop 'at the Corner House Ludgate Street next St Pauls'. On the strength of a map of Great Britain that he published in 1715, it has also been assumed that he was a loyal supporter of the Hanoverian regime (Fig. 2). The map includes a roundel containing a portrait of George I, who had ascended the British throne less than a year previously, and below it, adjacent to Scotland, a depiction of Hercules slaying the multi-headed Hydra. This is generally and correctly taken as an allegory of the defeat of the Jacobite uprising of that year. The message is reinforced by a verse on the right, under a depiction of a battle ship (Fig. 3).



Fig 3 George Willdey, detail from 'Map of Great Britain and Ireland', 1715.

*Hail GEORGE ! the Bulwark of thy Realm Survey,  
Both Land & Sea thy Sovereign Power Obey!  
What Rival dares dispute thy Lawful Claim?  
Since they give Strength to Thee and Thou to them!*

In the course of 1721, however, Willdey published a less well-known circular map of the country thirty miles around London (Fig. 4 overleaf).<sup>4</sup>

The map itself is a close copy of one created by his former partner, Charles Price (1679? – 1733), in 1712 but the decorative elements are Willdey's.<sup>5</sup> There are