Preface

Nearly a half century has elapsed since Sir Lewis Namier first issued a call for the biographical study of "ordinary men": "We have written about Parliamentary leaders and great administrators, and more or less ignored those whom they led and with or through whom they had to do their work, the individual members of Parliament, the Civil Servants, etc."[1] Certainly in his own lifetime Namier—through his meticulous structural studies of Parliament, his initiation of the mammoth *History of Parliament*, and his countless essays—made a prodigious contribution to redressing the scholarly balance in favor of those figures of the second and lower ranks who individually and collectively played crucial roles in the politics of eighteenth-century Britain. Scores of historians, including Namier's disciples, have taken up the challenge and have extended the study of "ordinary men" into many other historical eras and areas of investigation. Still, only a few years ago, a historian of the first British Empire (the subject which had originally engaged Namier's historical interest) could complain that too often studies of imperial administration were concerned essentially with institutions and economic theories "without investigating the undercurrents of personalities and politics which operated to produce a particular program" or attempting "to establish the origins of measures for the colonies in terms of the concrete experiences of the men who participated in policy decisions."[2]

One can hardly maintain that William Knox has escaped historical notice. He was not only a significant participant in the most important events of late-eighteenth-century British political and imperial history, but he was also a prolific and candid commentator, who has enjoyed the distinct historical advantage of having most of his commentaries survive in a variety of published forms readily available to modern researchers. Indeed, it sometimes seems (to this author, at least) almost impossible to pick up a work on the so-

called Age of the American Revolution without finding some acknowledgment of Knox as a primary source of evidence and even some treatment and analysis of this or that aspect of his personal role in one contemporaneous event or another.

These partial reproductions of Knox's life, career, and thought, however, have produced and perpetuated a composite portrait which remains at best incomplete, inconsistent, and even contradictory. Although Namier singled out Knox as a worthy subject "for a study of the eighteenth-century Civil Service," a recent student of subministers during the period of the American Revolution has specifically excluded Knox from classification as a civil servant and has categorized him instead as a minor politician.[3] Or again, while several scholars have expressed the highest regard for Knox as an imperial theorist and publicist, others have denounced his colonial thought as wrongheaded and even unworthy of contemporary imperial issues.[4] Indeed, several decades ago Knox's imperialism so aroused the righteous wrath of a respected scholar and unstinting admirer of the modern British Commonwealth that he described one of Knox's pamphlets as "desperate wickedness" and loaded this undersecretary in the American Department with an inordinate burden of responsibility for the American Revolution: "But in the end the ministry had to resort to Catherine the Great of Russia and Hessian troops to implement the programme of William Knox."[5]

The essential purpose of this biography, then, is to provide a comprehensive narrative and an integrated interpretation of the whole person who was William Knox—the interactions of his being and becoming, his thought and his behavior. The biographical approach, of course, has its limitations as well as its advantages: what the scholar gains by concentration in depth must be balanced against the loss inherent in precluding the widest scope. Every effort has been made not only to trace the evolution of Knox's life and thought within the proper historical context but also to incorporate to advantage the critical omniscience of scholarly hindsight; nevertheless, the scope and perspective of this biographical study have been consciously focused and projected from the point of view of the subject.[6] Whether Knox's perceptions, attitudes, and behavior were indeed typical or even representative of his contemporaries is a question which can be answered definitively only in appropriate general histories. But hopefully a better understanding of William Knox, as both historical actor and witness, will contribute substantially to

the comprehensiveness and cogency of the history of eighteenth-century Britain and of the revolution which sundered the first British Empire.

In the course of my research and writing I have benefited from the assistance and encouragement of so many scholars and friends that I regret I cannot acknowledge them all individually. My foremost debt is to the late Professor J. Harry Bennett, Jr., of the University of Texas. He first interested me in the subject of this biography; he guided the early stages of my research; and shortly before his untimely death, he read the drafts of several chapters, providing invaluable scholarly criticism. I can only flatter myself in the belief that he would have approved the final product. Professor Stanford E. Lehmberg of the University of Minnesota sustained my work during a trying period with generous encouragement and scholarly counsel. Professors John A. Schutz of the University of Southern California and Peter Stansky and John C. Miller of Stanford University graciously took time from their own work to read and comment upon the entire manuscript. The knowledgeable suggestions and painstaking attention to detail of these scholars permeates the whole of my work. To them I am indebted beyond return for the merits of this study; I alone, of course, am responsible for its defects.

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L.J.B.