As the light began to fade on 2 January 1777, a group of red-coated figures gathered in discussion on a small hill overlooking the village of Trenton, New Jersey. The urgency of their deliberations was emphasised by the rumbling sound of nearby musketry and cannon fire. Closer inspection revealed their uniforms to be those of senior British officers, richly enhanced with gold facings and epaulettes. At their centre was the thirty-eight-year-old Charles, Earl Cornwallis, a major-general in the army that King George III had sent to quell Britain’s rebellious thirteen colonies. Listening to him, hunched for protection against the icy cold, were three other senior officers: Major-General James Grant, Colonel Sir William Erskine, and Colonel Alexander Leslie. Trenton was not where any of them had expected to be so early in the New Year. Only ten days before, the rebellion had seemingly collapsed, allowing Cornwallis to board ship for an eagerly anticipated reunion with his beloved wife and children in England. Then, news arrived that the rebel commander, George Washington, had for a second time crossed the Delaware River into New Jersey, threatening the recent resurgence of Loyalist support. The response of Sir William Howe, the British commander-in-chief, was immediate. Cornwallis was to gather the cream of his army and administer a final crushing blow. After marching from Princeton, the British commander arrived at Trenton to find the rebel army cowering behind Assunpink Creek and seemingly trapped. However, three initial attempts to force the rebel position had failed. The question now posed by Cornwallis to his companions was whether to press home the attack or to wait until morning. Erskine proposed an immediate assault, fearing the enemy might otherwise escape during the night. Grant
and Leslie advised caution, preferring to wait until daylight, when the troops were refreshed and the task facing them clearer. To Cornwallis such advice seemed eminently sensible. Night attacks were always problematic. Why rush ahead when a few hours would bring success? Looking at his aristocratic companions, he summed up the position with a metaphor that he knew they would appreciate. ‘We’ve got the Old Fox safe now. Let’s go over and bag him in the morning.’

Within hours Cornwallis knew that Erskine had been right: the fox had escaped. But he could never have imagined that four and a half years later the roles would be reversed, with Washington the hunter and he, Cornwallis, the fox, cornered this time without escape. The surrender at Yorktown inevitably spelt disaster for the British prosecutors of the war, whether generals, admirals, ministers, or even George III, who momentarily considered abdication. Remarkably, Cornwallis was not among them. Instead, he emerged to play a leading role in British public life, first as a reforming governor-general of Bengal; then as master-general of the Ordnance responsible for war production during the French revolutionary conflict; next as lord lieutenant of Ireland entrusted with ending the 1798 rebellion and passing the Act of Union; and lastly as minister plenipotentiary for concluding peace with Napoleonic France.

Despite these important roles there has been only one biography of Cornwallis, and that was more than forty years ago. The diversity of his life perhaps explains the relative lack of biographical attention, except for his involvement in the War of American Independence. The biographer of Cornwallis, therefore, must master the details of a career spent in widely differing roles on three separate continents.

Seventy years ago, the title of this book might have been Cornwallis: Pro-Consul of the British Empire, since this best describes the role he was called to fulfil, first in America, then in India, and later in Ireland. In America he attempted to save the first British Empire; in India he endeavoured to reform Britain’s burgeoning second empire; and in Ireland he sought to preserve the centre of that empire from the scourge of Jacobin France. Until the 1960s it was seemingly a story of national pride. Since then, the word ‘empire’ has become a pejorative term, suggestive of
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racism, colonialism, and the denial of human rights. Nevertheless, even dead white
men have a claim to be understood, not least because the heroes and noble causes of
today will surely become the misguided zealots or disregarded ideologies of
tomorrow. Cornwallis’s career, in any case, was not one of unalloyed imperialism.
Although he began life as the dutiful soldier, he developed into a leader who was
habitually progressive in his views. Above all, he was imbued with a deep sense of
humanity for those less favoured than himself, no matter what their race, religion, or
circumstance.

Constraints of space have necessarily imposed limitations in the scope of this
book. I have, accordingly, restricted details about the wider Cornwallis family and
matters regarding his lands and estates. The focus is essentially on Cornwallis’s
public career, though even here certain topics have had to be curtailed or omitted.
This is especially true of his time in India.

Although Cornwallis has lacked biographers, much of his public life was
recorded in the three densely filled volumes of published papers, edited by Charles
Ross, the son of Cornwallis’s former aide and long-time friend, General Alexander
Ross. Ross not only scoured the Cornwallis family correspondence, but also
numerous public and private archives to give a fuller picture of his father’s friend
and mentor. Since Ross transcribed his documents with meticulous accuracy, I have
cited these rather than the archival source. But all citations include the type
of document used, the name of the writer, recipient, and date of composition. As
the original manuscript sources often have conflicting page and folio references, I
have only cited these where a source is not arranged chronologically. I have also
modernised the spelling and punctuation of quoted material where necessary for
readability.

Inevitably, I have incurred many obligations to scholars, both personally and
through their books. I should especially like to thank Peter Marshall for supporting
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me access to the foundation’s considerable data resources at a critical point in my

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research. Working as an independent scholar, after retirement from the fray of academic life, can be an isolating experience. The fellowship gave me a chance to meet other scholars working in contiguous fields to my own.

Grateful acknowledgement is also due to the peer reviewers of this book in manuscript form, both for recommending publication and for their pertinent comments. The text has additionally benefited from the assistance of several non-specialist readers of the manuscript, notably Henderson Downing, Bill Cook, and Basile Poulopoulos, who gave me valuable advice regarding readability and presentation. I am additionally indebted to Dr Hilary Flett for advice about Cornwallis’s medical condition.

Regarding illustrative materials, I must thank Chris Bryant for locating various portraits of Cornwallis. These included a previously unidentified miniature by the American artist Matthew Pratt. He was additionally helpful in explaining the details of eighteenth-century British military uniforms. My thanks too go to Ian Cranston for alerting me to some little-known Cornwallis family portraits at Audley End, and Bob Swayne for advice on maps.

This project additionally benefited from the helpful endeavours of numerous librarians and archivists, who obtained documents for me and suggested other sources where I might find relevant materials. Chief among these were the staff of the William L. Clements Library, the Bodleian Library, the British Library, the Kent Record Office, the National Archives at Kew, the National Army Museum, the National Library of Scotland, the Scottish Record Office, and the National Library of Ireland.

Finally, I should like to thank Yale University Press, especially Heather McCallum for accepting the project, and Marika Lysandrou for acting as principal editor. I also wish to acknowledge the important contribution of the copyeditor Jacob Blandy in preparing the text. All other errors of omission or commission are mine alone.

Richard Middleton, October 2020