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The Younger Pitt. III. The Consuming Struggle

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By any standards. Ehrman's Pitt is a major achievement. The third volume, covering the years 1797 until Pitt's death in 1806, is no exhausted sequel, no plodding postscript. Pitt died in office, commanding and interesting until the end. Ehrman conclude s in full command of his biographical skills: searching in analysis, judicious in judgement and apposite in style. In finishing in such a masterly fashion, Ehrman obviously invites comparison with other great political biographers, past and present. His t ask was both less and more complex than those of others. There were fewer years to cover: Pitt died aged 46 and his personal life, although opaque, is not centre-stage. On the other hand, his long period at the helm of state ensures that Ehrman's biograph y is very much a study of an era. As with the previous volumes, especially volume 2, there are sections where Pitt is somewhat lost from view, but this is always reasonable. It is impossible to judge his policies unless the problems facing him are fully e xplained. Ehrman's deft and scholarly handling of the background is one of many reasons why his biography is superior to that to which it was generally compared when only two volumes were complete: Plumb's Pitt. Ehrman misses Plumb's lightness of tone, bu t his altogether more serious and searching work offers much more to the reader who wants to know about the minister and his times. As an account of a rise to power, Plumb's first volume was interesting: he grasped and enjoyed the vitality of his subject. But once in power, Plumb's treatment of Walpole was less

satisfactory.

For an account of a great minister in office, it is necessary to turn to Ehrman. He does not ignore the private life; indeed is eloquent, accurately so, on the role of friendship in Pitt's life. Nevertheless, this is a treatment of an individual dedica ted to the burdens of office. Pitt told Hester Stanhope that he must remain unmarried 'for my King and country's sake', Ehrman commenting 'The words, addressed to marriage, might be taken in a comprehensive sense. For Pitt in essence was indeed single, af fectionate in private but fulfilled in public. He stood apart, untouched a priest stands untouched at the centre of his avocatiorls; a priest in this instance of politics and government' (p.97).

Unfortunately for Pitt, both proved very difficult. The period of this volume was one of crises and dashed hopes, a 'consuming struggle' in Ehrman's most apt phrase. These crises, domestic and international, form much of the substance of the book. 1797 was a year of crisis surmounted at home, but the French rejection of terms at the end of 1796 faced Pitt with the prospect that the war could be indefinitely prolonged! a situation that he made intense but unsuccessful efforts to avoid. The pressures on Pitt were intense as the second Coalition was constructed and then failed. Aside from the public strains, there were also serious disagreements within the ministry centring on strategy. Pitt did not lose command of the Commons but his control of the Minis try deteriorated and this played a major role in the political crisis that precipitated his resignation: The persistent indecision in the sphere of strategy through much of the year (l800), the failure to impinge on largely frustrating events, more intima tely the rising differences between Grenville and Dundas affected the tone of the Ministry as well as the spirits of the Minister himself'. (p.517).

When he resigned in 1801 Pitt was suffering from depression and gout. He appeared to have lost the will to go on, the desire to lead, the killer instinct that is so important in political leadership. An ability to manage or to conciliate was no substit ute in the circumstances of the early 1800s.

This slackened drive was possibly as important as any wish not to challenge or to be seen to challenge the King's prerogative in choosing ministers, in explaining why Pitt delayed his attack on his successor, Addington, until 1804. He was certainly pre ssed to mount such an attack by his political friends. The renewal of war with France the previous year had led to pressure for the return of Pitt and for a more broadly based government.

Once in office again, Pitt was obviously under great strain. His ability to lead was affected and his judgement can be questioned, as in his willingness to desert Melville and his subsequent refusal to advance Addington's supporters once Melville had f allen. Pitt's neglect to build up a true party can be related to his health and morale as much as to his political views.

When Pitt died the Ministry was in a weak state, facing an assertive albeit far from united, parliamentary opposition and with its foreign policy in ruins after Austerlitz. Pitt was scarcely to blame for Napoleon, and the domestic weaknesses of his min istry were not all his fault. He suffered from the weak nature of 'party' in the period. Furthermore, his resignation in l801 had splintered the Pittite 'party' for he was not replaced by an opposition party, the policies of which would maintain Pittite u nity, in other words a government in which the Foxite Whigs were prominent. In addition, as with other governments, the crucial, often intangible, pressures for cohesion had been lost. While success can lead politicians to temper their rivalries and can h elp in the postponement of problems, it is difficult to overcome the rivalries and they and related problems tend to revive when the general situation becomes more adverse, not least when a sense of confidence in clear leadership and purpose is lost. Ther e had been important rivalries within Pitt's ministry earlier, but they had been contained, whereas the political circumstances of the 1800s made them far more serious. The sense of success was gone, and the ministry no longer seemed to have much initiati ve, let alone to be in control of the political agenda.

Pitt's state on the eve of his death underlines a major problem with the political system in this (and other) ages: the difficulty of parting with a leader who was no longer capable of providing the necessary leadership and success. George III had no w ish to part with Pitt in 1805-6 and this played a part in ensuring that the

Pittites had no adequate alternative leader. The Pittite position collapsed with the Minister's death. This was not the consequence of any electoral defeat. Under the Septennial A ct, no election was due until 1809. Instead, divisions within those who served with, or had served with, Pitt were crucial.

It would be wrong to blame Pitt alone for the collapse of the Pittite system. The tasks faced by the Government were formidable and the succeeding 'Ministry of All the Talents' was also to fail and be short-lived. Indeed, in 1807 the Pittite system ret urned in the shape of a ministry led by the Duke of Portland and containing most of the leading Pittites, and the Whigs thereafter spent many years in opposition. They were unable to take advantage of the unpopularity and divisions of the Portland ministr y in 1809 and it was replaced by a government under Perceval that continued on a Pittite base. The creation and fall] of the 'Ministry of All the Talents' was a working through of the consequences of the weaknesses of the Pittite system. Nevertheless, the revival of the system suggested that the basic conservative principles, policies, and personnel that had characterized it were more successful and appropriate for the government of Britain in the 1800s than those of its rivals.

An 'Impaired Ministry ... in search of coalitions', domestic and foreign. Ehrman's characterisation of 'an Administration that was not at ease with itself' (p.717) reflects a deep understanding of the possibilities and problems of government at this ju ncture. He has produced a major work of scholarship. That it is a biography is more than incidental, but it does not detract from the scholarship. Instead, it gives it shape and further interest.

All works date; every book can be criticised. Indeed, Linda Colley, in a newspaper review, has attacked Ehrman for adopting an establishment viewpoint. Yet. this volume is a brilliant product of the intelligent mind. I can only hope it is read widely a nd paperbacked swiftly.

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