

Castlereagh: Enlightenment, War, and Tyranny

Review Number:

1191

Publish date:

Sunday, 1 January, 2012

Author:

John Bew

ISBN:

9780857381866

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£25.00

Pages:

582pp.

Publisher:

Quercus

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Philip Harling

Viscount Castlereagh's reputation had a very bad 19th century. Irish nationalists called him a turncoat and a tyrant for the role he played in suppressing the 1798 Rising as Chief Secretary at Dublin Castle. An indifferent public speaker in the heroic age of parliamentary oratory, the Whig opposition twitted him for his malapropisms. Just about everybody who didn't know him and many who did thought him a cold fish – arrogant, aloof, disdainfully aristocratic. Compared to his dazzling successor at the Foreign Office, George Canning, Castlereagh seemed a bit of a bore. One of the two indisputably fascinating things Castlereagh ever did was to shoot Canning in the thigh in a duel brought about as much by the former's oversized sense of honor as it was by the latter's oversized sense of entitlement in scheming to oust his rival from the cabinet. The other fascinating thing Castlereagh did was to kill himself with a pen-knife to his carotid artery. This final act won him no sympathy from his radical critics. But it did win him a crass couplet from Lord Byron:

Posterity will ne'er survey a nobler grave than this:

Here lie the bones of Castlereagh: Stop, traveler, and piss! (p. 548)

Even while Castlereagh was still very much alive, Shelley had memorialized him as Tory repression personified:

I met murder on the way –

He had a mask like Castlereagh –

Very smooth he looked, yet grim;

Seven bloodhounds followed him.

Victorian commentators were not quite as harsh. But still they habitually lumped Castlereagh together with Tory reactionaries like Eldon and Sidmouth, and scolded him for leaving it to Canning to ostentatiously distance Britain from the counterrevolutionary impulses of the crowned heads of Restoration Europe.

John Bew, in a very likeable book, provides his readers with a more likeable Castlereagh. Bew takes it upon himself to rescue his hero from the unfortunate reputation foisted on him by the Romantic poets and the Whig historians. His efforts are broadly successful. Far from being a mindless Tory, Bew argues, Castlereagh was a widely-read man whose mental cultivation was less than obvious because he was committed to the idea that a true gentleman must ever refrain from intellectual ostentation. Far from an anti-Enlightenment reactionary, Bew insists, Castlereagh was committed to the sort of balanced moderation one might expect from a man who was born into the Enlightenment vanguard of Dublin Presbyterianism. As Chief Secretary at Dublin Castle during the Rising, Castlereagh could appreciate better than most the destructiveness of sectarianism. Far from being an ultra-Anglican, Bew affirms, Castlereagh had a steadfast commitment to Catholic relief that stemmed from his belief that civic peace required a balanced approach to confessional politics. Bew pays valuable attention to Castlereagh's early Irish career, which recent scholarship has largely ignored and which, Bew contends, Irish republican scholarship caricatured a century ago. While he and his Lord Lieutenant, Cornwallis, took stern measures to suppress the Catholic rising, they also sought to check Protestant excesses. While, subsequently, Castlereagh played a pivotal role in consummating the Act of Union, he did so not as an enemy of Irish independence *per se* but as a sober realist who was convinced that Union provided the best means of protecting Ireland not simply against French invasion, but against further sectarian violence.

Bew retains his sympathy for Castlereagh as his hero moves from Dublin to Westminster. An ardent Pittite, Castlereagh emulated his master in laudable ways, according to Bew. He was committed to all-out war against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France alike. But he felt that the long-term security of Europe rested no less on preserving France's rightful place within the top echelon of nations than it did on checking France's broader territorial ambitions. As secretary for war in the early phase of the Peninsular campaign, he efficiently presided over one of the biggest build-ups in British military history, and as such was central to the Pittite war effort. As foreign secretary (1812–22), Bew contends, Castlereagh was by no means the extremist that his contemporary critics made him out to be. While by no means the outspoken friend of liberal constitutionalism that Canning later became, Castlereagh had no wish to see the wartime alliance with the big continental monarchies turn into a post-war counterrevolutionary crusade. He steered clear of the Holy Alliance not simply because he knew that opinion at home would never embrace legitimism in Europe, but because he truly believed that the Alliance was, in his words, "a piece of sublime mysticism and nonsense" (p. 581). While he thought it prudent to avoid too open a rupture with Alexander I of Russia and other royal interventionists, he paved the way for Canning's ostentatiously splendid isolationism by effectively breaking up the Congress of Verona (1823) through his opposition to French royalist action against the Spanish *Liberales*. Bew argues that Castlereagh's flexible, supremely sensible approach to European diplomacy was most prominently on display at the Congress of Vienna, where he played a pivotal role in securing the lasting peace that emerged from the forging of a balance of power that was predicated on the speedy return of France to the community of Great Powers.

Like perhaps too many biographies these days, this one is quite long. But casual readers shouldn't feel too daunted by its heft. Bew is a fluent stylist who knows how to convey the flavor of a time and place, and

paints a memorable portrait of a man about whom even professional scholars of late-Georgian Britain are apt to know strangely little. Bew makes it easy to share some (though perhaps not all) of his fondness for his subject. The later chapters that trace the fraught seven years between Castlereagh's triumph at Vienna and his suicide are especially compelling. He had the misfortune of serving a dual role as Britain's chief diplomat as well as the Liverpool ministry's leader in the House of Commons for a series of exceptionally fraught post-war years. The latter assignment thrust him into some profoundly unpopular roles – as the government's chief apologist for the excesses of the yeomanry at Peterloo, for instance, and as the man tasked with leading the investigation of Queen Caroline when George IV, himself a serial adulterer, was seeking to divorce her on grounds of adultery. A sensitive, proud, and reticent man, Castlereagh knew himself to be one of the most hated public figures in Britain. That knowledge added to the immense strain of office that undoubtedly played a major role in his suicide. (Whether the threat of scandal or blackmail also played a role we may never know, and Bew is disciplined enough not to hazard any guesses beyond the evidence).

One plausible quibble with Bew is that he's *too* sympathetic to his hero. Castlereagh might well have felt it his duty to bribe the Irish Parliament into extinction, to outspokenly justify the government's repressive measures of the late 1810s, and to pay £250,000 in Secret Service money to the spies and informers who dug up dirt on Caroline. But that he could carry out such unpleasant official tasks with something like enthusiasm makes it hard to like the man quite as much as Bew does. Another such quibble is that Bew protests too much, in the sense that Castlereagh's reputation, admittedly quite a bad one for much of the 19th century, has already been on the uptick for several decades. The conventional wisdom among diplomatic historians has long been to underscore what they see as the salutary continuities that link Castlereagh with Canning and Palmerston: British interests pragmatically first, avoidance of entangling alliances, a flexible commitment to a flexible balance of power. Bew offers little that's new in this regard. But what he does offer is a sensitive and memorable portrait of an aristocratic statesman who, like Trollope's Plantagenet Palliser, truly seemed to want little more than to be a 'serviceable slave to my country'.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

Other reviews:

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8881535/Castlereagh-From-Enlightenment-to-Tyranny-by-John-Bew.html> [2]

Standpoint

<http://standpointmag.co.uk/books-october-11-durable-diplomatist-andrew-roberts-castlereagh-enlightenment-war-and-tyranny-john-bew> [3]

Independent

<http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/review-biography-castlereagh-from-enlightenment-to-tyranny-by-john-bew-2913839.html> [4]

Today

http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9618000/9618482.stm [5]

Times Literary Supplement

<http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article837770.ece> [6]

M. M. Bennetts

<http://mmbennetts.wordpress.com/2012/01/11/viscount-castlereagh-sorley-maclean-and-the-january-glums/> [7]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1191>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7847>

[2] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8881535/Castlereagh-From-Enlightenment-to-Tyranny-by-John-Bew.html>

[3] <http://standpointmag.co.uk/books-october-11-durable-diplomatist-andrew-roberts-castlereagh->

enlightenment-war-and-tyranny-john-bew

[4] <http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/review-biography-castlereagh-from-enlightenment-to-tyranny-by-john-bew-2913839.html>

[5] http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9618000/9618482.stm

[6] <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article837770.ece>

[7] <http://mmbennetts.wordpress.com/2012/01/11/viscount-castlereagh-sorley-maclean-and-the-january-glums/>