

THE LIFE OF LORD CHATHAM

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649283910

The life of Lord Chatham by Arthur Sydney McDowall

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ARTHUR SYDNEY MCDOWALL

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LORD CHATHAM**

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ERRATUM.

Page 109, line 22, *for* "of heresy"
read "for heresy."

CHATHAM

CHAPTER I

EARLY LIFE

Pitt's birth and parentage—At Eton and Oxford—Holds a commission in the Blues—Enters Parliament—The position of parties—Pitt joins the Opposition Whigs—His early speeches—Deprived of his commission by Walpole—Pitt's intimacy with the Prince of Wales.

“MR. PITT,” says Lord Shelburne in his Autobiography, “was a younger brother of no great family, as I believe the founder of it was Governor Pitt, his grandfather, commonly known by the name of Diamond Pitt, on account of a vast large diamond which he obtained I know not how in the East Indies.”¹ The quotation is in the characteristic manner of the very human document from which it is taken, but justice to our subject demands its amplification here. It

¹ Fitzmaurice's *Shelburne*, i. 71.

was Governor Pitt, indeed, who conferred wealth, and with it a measure of celebrity, upon the family. But they traced their origin farther back into the past. The first authentic date for the foundation of their fortunes seems to be in the reign of Elizabeth, when a certain John Pitt, their progenitor, was Clerk of the Exchequer. His son settled at Blandford in 1662, and his grandson was rector of Blandford. The rector's son Thomas was the "Diamond" Pitt above referred to, who brought the family into prominence and gave them influence and means. His virile and masterful personality found scope in a varied career of commerce and administration in the Indies. Beginning as an "interloping" merchant, he became finally Governor of Madras; and in India he purchased the famous Pitt diamond, which he sold to the Regent Orleans in 1717, making probably over £100,000 by the transaction. At home he utilised his accumulated riches according to the spirit of the times. He bought among other property the borough of Old Sarum, and himself sat in Parliament as its representative. Robert, his eldest son, married Harriet, sister of the Irish Earl of Grandison, and their second son was William Pitt, the future Lord Chatham.

Pitt was born on November 15, 1708, in the parish of St. James's, Westminster. Little is known of his parents, and singularly few details

survive of his own boyhood and youth. Like Walpole before him and Charles James Fox after him, he went to Eton. George Lyttelton, with whom he formed a close friendship, Henry Fox, his political rival during the greater part of his career, and Fielding were among his schoolfellows. In after-years Pitt confided to Shelburne a retrospective view of Eton, which the latter embodied in one of those mordant sentences that make his portrait of Pitt, however palpably distorted, the most readable of all the engrossing passages in his fragment of autobiography. "Mr. William Pitt," Shelburne said, "was by all accounts a very singular character from the time he went to Eton, where he was distinguished, and must have had a very early turn of observation, by his telling me, that his reason for preferring private to publick education was, that he scarce observed a boy who was not cowed for life at Eton; that a publick school might suit a boy of a turbulent disposition, but would not do where there was any gentleness."¹ Whatever may have been the effect of eighteenth-century Eton upon others, it can scarcely be said to have cowed Pitt. But we may question whether his early training exercised much formative influence on a character that was soon strongly marked and exceptional. It may possibly have ac-

¹ Fitzmaurice's *Shelburne*, i. 72.

centuated, by repulsion rather than attraction, certain traits which were always noticeable in Pitt, but which in normal cases a public school education is supposed to modify or eradicate. An intense self-consciousness, a lofty and exasperating reserve, and an elaboration of manner unusual even in the eighteenth century, were characteristics that accompanied him throughout his life.

From Eton Pitt went in 1727 to Trinity College, Oxford, where by a curious irony of circumstance Lord North, who was to be the chief agent in carrying out that coercive American policy which Pitt spent his last years in denouncing, followed him some twenty years later. About Pitt's life at college the records are unfortunately silent; and for the Oxford period, as for that spent at Eton, we can in the main only fall back upon conjecture. The chief surviving trace of his industry is the Latin poem which he wrote in his second year on the occasion of the death of George the First. Lord Macaulay makes merry over it in the first of his two celebrated essays on Chatham; but, though conceived according to the spirit of the age in strains of extravagant eulogy, and containing one false quantity, which we may hope, with Macaulay, was the error of his printer or biographer rather than of himself, it is on the

whole not perhaps quite so worthless as the great historian would have us believe. But Pitt never attained to a true appreciation of the beauty of classical poetry. When he discusses matters of scholarship and taste he is invariably pedantic; and though his letters to his nephew, Lord Camelford, contain repeated exhortations to study Homer and Virgil, he fixes his attention almost exclusively upon their moral aspect, regarding them as essentially teachers of virtue. History, ethics, and politics were subjects more really congenial to him. When he was himself arranging for the education of his son William, he expressed a special desire that Thucydides should be the first Greek book read by the latter on going up to Cambridge. And long after his own studies were finished, in the late evening of his life, his thoughts went back at a great crisis to the Athenian who has been finely called "the historian of our common humanity, the teacher of abstract political wisdom," and in one of his American speeches he paid the first Congress at Philadelphia the splendid compliment of setting it side by side with the statesmen of antiquity whom Thucydides imperishably depicts.¹ At Oxford Pitt also imbibed the philosophy of Locke, and with it the principles of Whiggism. But his university career was never carried to

¹ *Vide* p. 188.