

**TWELVE ENGLISH  
STATESMEN.  
PEEL, PP. 8-246**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649668953

Twelve English Statesmen. Peel, pp. 8-246 by J. R. Thursfield

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Cover @ 2017

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**Twelve English Statesmen**

P E E L



P E E L (*Sci.*) *Walden*

BY

J. R. THURSFIELD

NEW YORK  
PUBLIC  
LIBRARY

London  
MACMILLAN AND CO.  
AND NEW YORK

1891

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neighbourhood of Blackburn. To the end of his life the second Sir Robert never entirely lost the somewhat uncouth Lancashire accent acquired in those early days. It may be that, entering public life in the days when most leading politicians were high born, and even Canning was branded as an adventurer, Peel owed much of his awkwardness and reserve to a consciousness of his lowly origin and his provincial accent.

Robert Peel, the member for Tamworth, was created a baronet by patent in 1800 on the recommendation of Mr. Pitt. He was a staunch Tory in politics and a warm admirer of Pitt. But his politics were a sentiment and perhaps a tradition rather than a body of reasoned opinions. He came of a stock which was naturally sober, steady, and conservative in temper. Like many others who have prospered greatly in business, he gave wholly to commercial pursuits the intelligence and clear-sightedness which might in other circumstances have enlarged his views on some of the broader issues of politics and finance. As early as 1780 he had published a pamphlet entitled "The National Debt productive of National Prosperity," and to the end of his life he never abandoned this delusion. He was an active opponent of the measure for the resumption of cash payments, introduced on the recommendation of his son in 1819. In a sense he was right, no doubt, in attributing the prosperity of his class to the measures of Pitt. "Rents had never been so high," says the historian to whom nearly every page of this biography is deeply indebted, "profits had never been so large, as during the continuance of the war. The manufacturing industries of the country had never previously ex-

perienced so marvellous a development. The hum of the workshop was heard in places which had previously only been disturbed by the whirr of the grouse; and new forces, undreamed of a century before, were employed to assist the progress of production. The trade of the United Kingdom acquired an importance which it had never previously enjoyed, and the manufacturing classes obtained an influence which they had never before known. The landowners were slowly losing the monopoly of power which they had enjoyed for centuries. Traders and manufacturers were daily obtaining fresh wealth and influence. A new England was supplanting the old country; and agriculture, the sole business of our forefathers, was gradually becoming of less importance than trade. . . . The predominance of the British at sea had driven every enemy from the ocean, and had enabled British merchants to ply their trade in comparative safety. The numerous possessions which the British had acquired in every part of the globe had provided them with customers in all parts of the world; and the most civilised, as well as the most savage, of nations were purchasing the produce of the looms of Manchester and of the factories of Birmingham. Even the taxation which the war had necessitated had stimulated the manufacturers to fresh exertions. The merchants were continually discovering fresh outlets for British trade; the manufacturers were constantly encouraged to increase their produce."<sup>1</sup>

All these advantages the first Sir Robert Peel, Tory as he was by temperament and training, attributed to the policy and genius of Pitt. As a merchant and

<sup>1</sup> Walpole, *History of England*, vol. i., p. 50.



manufacturer he profited by the enlargement of the Empire, as a landowner he did not lose by the depreciation of the currency. As often happens with practical men, he perceived the effect and profited by it, though he failed to trace it to its cause. The commercial development of England was due, not so much to the campaigns and alliances of Pitt, nor to the victories of Nelson, as to the peaceful inventions of Hargreaves, Arkwright, and Watt. As a man of business Sir Robert Peel was under no illusions on this point; he was keenly alive to the progress of invention, and he was among the first to perceive the change in industrial organisation it was destined to accomplish by the substitution of the factory system for the isolated labour of the homestead; to his infinite credit it must be recorded also that he was among the first to recognise that the factory system involved and required some legislative restriction on the labour of women and children. As a man of business he was one of Pitt's principal advisers on all questions relating to commerce and trade; as a politician he requited the confidence thus reposed in him by his unswerving support of the minister's measures and his enthusiastic admiration of his character and policy. But he was a man of business first, a politician by the accident of fortune, a Tory by nature, and a follower of Pitt above all.

When the eldest son of this enterprising and ambitious merchant was born to him in 1788, five years after his marriage, he is said to have fallen on his knees and vowed in thankfulness that "he would give his child to his country." There is, at any rate, good authority for saying that a similar vow was solemnly

uttered in church when the child was baptized. It is certain that from the earliest days the father had determined that his son should be a statesman, and so notorious did this determination become that it caused the young man no little vexation and embarrassment on his first entry into public life. His stiff manners seemed to bespeak the gravity of the future minister; but though not perhaps over-modest, he was far too sensible not to know that a man rises in public life by his own merits, and not by parental predestination. His father's ambition only involved a reserved and sensitive nature in unmerited ridicule at the outset of a promising career.

But though the first Sir Robert Peel could not make his son a minister, he could provide him with an opening in public life, and could give him an education and training which might fit him to become a statesman. In this he was only following the example of the father of his own political hero, Pitt. Pitt, however, was trained by a great minister, Peel by a great manufacturer. The training in the latter case was not altogether judicious. Born in a Tory home, the young Peel was sent to a Tory school, graduated in a Tory university, and took office in a Tory administration before he was twenty-five years of age. At school, both at Bury and afterwards at Harrow, he was shy, studious, attentive to his studies, and less of a boy than his contemporaries. His cousin relates that he would walk a mile round sooner than encounter the rude jests of the Bury lads. At home he was rarely allowed to forget the destiny that awaited him. His father was fond of lifting the child on to a table and making

him recite some boyish lesson. On Sundays he was encouraged to repeat as much as he could recollect of the sermon he had heard in church. His memory was thus strengthened, until it became extraordinarily capacious and tenacious. Macaulay's memory was a marvel, but the contemporaries of both used to doubt whether Peel's was not equal to it. With the finer and rarer qualities of mind he was not perhaps exceptionally gifted, nor was his early training particularly well adapted to the correction of his native deficiencies. The account given by Byron of his school-fellow has often been quoted, but it is so exact an illustration of the boy as father to the man that it must do service once more: "Peel, the orator and statesman that was, or is, or is to be, was my form-fellow, and we were both at the top of our remove. We were on good terms, but his brother was my intimate friend; there were always great hopes of Peel amongst us all, masters and scholars, and he has not disappointed them. As a scholar he was greatly my superior; as a declaimer and actor I was reckoned at least his equal; as a schoolboy out of school I was always in scrapes, and he never; and in school he always knew his lesson, and I rarely, but when I knew it I knew it nearly as well; and in general information, history, etc., I think I was his superior as well as of most boys of my standing."

At the age of eighteen Peel quitted school and was sent to Oxford, being entered as a gentleman commoner at Christ Church, then and long afterwards the most distinguished college in the University. Cyril Jackson was dean, and Charles Lloyd, afterwards Bishop of