

William Pitt – the Younger

28/05/1759



23/01/1806

Early Career



Britain's Youngest PM.

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Behold the infant Atlas of the state,
The matchless miracle of modern days,
In whom Britannia to the world displays
A sight to make surrounding nations stare;
A kingdom trusted to a school-boy's care.”

From The Rolliad – the Morning Herald

Foreign Affairs

- Formed the Triple Alliance in '88 with Prussia & Holland.
- Nootka Sound Controversy in '90 allowed the Alliance to force Spain to give up monopoly of west coast of the Americas.
- Very worried by Russian expansionism vs Ottoman Empire but achieved little due to opposition in Parliament (Burke & Fox)

The King's Condition

- Early November '88 saw the King's 1st period of madness, which threatened a POW Regency.
- Pitt cleverly played for time, helped by over-confident and disorganised Opposition and the speaker dying on Jan 2nd
- Feb 5 '89, Regency Bill finally put to House by Pitt. Approved on 12th, it was in the Lords by 16th – but on 17th King was declared recovered by his doctors.
- By summer '89 Pitt's career reached its zenith, '91 General Election was won, &, just as Louis XVI was captured by the Revolutionaries, the King made him “Warden of the Cinque Ports”.

French Revolution & War



Ireland and Failure of Coalition



Resignation



ENTIRETY retiring from Office!

*How, in consequence of the Bill,
the late Mr. Brough has retired.*

*For had he, had he remained here,
And the wild eye of Justice... deplore.*

Treaty of Amiens & Pitt's Return



Pitt's Death & His Legacy



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Portrait by John Hoppner (also did Nelson)

- 2nd son & 4th child (of 5) of Pitt (the Elder) & Hester Grenville (sister of George Grenville) a former PM.
- Very, very bright – & at home he absorbed Politics from an early age. (According to biographer John Ehrman, Pitt inherited brilliance and dynamism from his father's line, and a determined, methodical nature from his mother's)
- Suffered from poor health for much of his life, but nevertheless, after home tutoring by Rev. Edward Wilson (inc. Latin & Greek), he was admitted to Pembroke College, Cambridge in April '73 – just before 14!. Quickly invalided home for several months before rejoining.
- Studied political phil., classics, maths, chemistry & history. Was tutored by George Pretyman, who became a close personal friend & Pitt later appointed him Bishop of Lincoln, then Winchester, and drew upon his advice throughout his political career. Also befriended William Wilberforce, who became a lifelong friend & political ally in Parliament.
- Charming, witty & friendly in company, but he didn't seek it out.
- In 1776, plagued by poor health, took advantage of a little-used privilege available only to the sons of noblemen, and chose to graduate without passing exams. (It was said Dad demanded he continually translate aloud classical lit. into English and declaim upon previously unknown topics in effort to develop his oratory skills.
- His father, by then Earl of Chatham, died in 1778. Pitt was chief mourner at the funeral. In less than 28yr, he was to join his Pa in Westminster Abbey's Nth Transept.
- As a younger son, he received only a small inheritance, so he acquired his legal education at Lincoln's Inn and was called to the bar in the summer of 1780.

Early Career



Joseph Nollekens, 1808

- Sep '80 stood for Parliament in Cambridge but wasn't elected. Altho' he had an inheritance there was no money in Dad's Estate to pay it, so he went onto the Western Circuit as a lawyer that autumn – earned c£5k.
- Jan '81 elected as MP for Appleby (Rotten Borough) by getting patronage of Lord Lowther via his friend Duke of Portland. - despite campaigning against such practices in later life.
- Not yet 22, his maiden speech a month or so later, marked him out as special. It appeared unprepared (but probably wasn't!) and he refuted the previous speaker, Lord Nugent (for the Govt. & against the Bill which tried to curtail public expenditure) in no uncertain terms. The debate was lost but it catapulted Pitt into the front rank of parliamentary orators. He had entered Parliament fully formed as a politician and debater. He was an Independent Whig.
- Originally aligned with Whigs such as Charles Fox (Henry's son who had jousting with Lord Chatham) and denounced the War, calling for peace. He also campaigned (unsuccessfully) for Parliamentary Reform.
- Lord North's ministry collapsed in '82, and Lord Rockingham took over, offering Pitt a ministry which he declined as overly subordinate!
- Earl of Shelburne took over on Rockingham's death and offered Pitt the job of Chancellor of the Exchequer, which he accepted. Shelburne resigned the next yr. and Geo 3rd offered Pitt the job, which he wisely declined as didn't have sufficient support of the Commons.
- Duke of Portland formed a Govt. (Fox-North coalition), and Pitt was in opposition. In Dec. '83 the coalition fell trying to get Burke's Bill to reform the East India Co. through the Lords. The King was against & threatened the Lords to the extent they supported him, not Fox. & George dismissed the Govt.
- Pitt finally accepted the job. Had a hostile majority in Parliament, but was able to solidify his position within a few months, thanks to a run of good fortune.

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- Aged 24, many saw Pitt as a stop-gap awaiting some more senior statesman. It was widely predicted that the new "mince-pie administration" would not outlast the Christmas season, it survived for seventeen years.
 - Jan '84, lost vote of confidence but refused to resign, having support of both King and the Lords. Also granted freedom of City of London.
 - Popular with public “Honest Billy”, gradually more MPs abstained rather than vote against him.
 - March '84, Parliament dissolved and G.E. Called. Much popular support ensured big majority. Pitt finally elected for Cambridge Uni. Which seat he held until his death.
 - Tried once more (for last time) for Parliamentary Reform, again defeated in House.
 - Successful with '84 India Act, which set up Gov. General etc. Also began transportation to Australia ('86) & NSW formally under Arthur Philip in '88.
 - Nat. Debt £243m at end of war. Interest was £8m p.a. a third of receipts.
- He created a Sinking Fund in '86, adding £1m p.a. Interest used to pay off N.D. which was down to £170m by '92.
- Increased revenue by REDUCING TAXES. 25% of imports were smuggled, so reduced duties (eg: tea from 115% to 25%) thus increasing revenues. Put many smugglers out of business.

Foreign Affairs

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- Wanted alliance with Austria also, But King was also Elector of Hanover & he upset the Austrians so that couldn't happen until the next decade.
- Nootka Sound (Vancouver Island). Spanish seized British ships come to trade furs. Public outcry caused mobilisation of RN and Spanish Navy. France also mobilised but soon stood down, forcing Spain to do the same.
- The Nootka Conventions ('90-'95) allowed British trade to flourish on that coast, and began Britain's expansion of trade in the Pacific.
- In peace talks with the Ottomans, Russia refused to return key Ochakov fortress (southern Ukraine). Pitt wanted to threaten military retaliation. Russia's ambassador Semyon Vorontsov organised Pitt's enemies and launched a public opinion campaign. Pitt had become alarmed at the opposition to his Russian policy in parliament, Burke and Fox both uttering powerful speeches against the restoration of Ochakov to the Turks. Pitt won the vote so narrowly that he gave up the idea.

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- By summer of '88 Pitt had begun to shape his cabinet the way he wanted it & things were looking pretty good.
- But, by early November, fate intervened. The King had his 1st period of madness, which threatened a Regency headed by POW. He would undoubtedly dismiss Pitt and insert Fox.
- Pitt cleverly played for time, suspended Parliament for 2wks & then delaying over details of a Regency Act. Opposition was fortunately over-confident and disorganised (Fox was rushing back from Italy & his mistress).
- Pitt was lucky too that the Speaker died (Jan 2nd), more delay while a replacement was found (William Grenville) & put forward. Elected by 215 to 144
- Feb 5 '89, Regency Bill finally put to House by Pitt. Approved on 12th, it was in the Lords by 16th – but on 17th King was declared recovered by his doctors. Feb 19th the Cabinet withdrew the Bill.
- By summer '89 Pitt's career reached its apogee – the General Election of '91 saw him returned with a majority. In Aug '92 the King made him “Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports”.

French Revolution & War



Anton Hickel – 1793

- Initially, the French Revolution encouraged many to reopen the issue of parliamentary reform, dormant since Pitt's reform bill was defeated in 1785.
- Reformers were quickly labelled as radicals and associates of the French revolutionaries. Parliament began to enact repressive legislation in order to silence them.
- '94 writ of Habeas Corpus was suspended. Followed by Seditious Meetings Act, restricting public assemblies, and the Combination Acts, restricting the forming of societies that favoured reforms.
- Manning problems for RN led to Quota System in '95 in addition to impressment.
- War was extremely expensive, straining Great Britain's finances. Unlike in the latter stages of the Napoleonic Wars, at this point Britain had only a very small standing army, main contribution to the war effort mainly through sea power and by subsidies to allies.
- Government drastically reduced civil liberties and created a nationwide spy network with ordinary people being encouraged to denounce any "radicals", creating a tense, paranoid atmosphere through the '90s.
- '93 to '98 tried to capture Haiti from the French, at a cost of £4m and the lives of more than half the army (mostly to Yellow Fever).
- April '97, Spithead Mutiny, followed by Nore Mutiny in June led to an act making it unlawful to advocate breaking oaths to the Crown. Followed in '98 by Defence of the Realm Act, further restricting civil liberties.

Ireland and Failure of Coalition



- May '98, long-simmering unrest saw United Ireland Society launch a revolt to win Independence.
- Pitt took an extremely repressive approach to the United Irishmen with the Crown executing about 1,500 United Irishmen after the revolt. The revolt destroyed Pitt's faith in the governing competence of the Dublin parliament. Pitt sought an Act of Union that would make Ireland an official part of the United Kingdom and end the "Irish Question".
- French expeditions to Ireland in 1796 and 1798 in support of the United Irishmen were regarded by Pitt as near-misses that might have provided an Irish base for French attacks on Britain, thus making the "Irish Question" a national security matter. As the Dublin parliament did not wish to disband, Pitt made generous use of what would now be called "pork barrel politics" to bribe Irish MPs to vote for the Act of Union.
- Sectarian violence right through the '90s eventually led to the Acts of Union 1800, whereby the Parliament of Gt. Britain & the Parliament of Ireland merged into the Parliament of the United Kingdom.
- Meanwhile French armies had defeated the First Coalition (principally Austria, Prussia and Britain) in '98. A 2nd Coalition, Great Britain, Austria, Russia and the Ottoman Empire was also soon defeated after the Battles of Marengo and Hohenlinden in 1800, leaving Britain fighting on alone.

Resignation



Integrity retiring from Office by James Gillray

- Following the Acts of Union 1800, Pitt sought cement the union by granting concessions to Roman Catholics (75% of pop.), by abolishing various political restrictions.
- The king was strongly opposed to Catholic Emancipation; he argued that to grant additional liberty would violate his coronation oath, Pitt, unable to change the king's strong views, resigned on 16 February 1801.
- Henry Addington, his political friend, formed a new administration. The king then suffered a renewed bout of madness, so Addington could not receive his formal appointment. Pitt therefore temporarily continued to discharge his duties, & in Feb '01, he brought forward the annual budget. Power was finally transferred from Pitt to Addington on 14 March, after the king recovered.
- Although Pitt supported the new administration, he frequently absented himself from Parliament, preferring to remain in his Lord Warden's residence of Walmer Castle, whence he helped organise a local Volunteer Corps in anticipation of a French invasion, acted as colonel of a battalion raised by Trinity House—he was also a Master of Trinity House—and encouraged the construction of Martello towers and the Royal Military Canal in Romney Marsh.

Treaty of Amiens & Pitt's Return



Gillray – Britannia between Death & the Doctor's

- The Treaty of Amiens in 1802 marked the end of the French Revolutionary Wars. Everyone expected it to be only a short truce.
- By 1803, war had broken out again with France under Emperor Napoleon.
- Addington had previously invited him to join the Cabinet, Pitt preferred to join the Opposition, becoming increasingly critical of the government's policies. Addington, unable to face the combined opposition of Pitt and Fox, saw his majority gradually evaporate and resigned in late April 1804.
- Pitt returned to the premiership on 10 May 1804. Wanted a coalition, but king wouldn't accept Fox. Also, many former supporters joined the Opposition. Thus, Pitt's second ministry was considerably weaker than
- Thanks to Pitt's efforts, Britain joined the Third Coalition, an alliance that included Austria, Russia, and Sweden & in October 1805 came the Battle of Trafalgar. At the annual Lord Mayor's Banquet toasting him as "the Saviour of Europe", Pitt responded in a few words that became the most famous speech of his life:
"I return you many thanks for the honour you have done me; but Europe is not to be saved by any single man. England has saved herself by her exertions, and will, as I trust, save Europe by her example."
- Nevertheless, the Coalition collapsed, having suffered significant defeats at the Battle of Ulm (Oct '05) and the Battle of Austerlitz (Dec '05). After hearing the news of Austerlitz Pitt referred to a map of Europe, "Roll up that map; it will not be wanted these ten years."

Pitt's Death & His Legacy



Bust by Joseph Nollekens 1807 & Statue at Pembroke College, Cambridge

- The setbacks in the war took a toll on Pitt's health. He had long suffered from poor health, and his fondness of Port didn't help. He died at Bowling Green House on Putney Heath on Jan 23rd '06, probably from peptic ulceration of his stomach or duodenum; he was unmarried and left no children.
- He had debts of £40,000 when he died, but Parliament agreed to pay them on his behalf and a motion was passed, despite some opposition to honour him with a public funeral and a monument. He was buried in Westminster Abbey on 22 February, having lain in state for two days in the Palace of Westminster.
- William Pitt the Younger was a prime minister who consolidated the powers of his office. Though he was sometimes opposed by members of his Cabinet, he helped define the role of the Prime Minister as the supervisor and co-ordinator of the various government departments.
- One of Pitt's accomplishments was a rehabilitation of the nation's finances after the American War of Independence. He helped manage the mounting national debt, by changes to the tax system in order to improve its great capture of revenue.
- Biographer William Hague considers the unfinished abolition of the slave trade to be Pitt's greatest failure, despite his long encouraging of his friend William Wilberforce.
- Hague goes on to note that the failure was likely due to Pitt being a "spent force" by the time favourable conditions had arisen. His long premiership, "tested the natural limits of how long it is possible to be at the top. From 1783 to 1792, he faced each fresh challenge with brilliance; from 1793 he showed determination but sometimes faltered; and from 1804 he was worn down by ... the combination of a narrow majority and war".