

William Lamb, 2nd Lord Melbourne

March 1779 – November 1848



Portrait by John Hoppner 1796

William Lamb was born into an aristocratic Whig family in 1779 at the family seat, Brocket Hall in Hertfordshire. He was christened Henry William but his paternity was frequently questioned. Was he the son of Lord Egremont? This was always denied but as a young person William spent a lot of his time at Petworth with Lord Egremont. He was educated at Eton, Trinity College, Cambridge and Glasgow University. He entered Lincoln's Inn in 1797 and was called to the Bar in 1804. During the Napoleonic Wars he served as a captain and rose to be a major in the Hertfordshire Volunteer Infantry. His personal interests were literature and theology. He married a Lady Caroline Ponsonby in 1805 but it was an unhappy marriage. His own private life was not flawless.

In 1806 he entered the House of Commons as Whig MP for Leominster. From 1828 - 9 he was Chief Secretary for Ireland and in 1829 succeeded to the Viscountcy. From 1830 -34 he served as Home Secretary under Lord Grey. Although not a great supporter of Parliament and social reform, he dealt with outbreaks of unrest in this time, judiciously, urging local authorities to use existing powers rather than bring in the armed forces. He did reluctantly support Parliament in the 1832 Reform Act (he had not supported the repeal of the Corn Laws) In 1834 Melbourne was asked to form a Whig Government by William IV. He very reluctantly agreed to be prime minister in July but then because William did not agree with the Whig Church Reform policy was dismissed in November. Unfortunately the Tories could not form a government and Melbourne was returned in April of 1835.

Melbourne was not considered a politician of much conviction or energy, preferring not to legislate wherever possible, but to reach a compromise. During the time he was prime minister he held together a difficult and divided cabinet. Though not a reformer, he was efficient in keeping order, raising taxes and conducting foreign policy. In 1840 Britain was divided over industrial depression and Chartism and was fighting wars in China and Afghanistan. With the help of his foreign secretary, Lord Palmerston, he averted war with France over Syria. Among his government acts were a reform of Local Government and of the Poor Law. But he supported Slavery calling Britain's abolition of it 'a great folly'.



Portrait by John Partridge c1840

Melbourne was Prime Minister when Queen Victoria came to the throne in June 1837. Barely eighteen, she was only just breaking free from the domineering influence of her mother, the Duchess of Kent, and her mother's adviser, Sir John Conroy. Over the next four years, Melbourne trained her in the art of politics, and the two became friends: Victoria was quoted as saying she considered him like a father (her own had died when she was only eight months old), and Melbourne's son had died at a young age. Melbourne was given a private apartment at Windsor Castle, and unfounded rumours circulated for a time that Victoria would marry Melbourne, 40 years her senior. Tutoring Victoria was the climax of Melbourne's career: the prime minister spent four to five hours a day visiting and writing to her, and she responded with enthusiasm.

However, after her marriage to Albert he encouraged her to give him state responsibilities.

In 1841 following a vote of no confidence initiated by the Conservative MP John Stuart-Wortley his government fell and he resigned in August .

After Melbourne resigned permanently in August 1841, Victoria continued to write to him about political matters, but as it was deemed inappropriate after a time their letters became cordial and non-political without issue. It has been observed that Melbourne's role faded as Victoria increasingly relied on her new husband. Though physically weakened, Melbourne survived a stroke on October 23, 1842, fourteen months after his departure from politics. In retirement, he lived at Bocket Hall, Hertfordshire where he died on 24 November 1848 and was buried nearby at ST Etheldreda's Church, Hatfield, Herts., where incidentally, Robert Cecil, Marquis of Salisbury and Prime Minister at the end of Victoria's reign, is also buried. There is also a memorial to Melbourne in St Paul's Cathedral.