

William Pitt The Younger

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Elder and Younger

‘There never was a father more partial to a son.’

WILLIAM WYNDHAM GRENVILLE¹

‘He went into the House of Commons as an heir enters his home; he breathed in it his native atmosphere, – he had, indeed, breathed no other; in the nursery, in the schoolroom, at the university, he lived in its temperature; it had been, so to speak, made over to him as a bequest by its unquestioned master. Throughout his life, from the cradle to the grave, he may be said to have known no wider existence. The objects and amusements, that other men seek in a thousand ways, were for him all concentrated there. It was his mistress, his stud, his dice box, his game-preserve; it was his ambition, his library, his creed. For it, and it alone, had the consummate Chatham trained him from his birth.’

LORD ROSEBERY²

IT WOULD SCARCELY BE POSSIBLE to imagine a more intensely political family than the one into which William Pitt was born on 28 May 1759. On his father’s side, his great-grandfather, grandfather and uncle had all been Members of Parliament. His father, twenty-five years an MP, was now the leading Minister of the land. On his mother’s side, that of the Grenville family, one uncle was in the House of Lords, and two others were in the Commons, one of them to be First Lord of the Treasury by the time the infant William was four years old. An understanding of Pitt’s extraordinary political precocity requires us to appreciate the unusual circumstances of a family so wholeheartedly committed to political life.

It was in the year of William's birth that the career of his father, still also plain William Pitt, approached its zenith. Three years into what would later be known as the Seven Years' War, in which Britain stood as the only substantial ally of Prussia against the combined forces of France, Austria, Russia, Saxony and Sweden, the elder Pitt had become the effective Commander-in-Chief under King George II of the British prosecution of the war. In his view the war had arisen from 'a total subversion of the system of Europe, and more especially from the most pernicious extension of the influence of France'.³ He was not nominally the head of the government, the position of First Lord of the Treasury being held by his old rival the Duke of Newcastle, but he was the senior Minister in the House of Commons. Through his powerful oratory he dominated both Parliament and the Ministry, and was acknowledged as the effective leader of the administration. As Newcastle himself said in October of that year: 'No one will have a majority at present against Mr. Pitt. No man will, in the present conjuncture, set his face against Mr. Pitt in the H. of Commons.'⁴

From taking office at the age of forty-eight in 1756 as Secretary of State for the Southern Department,* with a brief interruption of two months during the Cabinet crisis of 1757, Pitt had become the principal source of ministerial energy in both organising for war and in preparing a strategy for Britain to do well out of it. It was Pitt who gave detailed instructions on the raising and disposition of the troops and the navy, and Pitt who insisted on and executed the objective of destroying the empire of France. As the French envoy, François de Bussy, was to complain to the leading French Minister the Duc de Choiseul after meeting Pitt in 1761: 'This Minister is, as you know, the idol of the people, who regard him as the sole author of their success . . . He is very eloquent, specious, wheedling, and with all the chicanery of an experienced lawyer. He is courageous to the point of rashness, he supports his ideas in an impassioned fashion and with an invincible

* In the eighteenth century a British Cabinet contained two Secretaries of State (compared to fifteen today). The Secretary of State for the Southern Department dealt with matters relating to southern European countries, including France and Spain; the Secretary of State for the Northern Department dealt with northern European countries such as Russia. In 1782 this arrangement was revised into one Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and one for Home and Colonial Affairs.

determination, seeking to subjugate all the world by the tyranny of his opinions, Pitt seems to have no other ambition than to elevate Britain to the highest point of glory and to abase France to the lowest degree of humiliation . . .²⁵

It was in 1759 that Pitt, previously dismissed as a rather unpredictable politician with a distinctly chequered career, came to be regarded as the saviour of the nation. His insistence on fighting a European war with offensives elsewhere – in America, the Caribbean, Africa and on the oceans of the world – was crowned with success within months of the birth of his second son, William. Instead of having to face the French invasion feared throughout much of the year, Britain celebrated a stream of military successes that summer and autumn: victory at Minden in Germany in August, the storming of Quebec which shattered French rule in Canada in September, the simultaneous news of victories which reinforced British dominance of India, and then the defeat and scattering of the French fleet at Quiberon Bay in November. These events brought about a change in the public perception of the elder Pitt, analogous to the regard in which Churchill was held after 1940 compared to the controversy which previously surrounded him. From then on there was a sense of reverence, sometimes of awe, towards him, both on parliamentary occasions and among the wider public. Tall, haughty, but always eloquent, he was the great orator and war leader who had placed himself beyond party gatherings and factions to be at the service of the nation. The young William, as he became conscious of the people and events around him, would know only a world in which his father was treated as a legend.

Such renown was a far cry from the frustrated ambitions of earlier generations of Pitts. Being a younger son, the elder Pitt had enjoyed little in the way of financial inheritance, but his ancestors and relatives had been well connected and often very wealthy for the previous century and a half. Pitt's forebears had included prominent and sometimes wealthy officials under Elizabeth I and James I, but it is Thomas Pitt of Bocconoc (1653–1726) who brings the family story to life. He was the buccaneering 'Diamond Pitt' who went to India and made a fortune in probably illegal competition with the East India Company, came back and purchased English property with it, including

the medieval borough of Old Sarum,* and then returned to India on behalf of the Company as Governor of Madras. While there, he bought a 130-carat diamond for £25,000 which he hoped to sell to one of the European royal families for at least ten times as much. Returning to Britain during the War of the Spanish Succession (1702–1713), he discovered that European royalty was otherwise preoccupied, but eventually sold the diamond at a substantial but much smaller than expected profit to the Regent of France. With this and other earnings from his exploits in India, Thomas Pitt set about buying more estates, particularly in Cornwall. He was part of a new and often resented breed of rich men who came back from the East to buy property and parliamentary influence at home. He used his wealth to help all five of his children on their way in life, particularly the eldest son, another Thomas Pitt, who kept most of the family wealth and became Earl of Londonderry. A younger son, Robert Pitt, was put into Parliament for Old Sarum in 1705, for which he sometimes sat alongside his father. Robert Pitt was undistinguished, came close to disaster by being on the fringes of Jacobite attempts to overthrow the new Hanoverian dynasty, and died young, but not before fathering six children, the fifth of whom was William Pitt, the future Earl of Chatham. Once again the eldest son was a Thomas Pitt, who after much litigation and family dispute ended up with the lion's share of the family wealth.

The family lived at Stratford-sub-Castle near Salisbury, but at the age of ten William was sent with his eldest brother Thomas to Eton, an experience which proved decisive in his later determination to educate all of his own children at home. He remarked much later to the Earl of Shelburne 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 forward disposition, but would not do where there was any gentleness'.⁶

It seems that Robert Pitt had intended William for the Church, but William himself had other ideas, joining the army at the lowest

* Old Sarum, near Salisbury, was to become the most famous of all rotten boroughs when early in the nineteenth century it continued to return two Members of Parliament while ceasing to have any voters at all. In 1728 Colonel Harrison, the Pitt nominee, defeated Henry Fox in a by-election by a four to one margin, literally four votes to one.

officer rank in the cavalry, as a Cornet of Dragoons. He never saw active service, since the long-serving Whig Minister Robert Walpole did an effective job of keeping Britain out of various international disputes at the time, but he took the opportunity to travel to the Continent on a modest version of the Grand Tour through France, Switzerland and Holland. This was the only time he left his native country; an eighteenth-century political career did not require extensive travel. Like his son, he was later to dispose of huge forces, alliances and treaties around the globe, while only once in his life leaving the shores of Britain. He was clearly determined to continue the emerging Pitt tradition of serving in Parliament, and was duly elected for the family borough of Old Sarum in the general election of 1734, but only after some acrimony when his brother Thomas suggested giving the seat to the sitting Member, with financial compensation for William instead.

Although Pitt seems to have been well disposed towards Walpole and the Whigs at the time he was elected, he soon fell in with key figures in the opposition, notably Lord Cobham, his ex-Colonel, and Prince Frederick, the Prince of Wales. The relationship between Prince Frederick and his father King George II was an early example of a noted Hanoverian tradition, being one of unmitigated hatred between monarch and heir. The Prince of Wales was truly loathed by both his father and mother. Queen Caroline once exclaimed when she saw the Prince pass her dressing-room window: 'Look, there he goes – that wretch! that villain! – I wish the ground would open this moment and sink the monster to the lowest hole in hell!'⁷ Such loathing was exacerbated when the King's adoption of a Hanoverian mistress became public knowledge, so helping to make the Prince the more popular member of the Royal Family. Pitt, as a young MP and army officer, became part of the Prince's circle, with some of his early parliamentary speeches being unmistakably toadying towards the Prince. He became a regular opponent of Walpole, and was dismissed from his position in the army as a result.

A study of the rise to power of the elder Pitt over the subsequent twenty years provides four main conclusions which assist in appreciating the career of his son. First, elections in the eighteenth century were

not contested by organised political parties with a programme or manifesto. Although in the mid-eighteenth century many politicians could still be roughly categorised as Whig or Tory, even this distinction was breaking down. The opposition to the long-running Whig administrations would generally include dissident Whigs as well as a rump of Tories. In any case, most Members of Parliament had no wish to pursue a political career as such and were not elected to pursue any particular policy, many seeing their duty as one of supporting the King's chosen Ministers unless they did something manifestly outrageous. As a result, politicians did not generally win power by campaigning at a general election and winning a majority for a specific programme, and nor did voters necessarily have the composition of the government foremost in their minds – no general election in the entire eighteenth century led directly to a change of government. There were really two routes into office: one was to be an ally of the Crown, or of someone who would inherit the crown in due course; the other was to make such a nuisance of oneself in Parliament that Ministers seeking a quiet life or a broad consensus would have to include the troublemaker in the government. The elder Pitt tried the first of these approaches for about ten years and then switched to the second, although by that time King George II was most reluctant to appoint him to anything. As Pelham, the leading Minister of the mid-1740s, wrote to Stephen Fox in 1746 on Pitt's appointment as Paymaster General: 'It is determined, since the King will not hear of Pitt's being Secretary att [sic] War, that he shall be Paymaster . . . I don't doubt but you will be surpris'd that Mr. Pitt should be thought on for so high and lucrative an employment; but he must be had, and kept.'⁸ There was never any love lost between Pitt and the other leading politicians of the day or between him and either of the kings he served. Each time he was appointed to the government it was because his speeches were too effective or his support too great to keep him out.

Second, while the power of Parliament was still tempered by the authority and patronage of the Crown, it was the only forum in which the politicians of the time engaged with each other and staked out their positions. As a result, prowess in parliamentary debate was a most valuable political skill. The elder Pitt could never have advanced

to high office without such skill since he lacked both money and the patronage of the King. The second Earl Waldegrave, chief confidant of George II, wrote in his memoirs:

Mr. Pitt has the finest genius, improved by study and all the ornamental parts of classical learning . . . He has a peculiar clearness and facility of expression; and has an eye as significant as his words. He is not always a fair or conclusive reasoner, but commands the passions with sovereign authority; and to inflame or captivate a popular assembly is a consummate orator.⁹

Having finally thrown in his lot with King George II in 1746 in return for a place in the government, Pitt was happy to use his oratorical skills to advance arguments sometimes the exact opposite of those he had propagated in opposition, a phenomenon well known to this day. He had made his name in opposition denouncing the payment of subsidies for Hanoverian troops even to the point of saying he would agree to be branded on the forehead as a traitor if he ever supported the idea, but once in office he swiftly switched sides on the issue with 'unembarrassed countenance'.¹⁰

It is a tragedy for historians that parliamentary proceedings at the time of the elder Pitt were not officially recorded. Indeed, it was expressly forbidden to publish speeches delivered in Parliament, since it was thought that this would lead to popular pressure interfering with the judgements of an independent Parliament. By the time of the younger Pitt these matters were treated very differently, but this restriction illustrates the limited role of public opinion in the British constitution of the mid-eighteenth century.

Third, while his long career encompassed a fair amount of opportunism and inconsistency, the elder Pitt undoubtedly developed and held to a broad philosophy of how Britain should operate in military and foreign affairs. Although he would have called himself a Whig, the term Tory being largely pejorative and still heavily associated with suspected Jacobite sympathies, Pitt was usually distinct in his views from the great figures of the Whig aristocracy. He was, for instance, much more likely than them to quote popular support as a factor in favour of his views, something that they would have looked on as the

folly of the mob. Pitt's views could be categorised as 'Patriot' or in 'the Country Interest', emphasising the views of a nation wider than the Whig oligarchy, and sometimes they were frankly Tory, such as opposing the existence of any significant standing army. Such opinions were associated with hostility to Continental entanglements and suspicion of the power of the Crown, two opinions woven together by the fact that the King was simultaneously but separately the ruler of Hanover.* Pitt believed in a maritime approach to foreign affairs, one which he brought to devastating fruition in the Seven Years' War and set out at its simplest in the Commons in the 1740s:

I lay it down, Sir, as a certain maxim that we should never assist our allies upon the continent with any great number of troops. If we send our troops abroad, it should be rather with a view to improve them in the art of war, than to assist our allies . . . The only manner, therefore, in which we ought to support her [Austria] and our other allies upon the continent is with our money and our ships. My reason for laying this down as a maxim is, not only because the sea is our natural element, but because it is dangerous to our liberties and destructive to our trade to encourage great numbers of our people to depend for their livelihood upon the profession of arms . . . For this reason, we ought to maintain as few regular soldiers as possible, both at home and abroad. Another argument on this subject presents itself: our troops cost more to maintain them than those of any other country. Our money, therefore, will be of most service to our allies, because it will enable them to raise and support a greater number of troops than we can supply them with for the same sum.¹¹

Throughout his career the elder Pitt emphasised the importance of overseas trade, an issue which regularly made him the darling of the City of London. To preserve and expand that trade, he believed in naval supremacy, the retention and expansion of the colonies, particularly in North America, and a firm stance against the Bourbon monarchies of France and Spain. Long after his death, elements of the same beliefs

* The Royal Family were Hanoverians by descent. In this period the King of England was also the hereditary ruler (Elector) of Hanover.

in trade and naval power would be discerned within the policies carried out by his son as Prime Minister.

Fourth, the elder Pitt cultivated a detachment from party as a healthy attribute in itself, along with a further detachment from the financial rewards and perquisites of office. Paymasters had traditionally made huge personal gains, usually by investing for their own account the balances of public money for which they were responsible, and taking a commission on foreign subsidies.* It was to the astonishment of other politicians and the delight of a wider public that on his appointment as Paymaster, Pitt lodged the balance of public money with the Bank of England and forwent his personal commission on a subsidy to Sardinia. It was as a result of such forbearance, as well as of his general political stance, that he was long regarded as different from other politicians, less corrupt and self-interested. Coupled with his apparent lack of interest in taking a title, this attribute led to him becoming known as 'the Great Commoner'. It was also as a result of these sacrifices that his income rarely kept up with his lavish domestic expenditure. The huge debts which this produced seldom seemed to trouble him, a trait faithfully reproduced in his famous son.

The elder Pitt spent a large proportion of his life visibly ill. He suffered from a wide range of ailments, all of which were then associated with gout; he was frequently lame and also suffered from 'gout in the bowels' and similar disorders. For him to give a speech in the Commons with a walking stick and a large part of his body wrapped in flannels was not uncommon. He would often retreat to his bed even at times of crisis, as this anecdote from the time of the Seven Years' War demonstrates:

Mr. Pitt's plan, when he had the gout, was to have no fire in his room, but to load himself with bedclothes. At his house at Hayes he slept in a long room; at one end of which was his bed, and his lady's at the other. His way was, when he thought the Duke of Newcastle had fallen into any mistake to send for him and read him a lecture. The Duke was sent for once and came when Mr.

* Henry Fox, father of Charles James Fox, is thought to have made £400,000 as Paymaster, a vast sum in those days.

Pitt was confined to bed by the gout. There was, as usual, no fire in the room; the day was very chilly and the Duke, as usual, afraid of catching cold. The Duke first sat down on Mrs Pitt's bed, as the warmest place; then drew up his legs into it, as he got colder. The lecture unluckily continuing a considerable time, the Duke at length fairly lodged himself under Mrs Pitt's bed clothes. A person, from whom I had the story, suddenly going in, saw the two ministers in bed, at the two ends of the room, while Pitt's long nose and black beard unshaved for some days, added to the grotesqueness of the scene.¹²

In 1760, the accession of George III, grandson of George II (and son of Prince Frederick, who after years of plotting for his accession with opposition figures, spoiled every calculation by dying before his father), set in motion a chain of events which led to Pitt's departure from government. Favouring a more hardline approach to Spain than his colleagues would accept, Pitt wished to continue in office only on the basis of assured control of the government, an ambition irreconcilable with the new King's advancement of his great favourite, the Earl of Bute.

Pitt left office at loggerheads with his colleagues but as a towering figure in public repute, which the King and Bute recognised by conferring on him and his descendants an annuity of £3,000 a year. Bute also tried to undermine Pitt's reputation by unusually making the details of the annuity public. Pitt complained that 'the cause and manner of my resigning' had been 'grossly misrepresented'. He had been 'infamously traduced as a bargain for my forsaking the public'.¹³ As part of the same package a title was given to Pitt's wife, who became Baroness Chatham. For the moment, Pitt himself chose to stay in his arena of greatest influence, the Commons, rather than go to the Lords. Out of office he could now bestow more attention on his devoted wife and five children, including William, now two years old.

However many wise decisions were taken by the elder Pitt in the Seven Years' War, few compared in wisdom to his decision a few years earlier in 1754 to marry Lady Hester Grenville. Pitt was still unmarried at the age of forty-six. His most consistent and affectionate friendship had

been with his sister Ann, although he reported falling in love with a French woman during his tour of the Continent. On the face of it, his decision to get married at that age, to someone he had known for years without apparently showing any previous romantic interest in her, seems sudden and strange. Pitt had one eye on posterity: it may simply be that he woke up one morning realising that if he did not find a wife and produce a family now he never would.

In any event, it was a marriage of great and enduring strength, supported by deep mutual affection. Hester proved utterly devoted to this difficult and often sick man, describing herself in early letters as 'ever unalterably your most passionately loving wife'. She was thirty-three at the time of their marriage and herself came from a powerful political family. Her uncle was the Lord Cobham with whom Pitt had intrigued twenty years before, and her brothers were highly active in politics, including both Richard, Earl Temple and George Grenville. The two families were already related because Pitt's elder brother Thomas had married Hester's cousin, but much has always been made of the strikingly different characters of the Pitts and the Grenvilles. Where the Pitts were demonstrative, emotional and argumentative, the Grenvilles were cool, methodical and loyal. Pitts had a spirit of adventure, Grenvilles an inclination to caution. And where Pitts enjoyed foreign and military matters in politics, Grenvilles were more at home with finance and administration. The seemingly better-balanced personality of the younger William Pitt is often ascribed to the fortuitous combination of these contrasting traits, although one of his biographers has commented: 'In the son – still more in the other children – was a full measure of the Grenville starchiness, which unhappily dulled the Pitt fire and brilliance.'¹⁴ Most other commentators have concluded that alongside a brilliant and impetuous father, the younger Pitt was fortunate indeed to have a mother who had resilience, a calm temperament and an unfailing sense of duty.

In 1755 the elder Pitt purchased Hayes Place in what would now be south London, near the village of Bromley. Although in time he would regard it as only a modest residence it had twenty-four bedrooms, elegant gardens and several hundred acres of pasture and woodland. In 1765, with his fame and reputation at their height, he

had the immense good fortune to inherit a large estate, Burton Pynsent in Somerset, from an admirer, Sir William Pynsent, whom he seems never to have met. Excited by the prospect of living on a far grander scale than was possible at Hayes, Pitt soon fought off the descendants of the deceased who tried to dispute the will, and set about vast alterations and landscaping. This included a 140-foot-high column in memory of Pynsent, raised as a token of humble thanks. The scale of these changes, in addition to the cost of selling Hayes and then repurchasing it at a higher price (he discovered he could not do without a large residence close to London), plunged Pitt into debts which remained with him for the rest of his life. One of the many inestimable services performed by Hester was to bring more careful management to the family's finances and to prevent further extravagances so that the debts did not become completely unsustainable.

The young William Pitt was born at Hayes in May 1759 'after a labour rather severe',¹⁵ the fourth child in five years after Hester, John, and Harriot. The fifth and final child, James, was born two years later. These five children born within six years of each other made a great deal of noise: 'The young ones are so delightfully noisy that I hardly know what I write,'¹⁶ wrote Pitt to his wife when she went to visit her own family. He seems to have taken the precaution of making alterations to the house at Hayes so that he could cut himself off, when he wished, from the sound and presence of his children.

It is clear that William soon emerged as a notably bright child and a particular favourite of both mother and father. Hester wrote within a few weeks of his birth: 'I cannot help believing that little William is to become a personage.'¹⁷ Although there would have been many servants in the household, the children received a good deal of attention from their father after he left office in 1761. They grew up in a very comfortable home, decidedly rural in a well-ordered sort of way. The young children rode, bathed, went birdnesting and explored the countryside first around Hayes and then around Burton Pynsent. Some of these things stuck: the younger Pitt rode regularly for exercise throughout his life, and inherited from his father a love of landscape gardening for relaxation; but even in his earliest years he did not put outdoor pursuits at the top of his list. He showed early on a sharp

intellect, highly advanced powers of speech and memory, and a clear interest in public affairs. All these attributes were cultivated constantly by his father.

Inevitably, there are plenty of stories in which visitors to the Pitt household claim prescience about the child's future greatness. Lady Holland, mother of Charles James Fox, is meant to have said, 'I have been this morning with Lady Hester Pitt, and there is little William Pitt, *not eight years old* and really the cleverest child I ever saw; and *brought up so strictly and so proper in his behaviour*, that, *mark my words*, that little boy will be a thorn in Charles's side as long as he lives.'¹⁸ Other reports include the young William standing up on a mounting block and addressing the trees as if they were Members of the House of Commons. Such stories may be fanciful, but the essential point, that he was extraordinarily well versed in politics and philosophy at a remarkably early age, certainly stands up to examination. Family correspondence refers to him as 'the Philosopher', 'the Young Senator', 'Eager Mr. William' and 'Impetuous William'. In 1766, when he was seven, his tutor wrote of him and his sister:

Lady Hester and Mr. Pitt still continue to surprise and astonish as much as ever; and I see no possibility of diminishing their ardour either by too much business or too much relaxation. When I am alone reading, Mr. Pitt, if it is any thing he may attend to, constantly places himself by me, where his steady attention and sage remarks are not only entertaining but useful; as they frequently throw a light upon the subject, and strongly impress it on my memory.¹⁹

The same tutor, Edward Wilson, who taught all the Pitt children at home because of their father's unforgiving recollections of public school, marvelled on another occasion that William 'seemed never to learn but merely to recollect'.²⁰ At the age of seven he was able to write letters in Latin to his father, and also did so in English in a rather pompous and wordy style. With his father delivering thundering orations against the Stamp Act in the Commons in early 1766, William showed an insatiable appetite for political news. 'I expect many sage reflections from William upon the public papers,' his father wrote to

his mother, and later that year, with a peerage for the elder Pitt in prospect, William commented that he was glad he was not the eldest son, because 'he could serve his country in the House of Commons like his Papa'.²¹

A seven-year-old with such attitudes and interests in our own times would probably find them beaten out of him at school, and indeed that could as easily have happened in the 1760s. William had the advantage of mixing almost exclusively with his own siblings, his tutor and adult family members, most of whom encouraged his political interest. The poet William Hayley reported when William was a boy of fourteen that he 'eclipsed his brother in conversation'.²² It is hard to think that he was not sometimes an irritation to his brothers and sisters; as the historian J. Holland Rose commented, 'the boy . . . narrowly escaped being a prodigy of priggishness'.²³ His narrow escape seems to have been made possible by an easygoing disposition and pleasant temperament, which made it easier for him to win friends in a small circle. He was also a rather sickly child, with frequently recurring problems in the nose and throat, and many coughs and colds. His fragility probably helped the other children to put up with his bookish ways.

Father and son showed a deep attachment to each other. 'If I should smoke,' the elder Pitt wrote, 'William would instantly call for a pipe'.²⁴ He would in later years describe William as 'the hope and comfort of my life'.²⁵ In 1772, when Hester took the three eldest children to Hayes and left William and his younger brother with their father at Burton Pynsent, the elder Pitt wrote:

My dearest life will read with joy that the boys go on well. I believe William's *sequestration*, as he learnedly terms it, agrees better with his contemplative constitution than more talk and more romps. Airing, literature, the arts, tea-table, sober whist and lecturing Papa for staying out too late, together with the small amusement of devouring a joint of mutton, or so, before I can look about, make up our daily occupations.²⁶

His wife replied: 'I do not in the least wonder that the style of William's present life agrees with him. It is certainly not better suited to the

state of his constitution, than to the fineness of his mind, which makes him enjoy with the highest pleasure what would be above the reach of any other creature of his small age.²⁷

In 1772 William even wrote a play, performed by the Pitt children, which was wholly political in content and eerily foreshadowed the Regency crisis in which he would play the real lead role seventeen years later. It is obvious that he showed academic gifts and political interest from an exceptionally early age, encouraged and nurtured by the adults around him, and that he enjoyed a pleasant and sheltered upbringing in the midst of a loving family. In all these respects he was very fortunate, but he was not unique. There must have been something more to his formative years, even before he went to university at the age of fourteen, to equip him to carry out the functions of Prime Minister at the age of twenty-four.

There were at least three factors which, in the formation of the young William Pitt's personality and opinions, were not only fortunate but truly unique. The first was that a father who had himself dominated the House of Commons and presided over a government took an active, usually daily, role in his education. At no other time in British history has the head of one administration acted as the tutor of another. A home education seems to have been well suited in any case to a child of William's temperament and health, but Mr Wilson's tuition was frequently supplemented by the ministrations of the elder Pitt. Bishop Tomline, in his surprisingly uninformative biography of the younger Pitt written shortly after his death, reports that 'when his lordship's health would permit, he never suffered a day to pass without giving instruction of some sort to his children; and seldom without reading a chapter of the Bible with them.'²⁸ While the elder Pitt seems to have been attentive to all his children, he particularly enjoyed passing on to William examples of eloquence from contemporary or classical writers and speakers, and asking him to study them. He taught him to speak in a clear and melodious voice by making him recite each day passages from the best English poets, particularly Shakespeare and Milton. Another biographer of the younger Pitt, Lord Stanhope, wrote

the following with the advantage of his father having spoken to Pitt himself:

My father had the honour to be connected in relationship with that great man – and, as such, he had the privilege of being in the house with him sometimes for many weeks together. Presuming on that familiar intercourse, he told me, he ventured on one occasion to ask Mr. Pitt by what means – by what course of study – he had acquired that admirable readiness of speech – that aptness of finding the right word without pause or hesitation. Mr. Pitt replied that whatever readiness he might be thought to possess in that respect, he believed that he derived it very much from a practice his father – the great Lord Chatham – had recommended to him. Lord Chatham had bid him take up any book in some foreign language with which he was well acquainted, in Latin, Greek, or French, for example. Lord Chatham then enjoined him to read out of this work into English, stopping where he was not sure of the word to be used in English, until the right word came to his mind, and then proceed. Mr. Pitt states that he had assiduously followed this practice. At first he had often to stop for a while before he could recollect the proper word, but he found the difficulties gradually disappear, until what was a toil to him at first became at last an easy and familiar task.²⁹

By the time he arrived at Cambridge in 1773, William could apparently read into English six or seven pages of Thucydides, without previous study of it and with barely a mistake. He may have been educated at home but he had in effect attended a master school in the use of language and its delivery. In addition he showed a strong early aptitude for mathematics. Uninhibited by peer pressure and required from the outset to meet adult standards, he developed early on a highly unusual ability to speak clearly, structure an argument, and think on his feet.

Secondly, he must have realised at a very early age that he belonged to a father and a family who stood apart from and were treated differently to everyone else. His father had become a national institution, and was greeted when he travelled with greater reverence than anyone else outside the Royal Family. When the Pitt family set off for their summer break by the sea in Weymouth or Brighthelmstone (modern-

day Brighton) or Lyme Regis, bells were rung in their honour and flowers strewn before them. Travelling to Weymouth by coach in 1766, the family heard the bells of Yeovil ringing in their honour as they passed, and a deputation of Mohican chiefs, on their way to London with a petition, were waiting there to greet them. In an age when the inheritance of names and traits counted for more than it does today, the younger Pitt always knew that he was the son of a very great man, and that everyone else knew it too.

The third unique aspect of the younger Pitt's early life is more complex, more debatable, but no less compelling. In the years 1765 to 1768 the career of his father took a series of dramatic turns, briefly for the better and then decidedly for the worse. At this time the elder Pitt took a series of decisions, some of which would have seemed wise at the time, but many of which must have appeared almost immediately to have been risky or foolish. While a child between the ages of six and nine cannot normally be expected to appreciate the finer points of the political events of the day, it is hard to imagine that this boy, with his precocious interest in politics, did not absorb some deep and lasting lessons from what happened. His father was in this period not only his tutor but also a living daily example of the perils of politics.

Several times between 1763 and 1766 the elder Pitt was asked to return to head the King's government and refused to do so. By 1763, the King's mentor and friend, the Earl of Bute, had discovered he had neither the aptitude nor the appetite for day-to-day politics, and resigned. King George III thus learnt at an early stage of his reign that he had to work with at least some of the politicians already available in Parliament rather than invent new ones, and that an effective Minister whom he partly disliked could be a better bet than an ineffective one he doted on. Several years of political instability now followed. The government was at first headed by George Grenville, Hester's brother, who after a short time the King cordially hated and wanted rid of. Next came the Marquis of Rockingham, who did not have the parliamentary support to sustain an administration. Throughout this time, the elder Pitt reverted to his earlier behaviour of being a trenchant critic of Ministers, except that he now did so from a far more commanding position, that of a former head of the government. He broke

off occasionally from his rural pursuits and the education of his children to go down to the House of Commons and thunder out his denunciation of the government, first attacking the Treaty of Paris, which brought an end to the Seven Years' War, for being too generous to the nation's enemies, then making no fewer than fifteen speeches attacking the handling of the case of John Wilkes, and then a determined campaign to overturn George Grenville's Stamp Act. The Stamp Act was a tax on legal documents in North America, introduced by Grenville as a means of raising revenue from the colonists, who enjoyed the protection of the British army but paid nothing towards it. It was deeply hated in America, and the elder Pitt was determined to overturn it, advocating conciliation of the colonies rather than aggravation of their discontent. Grenville having been forced from office, and the Stamp Act being overturned in early 1766, Pitt was once again acclaimed by the City and the crowds outside the Palace of Westminster. He was not in the least troubled that in pursuing this campaign he was also destroying the policies and administration of his brother-in-law.

The young William would certainly have heard of the devastating use his father had made of the power of speech on these occasions, and he is likely to have witnessed for himself his father's repeated decisions to refuse to take office unless given cast-iron authority over the government. The King could offer the leadership of an administration, but Pitt could refuse it. On one occasion in 1765 the Duke of Cumberland arrived at Hayes with an escort of guards, a Royal Duke sent personally by the King to invite the elder Pitt to form a government. We do not know if William was watching from the windows, but we do know that his father declined the offer, since 'nothing was conveyed that might have for object or end anything like my settling an administration upon my own plans'.³⁰ Being in office, his father knew, was not the same as being in power. Eventually, the only stumbling block to Pitt's return was the refusal of another brother-in-law, Richard, Earl Temple, to serve with him. But later in 1766 Pitt did indeed form a government and included in it most of the people he wanted. Protracted negotiation with the King was evidently worth it, a lesson not lost on his son, who was to be offered the premiership four times before accepting it.

It was at this stage that the elder Pitt made a major mistake. On becoming the King's First Minister he also accepted an earldom, 'Viscount Burton Pynsent and Earl of Chatham in the County of Kent'. In all probability, he wanted to set up his family as one of the great families of the land. He already had the estate. The next step was the title, and this was the great opportunity to acquire it. He was also tired and of course frequently ill, preferring to preside over an administration from the more genteel House of Lords without the endless knockabout of the Commons. The consequences were disastrous, according to the poet Thomas Gray the 'weakest thing ever done by so great a man'.³¹ At a stroke, the Great Commoner was no more. The man whose reputation had partly rested on being apart from the landed aristocracy had joined it, and the man highly regarded for his independence from the King had accepted the generous patronage of the Crown. It did immense damage to his support around the country, which had always been his strongest card. Worse still, in practical terms it disabled his government from the outset in the House of Commons, where his oratorical skills were no longer available. One Minister resigned rather than face the additional workload and stress that would result. Chatham compounded all this by taking the title Lord Privy Seal rather than First Lord of the Treasury, again to lighten his burden but thereby omitting to control the central function of his government. It is unlikely that these mistakes were lost on his son. There is no evidence of what he thought about them, but throughout his career he steered well clear of repeating them.

The energy of Chatham's administration was spent within a few months, and so was his own. According to Admiral Keppel, later a celebrated naval and political figure: 'He [Chatham] *governs absolutely*, never deigns even to consult any of the Ministers, is now at Bath, and all business is at a stop.'³² William watched his father retreat into illness, possibly into what would later be called manic depression. From the spring of 1767 he became an invalid, refusing to handle the business of government or to see more than a few chosen people, despite being supposed to be in charge of the country. This situation lasted for eighteen months until the King finally and reluctantly accepted that Chatham could not continue. Again there is no direct account of what

young William thought of his father's illness or what effect it had on him. We do know of the patience, loyalty and sheer endurance displayed by his mother. Coping calmly with the dire illness of the man she loved, Hester also dealt personally with the incoming correspondence from Cabinet Ministers and even the King. It would be an exaggeration to say that she was running the government, which now lost its central direction, but she was highly effective at preventing the government from running her husband. It is unlikely that the sight of his mother dealing with all the great potentates of the nation did not make some lasting impression on William. Not only could his father be the master of other politicians, but his mother proved rather effective at it as well.

William Pitt lived through all these events, with enough knowledge to make some sense of them, before he was ten years old. They do not seem to have disturbed his studious mind or happy disposition, but they would certainly have demonstrated to him that there need be no limit to his ambition.