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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Choose Your Weapons**

Written by Douglas Hurd  
and Edward Young

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# CHOOSE YOUR WEAPONS



THE BRITISH FOREIGN SECRETARY  
200 Years of Argument, Success and Failure

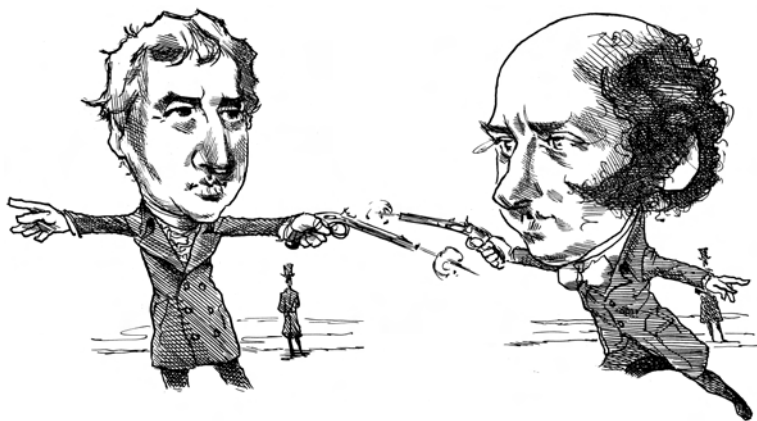
DOUGLAS HURD  
*and Edward Young*



PHOENIX

CHAPTER I

## CASTLEREAGH AND CANNING



‘So that in the nature of man we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, competition; secondly, diffidence; thirdly, glory. The first maketh man invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third, for reputation.’

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

We are told that Lord Castlereagh discussed the opera as he made his way to the duel. He entertained Lord Yarmouth, his cousin and second, by humming tunes made famous by the soprano, Catalani, as their curricula trundled over the bridge. They arrived on Putney Heath just as dawn was breaking on Thursday 21 September 1809 and disembarked from the carriage with duelling pistols in hand.

They were met on the Heath by two more men. There were discussions, a final attempt to call the whole thing off, before the seconds agreed on a distance of twelve paces – the longest for which there was any precedent. Castlereagh then took up his position. Standing across from him in the autumn morning was the proud, slightly balding figure of George Canning.

The seconds handed the duellers their weapons. ‘I must cock it for him for I cannot trust him to do it himself,’ Canning’s second explained to Lord Yarmouth. ‘He has never fired a pistol in his life.’ The men took aim. Lord Castlereagh was asked if he was ready: His Majesty’s Secretary of State for War and the Colonies

replied that he was. Mr Canning was asked if he too was ready: His Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs said yes.

Canning fired first, off target. Castlereagh responded and also missed. There was a pause, and some discussion. Perhaps past grievances could now be laid to rest. But Castlereagh insisted on a second attempt. Canning's second shot skimmed by Castlereagh's chest, taking a button from his coat; Castlereagh's bullet passed through Canning's nankeen breeches and punctured his leg somewhere along the 'fleshy part' of his thigh.

Canning's second ran up to him and began to help him away. Hobbling from the field, Canning stopped suddenly. 'But perhaps I ought to remain.' There was no response. He repeated himself, turning to his opponent. 'Are you sure we have done?' Before Castlereagh could speak, Yarmouth intervened, assuring Canning and also Castlereagh that indeed they had done. Castlereagh then approached Canning, took his arm and helped him to Yarmouth's house where a surgeon was waiting.

Standing close by as they limped away from the Heath was the house in which William Pitt the Younger had died three years before. The two men had been his close disciples. He had taught them many of the arts of politics but not that of working together. At the time of the duel Castlereagh was forty years old, Canning thirty-nine.<sup>1</sup>

For four decades up to this moment the lives of Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh, and George Canning had run together in counterpoint.\*

Born into Anglo-Irish families – Castlereagh in 1769, Canning in 1770 – they were each brought up on radicalism and religious dissent. Castlereagh ended one letter in October 1777 with a well-known call to revolution: 'I am still a true American,' he told his uncle, dismissing any doubts on the subject that an eight-year-old might have.<sup>2</sup> He abandoned his undergraduate studies before taking his degree and spent most of his second year at Cambridge attending the trial of Warren Hastings in London. The calling to

\* For the sake of simplicity, Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh will be referred to as Castlereagh throughout, although in April 1821 he became the 2nd Marquess of Londonderry when his father died.

account of the great proconsul for his deeds of speculation and misgovernment in India became the focus of political and social attention, and Castlereagh was gripped. By July 1790, Castlereagh had been elected to the Irish Parliament as an independent Whig representing County Down.

As a teenager, George Canning wrote Byronic poems before Byron, lamenting the slavery of Greece. He formed close links with the leading Whigs in England, and rumours, probably exaggerated, of his republican sympathies as a student are supposed to have reached and alarmed George III. He shared many of Castlereagh's early views on politics and society, and both men would later be joined by their belief in the need for Catholic Emancipation.<sup>3</sup>

But if the early political views of the two duellists were fairly similar, their childhood lives were worlds apart. Castlereagh's family had been prosperous and successful for as long as they had been in Ireland. His education may not have been sensational – the list of alumni at the Royal School in Armagh is not adorned with the names of great statesmen – but his upbringing amongst the Presbyterian gentry of Ireland was stable, landed and happy.

None of this applied to the early life of George Canning. His father had led a motley existence as a lawyer-cum-literary figure who then failed badly in business. Canning's father lost his inheritance when he married a penniless eighteen-year-old in 1768, and then he died just a year after Canning's birth. Canning's grandfather compounded one catastrophe with another, refusing to restore the inheritance his grandson was entitled to, and severed the existing pension of £150 per year. Mrs Canning's solution to her impending penury was to take to the stage. After a period of moderate success, she hitched herself to a dramatic rascal called Reddish who ended up drinking himself into dementia and died in York Asylum in 1785. She then found another failed businessman, Mr Hunn, married him, and persuaded him to become an actor as well.

Canning was rescued from this ramshackle childhood by the intervention of an actor called Moody, who wrote to all of Canning's relations warning them that the boy was 'on the road to the gallows'. In 1778, Canning's uncle, the merchant Stratford Canning, took charge of the eight-year-old and bundled him off to study at Eton. Here, George Canning began to shine, for he had a gift, inherited

from his mother, which he liked to deploy as a way of impressing his teachers and friends. At Eton, and later at Oxford, he dazzled his colleagues with fiery displays of oratory and journalism.<sup>4</sup>

The event which altered both men's lives and opinions more than any other took place across the Channel. Castlereagh, like Canning, was initially in favour of the French Revolution. He visited the Continent in the summer of 1791, and met French émigrés in the Austrian Netherlands. 'It was', he complained, 'impossible to convince them that matters never could be reinstated as they formerly were . . . that to escape disappointment they must moderate their views.' From the Netherlands he went on to Paris and attended debates at the Legislative Assembly. He was amazed at the deputies' 'inconceivable fluency of language' but he worried that there was a 'tumultuous pedantry' to France's new leaders and that the changes would lead to chaos.<sup>5</sup>

As the Revolution became more destructive and violent, Canning's views moved in the same critical direction. At a debating society one evening in the early 1790s, Canning turned to the President of the Club and explained to him and the audience that Mirabeau, the famous leader of the Revolution, was 'like the beverage, Sir, which stands so invitingly before you – foam and froth at the top, heavy and muddy within'. From November 1797 to July 1798, Canning dedicated the force of his wit and erudition to mocking the Revolution in a satirical magazine, the *Anti-Jacobin*.<sup>6</sup>

The two men, now convinced of the dangers of the French Revolution, disagreed about how to defeat it. For Canning, the French Revolution was the climax of a pan-European clash of opinions; it was a contest to be won by skilful arguments and dramatic exploits. By contrast, Castlereagh came to see that the Revolution had turned into a clash of European populations – that ideas had taken second place to thoughtless passions and pride. In 1793, the French Republic proclaimed its famous 'levée en masse', mobilising a whole nation to resist the counter-revolutionary forces. A month later, Castlereagh wrote that the 'tranquillity of Europe is at stake, and we contend with an opponent whose strength we have no means of measuring. It is the first time that all the population and all the wealth of a great kingdom have been concentrated in the field: what may be the result is beyond my perception.' Years later, Clausewitz analysed over

several hundred pages what Castlereagh had discovered: the French were attempting total war.<sup>7</sup>

While Canning cracked jokes about the French Directory and its curious new calendar of ten classical months in each year, Castlereagh spent the 1790s exploding insurrectionary plots in Ireland, personally involving himself in many of the arrests. In March 1798, he was appointed Chief Secretary in Ireland, in effect deputy to the Viceroy. Within months, a French expeditionary force arrived in Ireland, expecting the country-wide insurrection which had been promised by Irish exiles in Paris. Although the invasion and the uprisings failed, they called into question the whole basis of the British Constitution. An all-Protestant Irish Parliament sat in Dublin representing the dominant Anglo-Saxon minority, and there was no Irish representation at all at Westminster. This structure began to look rickety. It now seemed that the only way to secure the British Isles was to formalise the Union between Ireland and Great Britain and centralise power in London. It fell to Castlereagh to pursue that logic to its conclusion: he was required by Pitt to persuade the Irish Parliament to vote for its own dissolution. He set about this with great determination, using methods which just about stayed within the rules of the day, but were later denounced as unscrupulous.

Events in Ireland took their toll on the way Castlereagh thought about human beings. One letter, written a decade later, when his focus had shifted across the Irish Sea as a loyal Tory and Member of Parliament, shows the pessimistic flow of Castlereagh's opinions as he travelled through Britain. 'To observe the wealth, the industry, the comfort of the country, which I have passed through since I left London, and to know that there are people ready to hazard all these blessings [through sedition] does astonish, if we did not know what human nature always has been and will be.'<sup>8</sup> What was needed, as Castlereagh saw it, was a benign but cool-headed aristocracy, led by men who were strong enough to be uninterested in public opinion, and sensible enough to govern without pride.

These views were firm but not unfeeling. 'There is no bloodshed for which he does not grieve,' Castlereagh's Private Secretary reflected after the Irish Rebellion was over, 'and yet he has no tendency to injudicious mercy.' Castlereagh kept any unhappiness

carefully hidden; he only released his emotions when playing Handel on his 'cello or in letters to his wife, Emily, who remained dotty but devoted to the end. The public drew their own caricatures – a wise young man, able and dedicated, but cold in his manner and with 'a limited intercourse'. Meanwhile, the pessimism which ran through Castlereagh's character extended to his views about himself. 'I feel no confidence in myself', he told his uncle in 1796, 'beyond a general disposition for business, which perseverance and experience might ripen so as to qualify me to discharge the duties of an active situation.'<sup>9</sup> The famous clumsiness of his prose style was already apparent.

In England, Canning's confidence was blossoming. To confidence was added optimism about his fellow men. He was elected to the House of Commons in 1793, and by 1798 he was lecturing Parliament about the 'talents which God has given us for the benefit of our fellow creatures'.<sup>10</sup> Mankind, he thought, was perfectible, and the world might yet be improved. This would happen more quickly if he were in charge. He became obsessed with politics. In 1800, he fell in love with and married an heiress called Joan Scott. Her money gave him the independence he required. As repayment, he treated her as his closest confidante, sending her long and complicated letters analysing every coming in, going out, and piece of intrigue that he laid his hands on each day.

As talented young sceptics of the French Revolution, Canning and Castlereagh abandoned their Whig colleagues during the 1790s and became supporters of William Pitt. They were two of about a dozen disciples and followers, all around the same age, who had gathered together under the Prime Minister, and followed the master loyally in and out of office. Each was impressed by the sheer determination of a man vastly more talented than most others in Parliament, who seemed at times to be holding together the entire country as it was assailed by the revolutionary tide. But where Canning was drawn to Pitt out of loyalty and admiration for the man he christened the 'pilot who weathered the storm', Castlereagh never shook off his intellectual debt to a Prime Minister who was pragmatic, skilful and strong in adversity.

Pitt's death in 1806 left the two men in an alliance which was destined to fall apart. The Pittites excluded themselves from the

new Government – the Ministry of all the Talents – under Lord Grenville and agreed to stay together as a Pittite faction in floating Opposition. But when the Talents fell in March 1807, after abolishing the Slave Trade but achieving little else, each of the Pittites began to scurry around anxiously to secure his own return to high office.

By five o'clock on Wednesday 25 March 1807 the matter was settled. Canning sent a letter to his wife from the Foreign Office. 'Is my own dearest Love satisfied with this date? Will she be still more satisfied, when she hears that her letter quite decided me? I was nearly decided before – But I had a battle to fight & an intrigue to defeat, & to assert myself boldly – which I did – & here I am.'<sup>11</sup> Just as Canning was settling in as Foreign Secretary, Lord Castlereagh was a few yards away in Whitehall, acquainting himself with his own new responsibilities as Secretary of State for War and the Colonies. Both men were to be led by the Duke of Portland, whose qualifications as Prime Minister were his advanced age, his modesty and the fact that his appointment would offend the smallest number of people.

This was not an auspicious moment to become Foreign Secretary. Certainly, the prospects for survival against Napoleon were brighter than in the darkness of the early 1800s. Britain's naval supremacy had been confirmed by Nelson's victory at Trafalgar; the threat of a French invasion now seemed unreal. But on the Continent, Napoleon looked unbeatable. After victories at Austerlitz and Jena, Napoleon had reached a new summit of supremacy. This was illustrated in November 1806 by the inauguration of a 'Continental System', which banned all British goods from Europe. The French thought this blow would be crippling; the Continental System would cut off the sources of Britain's strength by distorting her trade, while adding to the discontent which was growing among merchants and industrialists in the north of England.

It fell to Canning to turn this situation around. For a long time he had argued that the key to Napoleon's downfall lay in the resistance of his conquered subjects. He had spoken in the House of Commons in December 1798 of risings against the French in Holland and Spain as proof that loyalty cannot be sustained by the sword. In this same spirit Canning outlined his foreign policy to the Commons on 15 June

1807: 'We shall proceed upon the principle that any nation of Europe that starts up to oppose a power . . . the common enemy of all nations, whatever be the existing political relations of that nation, it becomes instantly our essential ally.'<sup>12</sup> In practice, this meant supporting states that declared war against Napoleon of their own free choosing, but refusing to bribe countries into alliances before they had themselves declared war.

Canning never doubted that Britain was strong enough to defeat Napoleon. He argued that the key to England's international power lay in the self-reliance of its imperial economy. No Continental System could seriously affect this. Canning explained:

If ever the period should arrive when Great Britain being excluded from all Continental intercourse . . . the nations who now flatter themselves that they are the most necessary to her existence, who fancy that their commerce is one of the main springs of her power, would perhaps be the first to feel that that power is not created by foreign commerce . . . that this country has in itself in its own consumption and its own colonies ample means of self-existence; and that in her intercourse with other nations she bestows more benefit than she receives.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, a depression set in after the Continental System had been erected and after the British Government had established retaliatory measures. Canning had spent too long studying the Classics and not enough time reading Adam Smith. But it was this breezy confidence and sweeping vision which gave him the strength to face the first serious test of his ministerial career.

On 14 June 1807, Napoleon won a devastating victory over the Russians at Friedland. In so doing, he obliterated his last serious opposition on the Continent. Worse was to follow for Britain. Napoleon carried forward his victory by meeting the Russian Czar, Alexander, on a raft on the River Niemen, near the town of Tilsit in Russia, to discuss the terms of his defeat. There Bonaparte deployed to the full his ability to charm and frighten; Alexander was bewitched. In secret articles and agreements at Tilsit, Napoleon arranged with Alexander that if Britain did not restore to France all maritime conquests made since 1805 and make a series of major economic concessions, Russia would wage war on Britain. If this

happened, France and Russia would then compel the Danes, the Swedes and the Portuguese to join the Continental System and declare war upon Britain.<sup>14</sup> In this way, the remaining neutral states in Europe would be subsumed within a huge Napoleonic front against England. One way or another, the Danish and Portuguese navies would fall into Napoleon's hands, threatening that control of the seas on which Britain's security depended.

For several weeks, the new British Government had no idea about any of this. On 29 June there were rumours in London of a great battle in which the Russians had been involved. On the 30th it was clear to Canning that there had been some kind of disaster. By 7 July, the full nature of the defeat was apparent and news of an armistice filtered through.<sup>15</sup> But Canning, Castlereagh and the rest of the British Cabinet could only guess at what had gone on on that raft on the River Niemen, and had only a vague notion of the threats they now faced. Reports soon began to filter over to Britain about the cordiality of the Tilsit exchange. Spies, agents and ambassadors wrote from across Europe warning about some kind of Franco-Russian alliance. There was nothing uniform about their advice. They hypothesised about mysterious plans and cryptic commitments, basing their information on whispers and hearsay. Their reports were collated into dramatic dossiers of 'Secret Intelligence' and launched on to the Foreign Secretary's desk.<sup>16</sup>

We cannot tell how these reports affected Canning's idea of what had happened at Tilsit or his views on how Britain should react. Everything hung on the instincts and character of the new Foreign Secretary. By 10 July, Canning had 'no doubt that Bonaparte reckons on the Danish fleet at a fit time as an instrument of hostility against Great Britain'.<sup>17</sup> On 14 July, the Cabinet agreed to send a strong force to the Baltic.<sup>18</sup> Five days later, Lord Castlereagh wrote to Lieutenant-General Lord Cathcart, repeating Canning's warning in his own clunking prose: the 'most serious apprehensions' had arisen that the naval power and resources of Denmark 'may at no distant period be turned against this Country'. These apprehensions were to be explained to the Danes in full, but 'which explanations and representations however to have their due Weight, it is considered should not be entered upon until they can be supported by an adequate naval and military force assembled on the Spot'.<sup>19</sup>

The pace quickened when Canning received a letter on 21 July from the Count d'Antraigues, a peripatetic French émigré who bustled about lobbying for tougher action against the revolutionary French regime. His travels had taken him from France through Austria to Saxony, and into Russian pay. By 1807 he had settled in London, loosely attached to the Russian Embassy as a propagandist and spy.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps he was not the most reliable and objective source of intelligence to rely on when planning a dangerous operation – but in the shifting and confused world of the Napoleonic Wars, Foreign Secretaries had to make do with what they got. The letter d'Antraigues sent to Canning on 21 July reads like many of his other letters at the time. It was long and complicated, with a great deal of blather about his own affairs. But it began with a message which D'Antraigues claimed to have received from a Russian general close to the Czar. This general, while aboard the raft on the River Niemen, had heard plans for 'a maritime league of this country [Russia] against England and the unification of the Russian squadrons with those of Sweden and Denmark [as well as] the forces of Spain and Portugal in order to attack England at close quarters'.<sup>21</sup>

The information blew away any lingering caution in Canning's mind. He added a footnote to a letter he had been writing to Lord Gower, the British Ambassador in Russia: 'Since I finished my letter to you at two o'clock in the morning I have received intelligence which appears to rest on good authority, coming directly from Tilsit, that, at a conference between the Emperor of Russia and Bonaparte, the latter proposed a maritime league against Great Britain to which Denmark and Sweden and Portugal should be invited or forced to accede . . . If this be true our fleet in the Baltic may have more business than we expected.'<sup>22</sup>

The new information demanded tougher action. Just over a week later, a large expedition of ships and soldiers set sail. Canning made his instructions simple: 'the possession of the Danish fleet is the one main and indispensable object to which the whole of your negotiation is to be directed'. The Danes would be asked to give up their navy in exchange for subsidies and security. If the Danes rejected these offerings, more decisive measures would be required.<sup>23</sup> 'I am sure if we succeed we do a most effective service to the Country,' Canning scribbled in a letter to his wife on Friday 31 July. 'But the

measure is a bold one & if it fails – we must be impeached I suppose & dearest dear will have a Box at the Trial.’<sup>24</sup> The following day, Canning wrote to his wife about the one aspect of his Danish policy which was still bothering him:

... a mail which I received in the House last night, just at the moment when I sat down, brought me the account of the French being actually about to do that act of hostility, the possibility of which formed the groundwork of my Baltic plan. My fear was that the French might not be the aggressors – & then we would have approved a strong measure fully justifiable I think & absolutely necessary, but without apparent necessity as justification. Now the aggression will justify us fully: & yet be so timed as to give us all the merit (which we have a right to) of having foreseen & made preparation in time. I am therefore quite easy now as to the morality & political wisdom of our plan. – Now for the execution.’<sup>25</sup>

Canning slept badly during the next few weeks, alert with excitement and anxiety while waiting for news of the Danish mission. The diplomacy failed, the fighting started, and a naval bombardment of Copenhagen began. After three relentless days and considerable damage to life and property, the Danes asked for a truce. They agreed to give up the fleet if Britain evacuated its forces from Denmark.<sup>26</sup> The British sailed away accordingly, with the Danish fleet in tow.

When news of the attack reached London the reaction was mixed. George III had always been uneasy about the mission, complaining to Canning that it was ‘a very immoral act. So immoral that I won’t ask who originated it.’ The Opposition were equally unimpressed and launched their own attacks on Canning in the House of Commons. Thomas Moore, the poet, tried to explain Canning’s policy with an esoteric rhyme – ‘If Grotius be thy guide, shut, shut the book. In force alone for law of nations look’ – while the caricaturist Gillray drew a cartoon to celebrate the Copenhagen campaign. On balance, praise for the bold move outweighed the criticisms; even William Wilberforce concluded that the expedition was a justified measure of self-defence. But the arguments rumbled on into the following year, and in early February Canning had to defend the expedition in

full. In a speech lasting almost three hours, Canning pledged his honour to the accuracy of the intelligence and defended every action he had taken. Paying close attention was a young MP, Viscount Palmerston, who described Canning's speech as 'very witty, very eloquent and very able'.<sup>27</sup>

Canning argued that the Danish expedition was a pre-emptive measure to defuse an imminent threat. The imminence may have been exaggerated. Much of the intelligence Canning received was false, and some of it may have been planted by Napoleon to force Britain into a rash decision.<sup>28</sup> But Napoleon is said to have been furious when he heard about the British attack on Copenhagen, strongly suggesting that he did have some kind of Danish plan. This is confirmed by the secret articles of Tilsit which show that Napoleon intended to incorporate Denmark within his system of European alliances and client-states, and turn that mighty coalition against Britain.

Even before the Copenhagen expedition was over, the Tilsit tryst had begun to bear fruit in another part of Europe. The secret articles had referred to Portugal as well as Denmark, and by implication the Portuguese fleet. By six o'clock on 26 August 1807, Canning had reached his own conclusion about Napoleon's plans. 'We have more work upon our hands. Lisbon ought to be another Copenhagen.' Canning worked hard to persuade the Portuguese Royal Family to flee to Brazil before Napoleon exerted a stranglehold, but the Portuguese Regent wavered. On 26 November, the Royal Navy were instructed to blockade the Tagus unless the Royal Family agreed to escape with their navy to Brazil. At last, and with French troops closing in on Lisbon, the Regent joined the British on 28 November; the Portuguese fleet sailed the following day for Brazil under British escort. 'Huzza, Huzza, Huzza,' Canning wrote joyfully, 'Denmark was saucy and we were obliged to take her fleet. Portugal had confidence and we rescued hers.'<sup>29</sup>

With his typical swagger, Canning skirted over any regrets. Yet the larger question lingers on: were the bombardment of Copenhagen and the blockade of the Tagus just acts of war? The Catholic Church, embellishing Aquinas, tells us that a war must fulfil several criteria if it is just: it must be waged by a lawful authority; it must be fought for a just cause and underpinned by good intentions; the use of force

should be proportional; and it should also be a last resort. The Copenhagen mission was launched on what were plausible grounds of future self-defence. The threats in the Treaty of Tilsit were real enough; Nelson had destroyed nearly twenty men-of-war at Trafalgar, while Canning rescued more than thirty from Denmark and Portugal.<sup>30</sup> Force was employed only after diplomacy had failed and lasted no longer than was necessary. Many innocent people died in Copenhagen in September 1807, but if Canning had left the Danish fleet to Napoleon, he would have run the risk of far greater casualties when Napoleon challenged the Royal Navy and attempted a new invasion of Britain.

One hundred and thirty-three years later, Britain again stood in desperate danger. Again, an ally had collapsed in defeat. Once again, a powerful fleet seemed about to fall into the hands of the enemy; again, the British Government decided on a pre-emptive strike. On 3 July 1940 Admiral Somerville was ordered by Churchill, after negotiation had failed, to attack the French fleet at its base at Oran in Algeria. There were differences. Denmark was neutral, France had been an ally. The operation in Copenhagen was successful, the entire Danish fleet being captured, whereas in 1940 the battleship *Strasbourg* and other French ships escaped to Toulon. Copenhagen was bloodier; thousands of citizens were killed in the bombardment of the city. In each case there were some misgivings at home; but in each case the attack was justified by a certain danger and gave necessary proof of ruthless determination at a moment of weakness and doubt.

In the autumn of 1807, the British Government responded to Napoleon's Continental System. Orders in Council obliged all foreign ships to call at a British port to pay duty before visiting European ports from which British ships were excluded.<sup>31</sup> The effects were chaotic. During the course of 1808, international trade wound down to a standstill. In Britain, there were economic slumps and peace protests. In America, where trade was faltering, there were war-cries and some talked about an invasion of Canada. None of this seems to have had much effect on Castlereagh and Canning. They were both staunch advocates of the Orders in Council, and more worried about the dangers from Europe than from Yankee rebels who hated Britain already. Besides, by the

spring of 1808, the problem was overshadowed by new developments in Spain.

Just when it seemed as though Napoleon might be unbeatable, he made the first of his big mistakes. In the spring of 1808, he decided to make his brother, Joseph, the new King of Spain. Revolts, already brewing, now erupted across the Peninsula and Napoleon was forced to pour thousands of French troops into Spain. The crisis, an irritation to Napoleon, was for Canning a source of new hope and drama. He decided to support the struggling Spaniards with arms and equipment, while ignoring Joseph Bonaparte and recognising the Bourbon Ferdinand as the Spanish King. Some weapons captured from the Armada in 1588 were dusted down in the Tower of London and shipped back to Spain.<sup>32</sup>

In July 1808, a British army was dispatched to the Peninsula. Over the next months, erratic progress culminated in General Sir John Moore's Corunna campaign. Moore, a stern critic of the Government who was particularly baffled by Castlereagh's military dispatches, questioned the strategy but managed to carry out a series of delicate manoeuvres before Napoleon turned on him and chased him halfway across Spain. At Corunna, Moore fought a valiant rear-guard action, allowing his troops to evacuate peacefully, but he was mortally wounded. Both Castlereagh and Canning had to defend the expedition in Parliament. Castlereagh gave a pedestrian defence of the plans; Canning followed with a dazzling speech, but it is said that his words were eclipsed by the spectacle shining through the Commons' windows of Drury Lane Theatre burning down.<sup>33</sup>

In the spring of 1809, the Government was caught up and embarrassed by a scandal involving the sale of Army commissions by the Duke of York's mistress. The Duke resigned as Commander-in-Chief of the Army, but Canning's patience was wearing thin. He wrote a long letter to the Prime Minister complaining about the entire conduct of the war. In particular, he worried about the Government's 'spirit of compromise', the lack of a daring strategy, and the way that the Government had lost public confidence by its handling of the war in Spain. It was, he felt, his duty 'fairly to avow to your Grace, that the Government as at present constituted does not appear to me equal to the great task which it has to perform'. The Duke

of Portland, worried by what this statement might imply, invited Canning to discuss his concerns with him in person. Over the course of several days Canning's ultimatum became clear: there would be 'a change in Castlereagh's department, or mine'.<sup>34</sup>

Panic set in. Portland, anxious to avoid confrontations of any kind, scrabbled around for a compromise. Others were consulted – first Lord Bathurst, then Castlereagh's uncle, Lord Camden, even the King who devised complicated schemes by which Castlereagh might remain in Government but in a new position. But no one quite had the confidence to suggest any of these ideas to Castlereagh, and the problem stewed through the summer of 1809.

Perhaps the Duke of Portland should be forgiven for the loose and colluding part he played in those months. For several years, Canning and Castlereagh had sat calmly beside one another in Parliament. It is true that there had been tension between them and Canning had held a low opinion of Castlereagh's abilities for a long time.\* But this had always seemed compatible with the normal current of rivalry which runs through all political careers. Now Canning had infected that rivalry with an ultimatum much more ruthless than before. We cannot know whether expunging Castlereagh from the Government was Canning's main goal, or merely a tool to accelerate his own career. Either way, Canning was playing outside the normal rules of politics and the Duke of Portland was not a strong umpire.

Meanwhile, in Europe, the Austrians had turned on Napoleon and won a major victory at Aspern. Somehow, the British Government had to find a way of pressing home the advantage. The plan which they came up with – an amphibious expedition up the River Scheldt to seize the island of Walcheren, destroy French lines of communication, and attack Antwerp – was not new, but it was greeted with a flurry of fresh objections from the senior military advisers to the Government, who worried that the operation was unfeasible and based on faulty intelligence. These were minor details for someone like Canning; he and Castlereagh brushed off the military concerns. Something had to be done quickly before the French regained the

\* One particularly alert biographer of Canning found a table drawn up by Canning in 1807, charting the motley abilities of his colleagues. This fierce piece of analysis placed Castlereagh at the bottom of the pile. See Dixon, *Canning*, pp. 98–9.

initiative. On 21 June, the Cabinet gave the go-ahead to the Walcheren plan.

The Castlereagh-Canning dilemma now reached new levels of complexity. One Cabinet Minister was insisting on the dismissal of another; yet both were at a crucial stage of essential work. No one in the Cabinet wanted to upset the War Secretary while the Walcheren expedition was getting under way; everyone was equally desperate to stop Canning leaving the Government. Lord Eldon, Lord Chatham, Lord Harrowby, Lord Liverpool and Spencer Perceval were all drawn into the confusion. Castlereagh, consumed by hard work, knew nothing of what was afoot.

On 21 July, news reached England that the Austrian army had been defeated by Napoleon at Wagram, bringing to an end the resistance to French domination in Central Europe. The whole basis for the Walcheren expedition now evaporated – but the Cabinet ploughed on. On 28 July, Castlereagh, Canning and Spencer Perceval travelled down to Deal to see the British force of 40,000 troops set sail for Walcheren. The Duke of Portland now decided that something could be done to solve the Castlereagh problem. A plan was agreed: Castlereagh would be moved out of his post and into the House of Lords; Lord Camden would break the news to his nephew. But Camden could not bring himself to do it. Canning became more and more irritated by the concealment – but refused to remove his demand. At last Portland agreed to say something to Castlereagh; soon afterwards, he suffered an epileptic fit.<sup>35</sup>

What should be done with Castlereagh? Who should be the next Prime Minister? These two questions tangled with each other. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Spencer Perceval, and Canning were the obvious candidates; they tested each other's ambitions carefully, like prize fighters poking for weaknesses. Meanwhile, the news that Flushing had been successfully taken by the British expeditionary force reached London, driving Castlereagh into new convolutions: 'so hazardous and critical an operation (danger of navigation included) as our expedition to Antwerp is, I believe never was before attempted – so God send us a good deliverance'.<sup>36</sup>

But God sent no deliverance. With heavy rainfall slowing the expedition, the French opened the dykes on the waterways; the

British troops were already up to their knees in water. The water spread a fever peculiar to the region, and soon huge numbers of British soldiers were sick. The Commander-in-Chief of the Walcheren expedition, Lord Chatham, now admitted that it would be impossible to move on and attack Antwerp. This was the final straw for Canning. He demanded that Castlereagh be removed immediately. But Spencer Perceval and Lord Liverpool were reluctant to offend Castlereagh and set out a more cautious approach. They suggested a general reshuffle and persuaded the incapacitated Duke of Portland to resign. The Duke accepted this solution, but warned Canning that Castlereagh could not be dismissed out of hand. Canning responded by hinting at his own resignation, and refused to attend Cabinet the next day.

At this point, during the Cabinet meeting on 7 September, Castlereagh began to suspect that something was going on. It must have been sheer pressure of wartime work which had blunted Castlereagh's usual shrewdness up to then. Sir Thomas Lawrence thought Castlereagh was particularly downcast during his portrait session later that same afternoon. In the evening, Castlereagh asked his uncle, Lord Camden, to explain the situation. The story began to come out. Castlereagh resigned the following day, agreeing to carry on administrative business at the War Department for the time being but refusing to take part in policy. In Walcheren, the situation continued to deteriorate. By 11 September, almost 11,000 troops were ill.<sup>37</sup>

On 13 September, the King sent for Canning to consult on the formation of a new Ministry. Canning initially suggested Spencer Perceval as Prime Minister, but was willing to undertake the job if His Majesty so wished. The King refused the offer and later described the conversation as the 'most extraordinary he had ever heard'. Canning continued to wait hopefully, although now worried by the 'constant meetings and co-jobberations' at Spencer Perceval's house. It was also curious – or so Canning thought – that Castlereagh had somehow disappeared 'as thro' a trap door'.<sup>38</sup> But Castlereagh had not disappeared. On 16 September he wrote a long-winded letter to his old colleague, Edward Cooke: 'If my colleagues (whose support and confidence I had no reason to doubt accompanied me throughout my late anxious and laborious duties) are either unable or unwilling

to sustain me in that situation [the War Department] I desire in that case only the privilege of being allowed to defend out of office my own public character and conduct.'<sup>39</sup>

Three days later, Castlereagh wrote to Canning directly: 'You continued to sit in the same Cabinet with me, and to leave me not only in the persuasion that I possessed your confidence as a colleague, but you allowed me, tho' thus virtually superseded, in breach of every principle both public and private to originate and proceed in the Execution of a new Enterprise of the most arduous and important nature, with your apparent concurrence and ostensible approbation.'<sup>40</sup> Apparently, this was an unavoidable challenge to personal honour. At half past ten the following morning, Canning sent the following reply: 'The tone and purport of your Lordship's letter (which I have this moment received) of course precludes any other answer, on my part, to the misapprehensions and misrepresentations, with which it abounds, than that I will cheerfully give to your Lordship the satisfaction that you require.'<sup>41</sup>

News of the duel travelled quickly. Within days, Londoners could choose from a full selection of rhymes and satires about the contest. There were also serious conclusions to be drawn. The Whig *Morning Chronicle* voiced one of them: 'To suppose it possible after the disgusting exhibition they have made, to form out of their dispersed and disordered ranks a Government that could stand, is the height of absurdity.' It was indeed absurd. Both Canning and Castlereagh slunk off to the back benches; on 4 October Spencer Perceval was appointed Prime Minister; twenty-two days later the long-suffering Duke of Portland died; finally, on 4 November, the order was submitted to evacuate the island of Walcheren.<sup>42</sup>

Castlereagh wrote to the King to apologise for his part in the duel, but denied that Canning had had any grounds to complain about his work as Secretary of State for War. Canning tried to defend his own actions by publishing the correspondence which had led to the duel, but the attempt backfired. Yet Canning did have a case. Castlereagh's administration of the military effort had been clumsy as well as unlucky. But Canning had pushed the argument too far and at the wrong time; the wide support he once had now deserted him.

Historians and observers would later take this duel as the high

point of the argument between the two men. Their two most famous biographers, Sir Charles Webster and Harold Temperley, filled the pages of a renowned journal in 1929 with a learned dispute about its causes and consequences. But this had been a duel of ambitions not ideas; fierce personal competition rather than ideological rancour had been the animating force. The strange and interesting part of the Castlereagh and Canning story followed the physical contest. The intellectual dispute became sharp and real. As the personal relationship was slowly restored between Castlereagh and Canning, a series of political arguments broke out between them about Britain's position in the post-war world. These arguments reached back to their earliest ideas and drew on each man's instinctive beliefs. They unfolded in an altogether more stimulating manner than any violent quarrel about jobs.

During the next two and a half years George III faded into a final, incurable bout of madness. The Prince of Wales at last achieved those powers of Regency which his Whig friends, led by Lord Grey, had long hoped for. He at once let them down. Instead of appointing a new Whig government as expected, the Regent kept in place the existing Tory Administration under Spencer Perceval. Perceval abandoned his attempt at bringing Whigs in to his Government and now looked back to older friends. On 18 February 1812, at the second time of asking, some twenty-nine months after he handed in his resignation as Secretary of State for War, Lord Castlereagh agreed to return to the front benches as the new Foreign Secretary. Canning, still condemned to the back benches, had paid the heavier price for the duel.

Not much had changed in the world. Napoleon continued to dominate most of Europe. Britain had found a new military hero in Arthur Wellesley, who later became the Duke of Wellington, but even he had made only a stilted progress in Spain. Meanwhile the pressure of unrelenting warfare continued to fuel disgruntlement across England. As the economic effects of the Orders in Council became steadily more erratic and controversial in Britain and also in America, an Inquiry into the Orders was proposed in April 1812. But before any headway could be made in reforming the system, fate changed the game. As Spencer Perceval was walking through the lobby of

the House of Commons on his way to the Inquiry on 11 May, he was shot through the heart and killed. The assassin was an insane businessman called John Bellingham who had been financially ruined by the Orders in Council.\*

The tragedy suspended the normal functioning of Government. The Regent flailed around in search of a new Prime Minister. After several false starts and widespread confusion he chose Lord Liverpool on 8 June 1812. Castlereagh was to continue as Foreign Secretary and now also as the Leader of the House of Commons. From the Peninsula, Wellington wrote to Lord Liverpool with typical terseness to welcome him to his new Office. 'You have undertaken a most gigantic task, and I don't know how you will get through it . . . However, there is nothing like trying.'<sup>43</sup>

Within a fortnight the gigantic task had become titanic. On 16 June a motion was put forward to repeal the Orders in Council. Under pressure, the Government conceded. But unaware of this retreat, and furious after years of being bullied by the Royal Navy, the Americans declared war on Britain two days later.

The American war was always going to be a sideshow to the European conflict, and it did not resolve any of the issues which had caused it. The Americans invaded Canada, where they sacked the city of York, now Toronto; the British burned Washington in revenge. The conflict then sank into a fierce stalemate. The tenacity of the Americans surprised even cautious observers, but the war did not have the devastating effect on Great Britain's struggle against Napoleon which most wars on two fronts are supposed to have.

No one could have predicted this when the fighting broke out in 1812. With Britain now at war on two continents and the Government in a state of general disarray, the Regent decided to intervene. The Government needed politicians who could hold their own against the Opposition, with skills of oratory and 'especially of retort'. The Prince took it upon himself to broker an agreement between Castlereagh and Canning in order to get Canning back into Government. Surely, as he explained to Castlereagh's half-brother,

\* Today, John Bellingham's descendant Henry Bellingham is a bastion of respectability as the Conservative Member of Parliament for North West Norfolk.

Sir Charles Stewart, there was nothing between Castlereagh and Canning 'which the weighty, enormous and difficult crisis of the country ought not to soften down and bury in oblivion'.<sup>44</sup>

But even the weighty, enormous and difficult crisis of the country was not enough to soften Canning's pride. Canning met Castlereagh; they shook hands; they agreed to let bygones be bygones; but they could not agree about how they could work together in Government. The offer which Castlereagh made to Canning was generous. He would relinquish the Foreign Office to Canning, but keep the Leadership of the House of Commons and also assume the Chancellorship of the Exchequer. Yet Canning could not bring himself to agree on the grounds that by keeping the Leadership of the House of Commons Castlereagh would technically be his superior.

Canning had made a huge mistake. On 24 June Napoleon had launched a massive army of around 600,000 French troops across the River Niemen to invade Russia; six months later only 40,000 would drag themselves back. After so many ripples and eddies this way and that, the tide in Europe had finally turned but Canning was not there to profit from it in his own career. Some years later, Canning would look back ruefully on Castlereagh's offer – 'the handsomest ever yet made to an individual'.<sup>45</sup>

After defying the French invaders, the Russian Czar, Alexander, decided to rescue the rest of Europe from Napoleon's claws. Castlereagh dispatched Lord Cathcart as the new Ambassador to Russia. His instructions were vague: 'Whatever scheme of policy can most immediately combine the greatest number of powers and the greatest force against France ... before she can recruit her armies and recover her ascendancy is that which we must naturally desire most to promote.' With the help of Nathan Rothschild, who worked hard to raise cash on Castlereagh's behalf, the British began to persuade the other powers in Europe to join yet another alliance against Bonaparte.\* On 27 February 1813 a treaty was

\* Nathan Rothschild played a remarkable role in Britain's war effort, providing finance as well as an impressive intelligence network for the allies. A year later, Castlereagh received a note from Lord Liverpool which ended with a quiet statement of Rothschild's importance: 'P.S. – Mr Rothschild has been a very useful friend. I do not know what we should have done without him last year.' See Charles Webster, *The Foreign Policy of Castlereagh* (London: G. Bell, 1931–4), Vol. 1, pp. 38; 543.

signed with Prussia; in June Castlereagh managed to pass a treaty of alliance with Sweden which granted subsidies as well as the use of the Royal Navy in annexing Norway if the Swedes sent 30,000 troops to Germany. In the same month Wellington won a decisive victory in the Peninsula at Vittoria and Joseph Bonaparte was bundled out of Spain. Weeks later the Austrians declared war against France.<sup>46</sup>

Canning's career unravelled at almost the same speed as Napoleon's. There was small profit in opposing a victorious government. Half-hearted attacks on the Government's 'half-afraid' war with the USA came to little. The Norwegian conquest 'filled him with shame, regret and indignation', but he could do little about it beyond quarrelling with Castlereagh in Parliament.<sup>47</sup> He began to think about leaving politics altogether. In 1814 he decided to travel to Portugal to improve the health of his eldest son. The Ministry learned of his plans and asked him to become the British Ambassador in Lisbon. Canning accepted the posting under pressure. He did not return until 1816.

Years of chaotic and exhausting warfare with Napoleon were reaching their final climax. The man who had controlled most of Europe for a decade was at last on the run. His opponents sensed blood and drove forward. Castlereagh grasped the opportunity which opened up before him and focused his energy and expertise on bringing the long conflict to a close. He was ably supported by the new Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, who began to show himself as a man of cautiousness, plain sense and determination.

Castlereagh was confronted by two major problems as he pursued his task. The first was how to draw the various strands of counter-offensive against Napoleon into a coherent campaign. It was clear that what was needed was a new system of co-operation. The individual interests of the allies had to take second place to their shared interest in beating Napoleon. But achieving this would require levels of discipline and self-restraint which had been absent in the earlier coalitions, and a new, intense and regular pattern of consultation. As Castlereagh put it in August 1813, 'before Lord W[ellington] forms his future plans, he must know what is to happen in Germany; his whole policy must be governed upon that of the Allies'. This did not mean abandoning the work in Spain, but co-ordinating the effort

there with a powerful thrust against Napoleon in Central Europe. We have done wonders in the Peninsula,' Castlereagh told Lord Cathcart, 'but don't let the experiment be tried of a single combat again in that quarter. We may sink before the undivided power of France: and if we do, Germany, and even Russia, will soon resume their fetters.'<sup>48</sup> From this desperate need for European co-operation against Napoleon flowed the whole philosophy of a Concert of Europe, which in different forms strongly influenced the diplomacy of the next hundred years.

The first problem led naturally to the second. Europe had been in tumult for two decades; years of conquest and upheaval had wiped out the structures which had defined the old order. Victory against Napoleon would have to be followed by diplomacy and reconstruction on a scale unknown since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. But the allies each had their own ideas for what Europe should look like after the wars. There was a particular argument about whether Napoleon had to be removed from the French throne or whether Europe could be liberated without regime change in France. The Austrians favoured the second option because of the check Napoleon would have on the other powers in Europe, and because he was married to their Emperor's daughter. But, slowly, Castlereagh came to realise that there could be no peace in Europe with Napoleon in power. 'Fatal would it be for them, and for the world, if they could for a moment think of seeking their safety in what is called a Continental peace.'<sup>49</sup> A lasting peace would depend on whether the European powers could agree on some kind of system, some new alignment of nations and empires in Europe which could withstand the competing forces and rivalries which had contributed to Napoleon's rise.

As wise men do when faced with great difficulties, Castlereagh looked to the past; as a good Pittite, he wondered what his master would have done. His research came to rest on a thoughtful but winding memorandum on the 'Deliverance and Security of Europe' which Pitt had drawn up in 1805.<sup>50</sup> The plan had come to nothing at the time but it fitted Castlereagh's worldview. He sent a copy to Cathcart in April 1813. 'As an outline to reason I send you ... a dispatch on which the confederacy in 1805 was founded,' he explained. 'I well remember having more than one conversation with

Mr Pitt on its details before he wrote it.' The 'main features we are agreed upon', Castlereagh told Cathcart, were 'that to keep France we need great masses'.

Occasionally in history we come across documents which achieve little in their own right but which articulate something so powerfully that the central ideas take on a life of their own. There was no penetrating rhetoric or imaginative prose in Pitt's memorandum, nor was the basic tenor of his proposal particularly new. France had to be kept in check, and this meant surrounding it with 'great masses', creating territorial balances and power blocs around it to deter fresh expansion or daring attacks. But the rigour and completeness of Pitt's memorandum lifted it above others of its time. First Castlereagh, and then, much later, a Harvard academic called Henry Kissinger saw it as a template for ending the Napoleonic Wars. Indeed, as Dr Kissinger illustrated, 'the Pitt plan became the blueprint of Castlereagh's policy'.<sup>51</sup>

There was also a hidden subtlety to Pitt's memorandum, and it was this which Castlereagh seized and deployed to maximum effect. Pitt had realised that in the clashing world of revolutions and mass warfare it was not enough just to shift around territories and armies, as if playing a game of Risk. The 'great mass' foreign policy, with its border changes, power blocs, empires balancing empires, could only be part of the solution. It had been the bread and butter of eighteenth-century diplomacy, but it was not quite palatable now. New devices were needed to keep revolutionary France from spreading its ideas abroad using force; Pitt had sketched these out in his usual meandering way:

... in order to render this Security as complete as possible, it seems necessary, at the period of a general Pacification, to form a Treaty to which all the principal powers of Europe should be Parties ... and they should all bind themselves mutually to protect and support each other, against any attempt to infringe them – It should re-establish a general and comprehensive system of Public Law in Europe, and provide, as far as possible, for repressing future attempts to disturb the general Tranquillity, and above all, for restraining any projects of Aggrandizement and Ambition similar to those which have produced all the Calamities inflicted on Europe since the disastrous era of the French Revolution ...<sup>52</sup>