

“The Representative Man”

Book Reviews
by Tony Little

Kenneth Bourne:

Palmerston: The Early Years 1783-1841
(Allen Lane, 1982)

Donald Southgate: *The Most English Minister*
(Macmillan, 1966)

The great boon for nineteenth century historians is the availability of materials. The spread of literacy, the efficient post, and the growth of the civil service left a mass of paper. Despite the second world war, the ravages of time and the destruction of obviously embarrassing documents much has survived, even material never intended for publication. But this plentiful supply is also the historian's greatest curse. The availability of written evidence sometimes makes one forget that most politics, even then, involved meetings and conversations, the bulk of which were never recorded. In addition, the sheer bulk of correspondence, diaries, memos and memoirs referring to long lived statesmen require an army of researchers or a lifetime to master.

Palmerston is a prime example. He accepted his first ministerial post in 1807, before securing election to parliament, and died as prime minister 58 years later. Throughout that period he was out of office for less than 10 years and was only off the front bench for three years. Such a career inevitably left a mass of documentation dense enough to defeat the most assiduous historian and sufficient to support a range of controversies. Bourne's book covers the first, most neglected part of the career; Southgate's rather older tome the whole life but with most weight given to the period after 1846. So, until Bourne's work is complete, this pair offers the best detailed modern examination of the early Victorian era's dominant statesman. Although Bourne's is the first modern biography to claim full access to the Palmerston papers, for the period the two books share, it is surprising how much they overlap and how much their judgements coincide.

Palmerston was a slow starter. The first twenty years of his career, longer than most politicians ever achieve, was spent in middle ranking office, frequently passed over for promotion. But this time was not wasted. He was given the space in which to become at ease in the Commons, for he was not a natural orator. He gained experience and demonstrated skill at managing a frequently obtuse and obstructive bureaucracy. He had the time for an extensive and expensive social life.

The period from 1820 until 1859 was one of great fluidity in British politics. Although the Commons never entirely solidified into a two party system, after 1859 it functioned more clearly on party rather than factional lines. Palmerston reflected the ambiguity of the period and would have been happier with the description Liberal Conservative rather than

the honorary Whig he became after 1830 through his association with Lady Cowper, his mistress and Melbourne's sister. His Liberalism caused his resignation from the Tory government in 1827. His conservative inclinations made him resistant to constitutional reform from the time of the Great Reform Bill until his death.

“Liberalism all over the world”

Pam's great abiding interest was in foreign affairs. He was Foreign Secretary from 1830-1841 and again from 1846-1851. When he was Prime Minister after 1855 and again from 1859-1865 he still effectively controlled foreign policy. It was here that his Liberalism made itself most clearly felt. His first great parliamentary speech, against the Wellington government, was in favour of Greek nationalism and secured him his place in the Whig government of 1830. He welcomed the 1830 continental revolutions. He appeared the firm supporter of the 1848 nationalist uprisings. He helped achieve the unification of Italy in 1859 - a key factor in bringing the forces of the Liberal Party into a cohesive whole. Palmerston played the leading role in the creation of Belgium, down to the treaty which formed the *casus belli* of the Great War in 1914. Throughout his career, Pam was a leading crusader against slavery.

The key to understanding Palmerston is to recognise his sympathy for his time. He was popular with the electorate, he was one of the early manipulators of the press to secure that popularity and to use it in forwarding his policies, but this was subsidiary. He was a British nationalist who always sought to advance that interest at a time when the navy ruled the seas and Britain was the dominant world economic power. But even this was not the critical factor. Palmerston instinctively embodied the views of the country at the time in the way that Churchill did in the second world war.

Palmerston was not an imperialist in the subsequently accepted meaning of the term. He disdained the conquest of other nations: *“Let us try to improve all these countries by the general influence of our commerce, but let us all abstain from a crusade of conquest which would call down upon us the condemnation of all other civilised nations...”* was how Palmerston stated the position formally. His more informal instruction to Cowley sums it up even better - *“We do not want Egypt any more than any rational man with an estate in the north of England and a residence in the south would have wished to possess the inns on the north road. All he would want would have been that the inns should be well kept, always accessible and furnishing him, when he came with mutton chops and post horses.”*

Palmerston saw the crucial significance of the French Revolution and of the settlement of the Napoleonic wars in 1815. Throughout, his foreign policy aimed to preserve the balance of power in Europe. He sought to prevent the other great powers coalescing to achieve dominance, or, by allying Britain to potential aggressors, to moderate their demands. He also recognised that this balance of power could not be maintained by the reactionary techniques of a Russia or an Austria. Constitutional, but not democratic, governments were more effective in providing for the needs of their own peoples and less inclined to the glory of war than autocracies.

While glorifying Britain's adaptable constitution he never sought to impose it on others.

His reputation for aggrandisement rests not on the colonies added to Britain's realm but on his aggressive foreign policy techniques. Occasionally this went OTT, as when Pam used military force against the Greeks to achieve satisfaction for the dubious claims of Don Pacifico, but overwhelmingly his threats of force prevented rather than caused wars. He only threatened where it was thought he could deliver but where, as in Poland or Hungary, Britain was unable to intervene militarily Palmerston still thought it worth while to lecture Russia or Austria on the benefits of reform. The only major war of the period to involve Britain, the Crimean, occurred when his Foreign Office rival, Aberdeen, was at the helm, employing techniques closer to Neville Chamberlain's. To be effective Palmerstonian policy depended on subterfuge, a willingness to wield a scathing pen and an apparent willingness to resort to arms. With members of the royal family and his own government colleagues in regular, friendly correspondence with his autocratic continental opponents, it is not surprising that he built a reputation for arrogance and independence nor that he sometimes failed to inform the Queen of his intentions until it was too late for her (or Albert) to interfere.

"We cannot go on legislating for ever"

Palmerston only played a limited part in domestic policy. Even as a junior minister, his war office responsibilities had primarily a foreign orientation. Traditionally he is seen as an obstacle in the path of Liberal reform. He tried to moderate the 1832 Reform Bill. His opposition to Gladstonian financial reforms, when PM, remind one of Mrs T's relations with Nigel Lawson or Geoffrey Howe at the end of her career, and in his final term of office he effectively postponed consideration of a further reform act. He recognised that there would be strange doings "when Gladstone has my place" and perhaps this is one of his reasons for clinging to office until he died. Throughout his premierships his policies were sufficiently conservative for the Tories generally to support him in office.

Yet while Palmerston was conservative he was not a Tory. His policy objectives were to preserve aristocratic power by efficient administration while tolerating sufficient reform to head off unrest. He was never an autocratic reactionary trying to defend the indefensible or seeking to put the clock back. It is this outlook which unifies Palmerston's foreign and domestic policies.

Palmerston's resistance to change is also easy to overestimate. Even when in Tory governments he supported Catholic emancipation and his role in the 1832 reform was as an intermediary trying to secure an agreement with Tory moderates and prevent a deadlock with the Lords. In the 1840s he supported factory legislation and had close links with Shaftesbury. When Home Secretary in the Aberdeen coalition, he promoted the Truck Act of 1853 and supported public health reforms to prevent intra-mural burial in churches and to improve London's sewerage. As premier he kept Gladstone at the Treasury despite his acknowledged hostility, his fiscal reforms and his resistance to Pam's defence expenditure.

Both these books are long and detailed. They assume some knowledge of foreign affairs and occasionally make leaps in argument that would leave a beginner groping for a handhold on the reasoning. While Bourne seeks to give a detailed exposition of the early career, the minutiae sometimes smother the larger view. His access to the private papers allow a clearer understanding of the sometimes scandalous social life and the difficulties Palmerston faced in balancing his finances despite his extensive estates. Southgate has drawn on his wide experience of the era and presents his judgements in a comfortable and balanced style. By no means a hero worshipper he comes down broadly in favour of Palmerston's style. A reader with time for only one of these works should prefer Southgate.

After the second Russian revolution, the balance of power in Europe Palmerston sought so strenuously to preserve may again be the most important consideration in foreign policy. Let us hope that our age brings forth a more worthy successor to Pam than the Tories can provide.

A Liberal in Power

Book Review
by Malcolm Baines

Roy Jenkins: *Asquith*
(Collins, 1964, reprinted 1978, 1986)

Asquith and his biographer, Roy Jenkins, have often been compared, although more for their reputations as *bon viveurs* than for their comparative success as statesmen. What is conveyed very powerfully in this biography is Asquith's extraordinary administrative and political effectiveness as Prime Minister. Jenkins briefly considers whether Asquith was our greatest twentieth century peacetime PM and concludes that although Attlee, Baldwin and Macmillan all have claims on that title, none actually compares with him in terms of authority over his colleagues, the impression of permanence of command over the nation, or comfortableness in holding the post of PM. Whether in the light of Thatcher's 11 years at No.10 Jenkins would now revise that judgment must, however, await a future edition.

For Liberals, attention has always focused not only on the achievements of the 1906-1914 government, but also on Asquith's part in the subsequent decline of the Liberals to minority party status. Jenkins deals with Asquith's fall in great detail, effectively explaining it as Lloyd George's ability to build a coalition with Bonar Law, the Tory leader whom Asquith had always distrusted and underrated. However, Asquith's final years after his 1916 resignation as PM are only cursorily covered. The issue of the voting records of individual Liberal MPs following the Maurice debate in the Commons on Lloyd George's veracity regarding the number of UK troops in France being used to determine the denial of the coupon to Liberals supporting Asquith which led to the party's disastrous result in the 1918 election is covered, but there is little about