



JOHN EHRMAN

John Patrick William Ehrman

1920–2011

JOHN EHRMAN was born in London on 17 March 1920, the only child of Albert and Rina (née Bendit) Ehrman. His paternal grandfather, whose forebears had been settled near the Rhine in Frankfurt, Württemberg and Alsace, migrated to England in the mid-nineteenth century and founded with an English partner a merchant firm specialising in the supply of industrial diamonds. It was the first such firm in England and became very successful. His only son, Albert, was called away from Charterhouse in 1906 to join the firm in High Holborn. Albert Ehrman was a cultivated man. Business trips to Amsterdam and Paris enabled him to learn Dutch and French, and he never forgot his school Latin. He married Rina in April 1919 and moved to the small town of Broxbourne, Hertfordshire. While ‘recovering from a bout of influenza in Eastbourne’ he saw in a bookstore by ‘happy chance’ a folio volume published in Venice in 1472; attracted by the beauty of the typography, he purchased it. A love of these early books combined with a developing enthusiasm for ‘learning about the invention and spread of printing’ led to an extensive and important collection of incunabula and other rare books which, for convenience of brevity, he named the Broxbourne Library.¹ With Rina and their son, John, he soon moved to London, residing at 38 Lowndes Street. But Albert Ehrman was fond of sailing and had taken instruction in navigation—as a boy at Charterhouse he had hoped to become a naval architect. In 1936 he built a house at Clobb Copse, Buckler’s Hard on the Beaulieu

¹A. Ehrman, ‘Contemporary collectors II: The Broxbourne Library,’ *The Book Collector* 3.3 (Autumn 1954), 190–1.

River in Hampshire and soon added a structure to house the Broxbourne Library. In due course he also found time to design a series of motor yachts for himself. Thus, while continuing to manage a successful business, he 'pursued his twin loves of boats and books'. Sixty years later, John Ehrman would write: 'I grew up, in London and on the banks of the Beaulieu River in Hampshire, against this dual background; when in London, a world of book collectors and curators, publishers and some of their authors and illustrators.'²

From an early age John Ehrman enjoyed reading history and was increasingly drawn to English history from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Entering Charterhouse in 1933 he became a 'History specialist' and had the good fortune to study under John Morgan and Robert Birley (later Sir Robert). There can be no doubt that he enjoyed his days at Charterhouse. In his last year he triumphed in the public schools sailing championship. His delight in wit and humour were scarcely suppressible. In 1983, Ian Wallace recalled that as a member of a small group of Sixth Form History Specialists he was 'forbidden to sit next to one of the outstanding historians of his generation, John Ehrman, because the resultant helpless laughter quickly infected' others. It was quite a group, gaining five entrance awards to Oxford and Cambridge. Two did not survive the war. Lawrence Stone became a historian of great distinction at Oxford and Princeton. Ian Bryce Wallace became an actor excelling in comic parts, a (bass-baritone) opera favourite, and the star of the BBC Radio 4 quiz show 'My Music'.³ Those familiar with Wallace's unflinching good nature and robust sense of fun can readily understand why Ehrman was unable to stifle his laughter. In summer 1939 Ehrman and Wallace walked in the Cotswolds and travelled in America together.

Ehrman went up to Trinity College, Cambridge in autumn 1938. He had joined the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve in the summer. He expected to be called up when war broke out in September 1939, but the government's policy for university students allowed him to finish a second year and take the examinations for Part I of the History Tripos, in which he earned a Starred First. He later observed: 'I thus had the advantage of two years under supervisors who included Philip Grierson, Charles Smyth, and above all, and influentially, George Kitson Clark.'⁴

² John Ehrman, British Academy memorandum lodged with the Academy in 1996.

³ Ian Wallace's obituary of Michael Trollope in *The Carthusian*, Dec. 1983.

⁴ Ehrman, British Academy memorandum.

Immediately after completing his examinations in June 1940 he was ordered to HMS *King Alfred* in Hove and from there to duty as an acting sub-lieutenant, reporting aboard HMS *Gloxinia* (K 22) on 8 August 1940, a fortnight before she was commissioned. The *Gloxinia* was a Flower-Class corvette. In 1939–40 the Royal Navy ordered hundreds of these small escort vessels to be built. Nicholas Monsarrat, author of *The Cruel Sea* (also from Trinity College, Cambridge but ten years older), was appointed to an almost identical corvette commissioned a fortnight later. As sailors remarked, ‘A corvette would roll on wet grass.’⁵ Thus the only offspring of Albert and Rina Ehrman was embarked in a small ship of war in dangerous seas. They were probably not able to see him off. From 1940 to 1942 they were in New York, where the firm had an office. Years before the war, apprehensive about international developments, Albert Ehrman had refused to sell industrial diamonds to Germany or Russia; his mission in 1940 was to ensure that the United Kingdom would be well supplied and that no diamonds would go to the Axis powers.⁶ The Ehrmans also supported national defence by donating two ‘presentation’ Spitfires and two Fulmars, each plane reckoned by Lord Beaverbrook’s scheme to cost £5,000.⁷

John Ehrman reported to his ship in Londonderry. Walking from the train station to the base he met with a nasty surprise, being pelted with rotten vegetables and probably worse because he had made the mistake of walking down ‘a Catholic street’. The *Gloxinia* put to sea on 27 August and within a month was picking up survivors from two torpedoed vessels in its convoy.

After two and a half months of North Atlantic service the ship was assigned to the Mediterranean. She escorted supply ships from Gibraltar to Malta and assisted, in early 1941, the resupply of British forces defending Greece. Soon these forces had to be hurriedly evacuated, and small ships like *Gloxinia* were essential because minor Greek ports had to be used. These were hazardous missions. There was no air cover, so embarkations had to be done at night and as the ships sailed away in morning daylight they were bombed relentlessly by the German aircraft. Ehrman’s ship missed the horrendous evacuation of Crete. She had been ordered to

⁵N. Monsarrat, *Monsarrat at Sea* (London, 1975), p. 26.

⁶N. Barker, ‘Albert Ehrman, 6 February 1890–12 August 1969’, *The Book Collector* (Winter, 1970), 458.

⁷H. Boot and R. Sturtivant, *Gifts of War: Spitfires and other Presentation Aircraft in Two World Wars* (Tonbridge, 2005), notes the Ehrman gifts (pp. 28, 227, 368, 384). Their gift of Fulmars, navy carrier-based aircraft, was almost unique.

Malta where the Grand Harbour was closed by mines; convoyed supplies could not get in and a squadron of destroyers could not get out. *Gloxinia* was specially equipped for magnetic mine-sweeping. Experimentally, on 9 May, depth charges were dropped by an assemblage of small vessels to detonate the mines.

The scheme was a triumphant success . . . It has to be recorded, however, that when the *Gloxinia*, towing her magnetic sweep, or ‘fluffing her tail’, as they called it, led the convoy into harbour the next day, nearly a dozen more mines went up as she steamed through the breakwater entrance.⁸

Shortly thereafter she was damaged by an acoustical mine and slated for repair in Malta Dockyard. Since Malta was under continual aerial bombardment in 1941 the work went slowly, and personnel understandably complained of lack of sleep—evidently not John Ehrman, who was able to sleep well all his life; this may have been the occasion when, off duty, he slept through the moment when a bomb fell on his ship. He was promoted to lieutenant in January 1942. During the early months of the year the ship operated with the ‘Inshore Squadron’ that convoyed supplies from Alexandria to beleaguered Tobruk, where she was also engaged in mine-sweeping. On this service there was danger from both air and submarine attack, but *Gloxinia* was unscathed. In June she was assigned to escorting Levant convoys. Probably in April 1943 Ehrman left her under orders for re-appointment.

After completing the specialised navigation course at Portsmouth he became navigating and staff officer of an Atlantic Escort Group on board HMS *Enchantress* (L 56). Mainly she supervised convoys which ran between Freetown and Gibraltar, often stopping at Dakar and Casablanca. It was a relatively safe and comfortable service, but at least once the group was assigned to the dangerous Gibraltar–Londonderry route. Ehrman’s next appointment was ashore. In summer 1944 he became an instructor at HMS *Dryad*, the Navigation School at Southwick House near Portsmouth. Before long he was selected to join a team that was doing pioneering work for the Action Information Organisation (AIO) in developing shipboard operations rooms. The new system was essentially made necessary by radar; a similar development, the Combat Information Center (CIC), was occurring in the US Navy. In the months before Ehrman joined the team a number of mock-ups had been created for various classes of ships, but

⁸A. B. Cunningham, *A Sailor’s Odyssey: the Autobiography of Admiral of the Fleet Viscount Cunningham of Hyndhope* (New York, 1951), p. 361. Cunningham was Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean.

it was clearly a work in progress. Reflecting back upon it decades later, Ehrman wrote: ‘I found the experience of considerable interest.’⁹

War, strategy and government

Ehrman was listed for early demobilisation at the request of Trinity College, Cambridge. The government knew that university teachers would be needed to meet the expected post-war influx of students. He arrived shortly after the start of the academic year in autumn 1945, eager to embark on historical research. But he needed a topic. The Regius Professor of Modern History, G. N. Clark, who had come from Oxford in 1943 and became a fellow of the college, suggested ‘something maritime’, and Ehrman, because he had served in the Mediterranean, thought of ‘the survival of Venice’s island colonies in the prolonged period of the city’s decline’.¹⁰ But the postwar situation of the Venetian archives seemed uncertain and Clark then suggested studying the navy during the early years of the Board of Admiralty when Samuel Pepys was no longer the leading administrator. The result was *The Navy in the War of William III: its State and Direction 1689–1697*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1953.

It is a long book, 622 pages of text. Ehrman conducted research and wrote at amazing speed, holding his pen with heavy gloves during the hard winter of early 1947. He was elected a fellow of the college later that year and began teaching undergraduates in the autumn. He might have taken time to reduce the long manuscript to conform to the university’s word limit for Ph.D. theses but chose not to do so.

The book stands as an essential foundation for the history of modern British naval administration. In fact it is much more than this. It integrates the history of new administrative challenges with the navy’s operational history—encompassing, for instance, the unprecedented achievement of wintering a battlefleet at Cadiz in 1694–5—while relating all this to the violent political upheavals that disturbed the navy’s leadership after 1688. Furthermore—this may be its most significant contribution—it traces in substantive detail how the navy’s rapid growth in size and expense during the 1690s prompted the development of all-important financial institutions upon which the power of Great Britain would thereafter depend.

⁹ Ehrman, British Academy memorandum.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Parliament's role in this was fundamental, and the modernised British navy, as its leading present-day historian has observed, was (unlike the army) an institution answerable to Parliament more than the monarch.¹¹ Ehrman's study probes the proceedings, contentious and chaotic, which shaped the crucial early years of administrative development. He notes that the Commissions of Public Accounts appointed by the House of Commons to scrutinise expenditures, though troublesome and sometimes behaving as misinformed nuisances, were charged with attempting to understand the navy's real needs. It helped that Parliament and public, despite misgivings about William III's strategic priorities, realised that the future of the realm as a protestant polity was at stake and that survival depended on a strong navy.

Yet Parliament's financial support, however strongly motivated, was chronically inadequate. Ehrman shows how credit crises compelled naval and Treasury administrators to acquiesce in financial methods that were suited to capital-market expectations, methods suggested by bankers and merchants. The pressures on government were immense. When, in 1694, the Navy Board's credit was completely exhausted all the merchants held back from tendering and delivering urgently needed naval stores. These naval contractors—mainly men of the City—were the only people who might provide a rescue.

Chief among the various proposals was a new institution, the Bank of England. Its foundation in May 1694 has been generally treated by historians as a milestone in the history of monetary and financial innovation and as a means of providing large wartime loans. Ehrman focuses on something else: how the Bank's issuance of paper notes transformed the navy's indebtedness. He gives prominence to the Bank's role in absorbing myriad tallies issued by the Navy Board. By this point in the war masses of tallies registering debts owed to merchants could only be cashed at a distant date, some being assigned to revenue funds so anaemic that eventual payment seemed hopeless. A great deal of potential wealth was thereby 'locked up in large bundles of wooden sticks . . . awaiting redemption'. The solution was 'the negotiable paper bill', but of course creditors had to be willing to trust it. 'With the emergence of the Bank of England . . . and the circulation of . . . powerful Bank of England notes, an answer was to be found.' In effect, the Bank united 'Parliamentary financial responsibility and departmental credit' (pp. 489–90). Later in the war an

¹¹N. A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: a Naval History of Britain, 1649–1815* (London, 2004), p. 579.

unavoidable but inefficient recoinage left the realm without hard money. The navy was unable to pay wages and the Bank again came to the rescue; in return it was given permanent privileges that insured its standing and future usefulness to the British state.

At least one-quarter of the book is concerned with naval materials, wages and financial problems. In discussing these Ehrman reveals his awareness that the interactions of Navy, Treasury and Parliament as they faced the dire challenges of the war of 1689–97 had an enormous long-term impact on the British state. Most reviewers in 1953–4 did not comment on this, though one did: ‘William’s reign witnessed a most remarkable development in government administration, but this vital change has been so neglected by historians that far more is known of the administration of Edward II than of William III.’¹² Arguably, the book’s greatest achievement is to highlight a momentous stride in what has been described as ‘the largest, longest, most complex and expensive project ever undertaken by the British state and society’.¹³

The manuscript was practically complete when Ehrman accepted an offer to write the final volumes on *Grand Strategy* for the official history of the Second World War. The offer was made by the general editor of the United Kingdom Military Series, Professor J. R. M. Butler, who became Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge in 1947; he had been a fellow of Trinity for many years and knew Ehrman well. Butler’s selection of this relatively young scholar bespoke confidence in him as a careful historian who seemed likely to cope courteously yet firmly with criticisms made by high-ranking officers and distinguished statesmen. Most of these men were still living and would be allowed to comment on the finished draft. The work, supervised by the historical branch of the Cabinet Office, would be done in London. On 24 April 1948 Ehrman resigned his Trinity fellowship.

By this time he was engaged to be married to Susan Blake. It might be thought that he met her at a social gathering of persons involved in producing the Military Series because her father, Vice-Admiral Sir Geoffrey Blake, was a service adviser to the series, but in fact Ehrman met her during vacation time at Buckler’s Hard. The Blakes and Ehrmans possessed adjacent mooring locations, and one day after she came in from crewing for her father John Ehrman offered to carry up the sails for stowage. A theatre invitation followed the next day and after five dates he proposed.

¹²J. H. Plumb in *The Spectator*, July 31, 1953, p. 138.

¹³Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, p. lxx.

Learning that she wanted to accept, her father wrote to the renowned historian, Professor G. M. Trevelyan, Master of Trinity College, asking him about the young man. Trevelyan's reply was emphatically positive. The marriage took place on 1 July 1948. In 1954 the couple made their home at Sloane House in Chelsea. During the 1950s four sons were born: William, Hugh, Richard and Thomas.

The history of *Grand Strategy* in the last two years of the war required two volumes. Volume V begins in August 1943.¹⁴ At this point Allied maritime and air superiority had been achieved, so the range of choices for land campaigns was broad. Ehrman believed that he should include options to which the strategic planners gave serious consideration before setting them aside; he warned readers that this might seem unnecessary and tedious in hindsight but argued that omitting them would present a distorted picture of the high-level deliberations. As a result, many pages of these two volumes deal with regions that the American strategists were inclined to call 'side-shows'.

The Americans' focus was on invading northwest Europe—Operation Overlord—and they feared that British interest in the Mediterranean might subvert and therefore postpone it. The question of whether Britain's leadership was properly supportive of Overlord has generated an enduring historical controversy. It had already begun when Ehrman addressed it in the early 1950s:

It is important to be clear on this. Much was said at the time, and has since been written, on British, and particularly Churchillian, strategy in the Mediterranean during this period, which is misleading not only for the period but for the same problem in later periods. (*Grand Strategy*, V, p. 111)

He began by observing that British and American strategists fully agreed that Overlord's success depended on a diversion—on preventing the Germans from building up military strength in northwest Europe. The dispute was chiefly over how best to achieve this. The British thought the best way was to campaign in Italy. They had to admit that the offensive had stalled south of Rome but pointed out the main reason for this: the Germans had added divisions in Italy—which for the sake of Overlord was of course what was wanted. The Americans did not entirely agree. They pressed for a landing in the south of France, Operation Anvil. To this the British objected that pressure on the German lines in Italy would

¹⁴ *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series*, ed. J. R. M. Butler. J. Ehrman, *Grand Strategy: Volume V, August 1943–September 1944* (London, 1956), Preface dated November 1955.

be diminished as forces would be withdrawn to prepare for Anvil and must remain inactive until the time of its launching.

Some American leaders feared that the British intended to substitute a push through the Balkans as an alternative to Overlord. Ehrman found that prior to the Normandy landings nothing beyond supplying arms to guerrilla forces was planned. Churchill sometimes talked as if he would prefer action in the Balkans and also wished to mount minor operations in the Aegean Sea with the hope of bringing Turkey out of neutrality, and all this made the Americans suspicious. Eighty days after the Normandy landings, however, Churchill seriously urged a thrust towards Vienna that would involve the northern Balkans. It was proposed with an eye on the postwar world (*Grand Strategy*, V, pp. 392–4). When British leaders gave it serious consideration Russian armies were in Romania and Stalin's forces were standing off and allowing the Warsaw uprising to be crushed.

The British made strenuous efforts to drop weapons and supplies into Warsaw to help the insurgents. Stalin refused to make convenient landing fields available. Ehrman reports that British leaders were deeply angry; the War Cabinet even considered stopping the Arctic convoys to Russia. At the end of his account Ehrman felt a need to write: 'The beginning of the last message from Warsaw deserves to be recorded. "This is the stark truth. We were worse treated than Hitler's satellites, worse than Italy, Rumania, Finland."' Ehrman's final observation: '[R]elations between Britain and Russia suffered a shock from which they never fully recovered' (*Grand Strategy*, V, pp. 369–76).

Throughout his discussion of strategic options Ehrman, as he states in his Preface, was intent on 'seeing each step against the background of resources, within whose iron limits the actors moved' (*Grand Strategy*, V, xiii–xv). The shortage of assault shipping, especially Landing Ships, Tanks (LSTs), is a recurring theme throughout the book. It has been suggested by some historians that the shortage of these in Europe was exaggerated by British military planners in order to postpone Overlord, but Ehrman's history shows that their planning was repeatedly constrained by its realities. It is interesting that Roosevelt's choice of Eisenhower, who paid close attention to logistics, to command Overlord was judged by Ehrman to be 'perhaps one of his best' appointments (*Grand Strategy*, V, p. 201).

Publication of this volume was delayed by Sir Winston Churchill. He had agreed that the official historians could look at his 'personal minutes and telegrams' but only on the understanding that any extracts or 'substantial use' made of these documents should be shown to him for approval

before publication. Having seen a critical account by Sir Stephen Roskill of his decisions concerning naval strategy, he developed a loosely paranoid view of the motives of the official historians, and while he was still prime minister Ehrman's study of 1943–4 became 'the prime target'. But he relented in August 1955 and allowed the relevant volumes to be examined and approved by trusted persons.¹⁵

Among topics traced by the final volume are:¹⁶ continuing disputes over bombing strategy—railway versus oil targets—and RAF Bomber Command's persistent favouring of area bombing. (These issues would be fully explored in a later official history, *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany, 1939–1945* by Charles Webster and Noble Frankland: London, 1961.) Also in the realm of strategy, Ehrman pays close attention to Eisenhower's preference for attacking in the southern sectors where the German army left its defences weak over Bernard Montgomery's steady insistence on attacking in the northern sector where enemy concentrations were strongest. He notes the importance of logistics in defining the limits of penetration in the southern sector.

Matters affecting postwar positioning are prominent, such as the ultimate success of Britain's sustained interest in Greece and Churchill's urgent desire to take Vienna before the Russians did. The conclusion regarding Burma is interesting. Although the years of brutal fighting by British and Commonwealth forces in the mountainous jungles were eventually crowned by a remarkable success as the Japanese were pushed out, Ehrman ends by asking whether it was all worthwhile, since action in this theatre could not contribute directly to Japan's surrender. He answers by citing its diplomatic and military advantages, not least the tremendous losses sustained by the Japanese army in the theatre (*Grand Strategy*, VI, pp. 256–7).

Another prominent theme is the discussion of plans for British participation alongside the Americans in the effort to defeat Japan, most of the plans rendered irrelevant when the war suddenly ended after atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. In early 1951 Ehrman realised that this fact presented him with a problem: how could he properly write a history of grand strategy in the final year of

¹⁵D. Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (New York, 2005), pp. 516–17.

¹⁶J. Ehrman, *Grand Strategy: Volume VI, October 1944–August 1945* (London, 1956), Preface dated March 1956.

the war without discussing the decision to drop the atomic bomb which ended it?

He presented the problem to his general editor, J. R. M. Butler, who, on 21 March 1951, drafted a minute for the Cabinet Secretary responsible for the official histories, Norman Brook. Ehrman had volunteered to write about the decision to drop the bomb. He was directed to proceed and, evidently, was encouraged to explore the circumstances under which British scientists (many of them refugees from Europe) who had led the way in research on atomic energy turned their knowledge over to the Americans. But his main concern was the decision to drop it. There existed agreements between London and Washington, particularly one that Franklin Roosevelt signed at Quebec in August 1943, promising that the British government would be consulted before a decision to use the bomb was made: 'These agreements, though concluded during the war, were still very much of a live issue in international politics' and they were still kept secret, Brook minuted. (At this time speculation as to whether American bombers at East Anglian air bases were carrying atomic bombs was of intense public interest in Britain.) It was decided that Ehrman's book would be restricted to internal government use only.¹⁷

Since his primary concern was to be able to write a chapter on the decision in his official history, the difficult question of clearance remained, and on 8 January 1953 he wrote to Professor Butler, laying out the problem. 'To say nothing of the decision that ended the war would be an undoubted gap in the official history of the war. Nor do I think, on reflection, that the Western Allies need be unduly ashamed of their reasons, which (in my opinion) can bear scrutiny.' There were, however, 'three possible objections'. First, 'a published account must include all or nothing'. The factors justifying the decision were complex and omissions would 'lead to distortion . . . It would therefore, I think be extremely difficult and unwise, as well as dishonest, to write a partial account; and I could not consent to do so.' A second objection was that the wartime agreements between the British and the Americans were still secret. Third, since the British were only partially involved, the account 'cannot hope to be based on all the available evidence. This is an undoubted drawback, particularly in a delicate and controversial subject.'¹⁸ These were powerful

¹⁷J. Ehrman, *The Atomic Bomb: an Account of British Policy in the Second World War*. The Preface is dated July 1953. The book remained classified as Top Secret until the early 1990s.

¹⁸These documents and others involving Ehrman's proposals are to be found in TNA CAB 140/61.

objections, and how the chapter managed to be approved for publication in Volume VI cannot be traced here, but it may be said that whole pages of the Top Secret book appear in it.

As his work on *Grand Strategy* was coming to an end Ehrman was honoured to be asked to give the Lees Knowles Lectures in Military History at Trinity College, Cambridge. The four lectures, delivered in 1957, were published.¹⁹ He began by observing that strategic planning for armed defence of Britain and its empire had been virtually absent during the half-century before 1890, and ended by observing: thus, ‘one of the three classic activities of government, after a long period of disuse’ was brought ‘into the framework’ in a way that preserved the traditional attributes and authority of Britain’s system of cabinet government (p. 132). His attention to persons was limited to ‘a small group of men’—Arthur Balfour, Robert Haldane, David Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, George Sydenham Clarke and Maurice Hankey (‘above all Hankey’)—who moved the process forward and a few others who obstructed it. But the focus is on structure, not men, nor even political situations or intractable issues.

The book’s concern with structure exposes the way in which the presence of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) obscured the need for the Cabinet to deal with the fundamental requirements of national and imperial security. As Ehrman points out, the CID ‘had developed as an alternative to, rather than as a regular instrument of, the Cabinet in strategic affairs’, yet only the Cabinet could make the basic decisions. It failed to do so. Foreign policy wound up being excluded from discussion by Sir Edward Grey and the Foreign Office—most Cabinet members, pre-occupied by domestic policy, were willing to allow this—and the CID, although ‘set up to consider problems of strategy in general . . . [became] increasingly involved in the detailed preparations for a specific campaign’, namely the sending of regiments to support France on the Continent. One sees why, when war broke out, the CID and its sub-committees were scarcely consulted; instead, the Cabinet resorted to a ‘formless search for professional advice’ (pp. 52, 54, 57). Lurking in the background is the fact that Britain’s unique situation—global yet European—presented choices so profoundly divergent that no system of committees, not even the Cabinet, could have reached a consensus without enormous strain.

Aware that Ehrman had been one of the official historians, Robert Blake regretted that the book’s scope did not extend to 1945: ‘the reader

¹⁹J. Ehrman, *Cabinet Government and War, 1890–1940* (Cambridge, 1958).

longs to know what he would have said about Sir Winston Churchill's war-time administration'.²⁰ Perhaps this gave Ehrman the idea for a paper he read to the Royal Historical Society on 8 October 1960, 'Lloyd George and Churchill as War Ministers'.²¹ This beautifully written paper looks at the two statesmen with sensitivity, deep knowledge and wise perception. 'Both,' Ehrman writes, 'had that rare and indefinable quality, of catching the imagination of their times' (p. 102) and both had a remarkable capacity to 'inspire, and at least sustain, the morale of the nation' (p. 105). But, Ehrman then observed,

inspiration by itself is not enough . . . ; [it] will fail after quite a short time if it is not based on competence, . . . [so a leading war minister] needs knowledge and experience, as well as imaginative flair . . . Both Lloyd George and Churchill, it is well known, possessed the imaginative flair. It is not so often appreciated to what extent they also possessed the knowledge and experience . . . Both in fact were very good administrators for war. (pp. 106–7)

When concluding this paper Ehrman remarked that it is often asked 'which of these two wartime Prime Ministers was the greater'. His response was (for him) predictable and interesting: 'It is not a question I should like to answer', and he added, 'Nor is it, I suspect, the sort of question that historians think should be asked, at least of them.' Instead, he offered a reflection: '[I]t is fortunate, for the survival of the country itself and of its traditional institutions in this century, that the normal political world should have thrown up such a figure on each occasion, to work within its framework and to preserve by his unusual methods a tried and familiar form of government' (p. 115). He avoided saying which wartime Prime Minister was the greater while giving his audience the means to decide. Yet one may detect a preference for Churchill:

He was far more generous in big issues, more loyal to his associates, possessed of much greater humanity, than one who was, as Keynes divined, ultimately remorseless and rootless . . . The central sanity of his character—supported and strengthened, I think, by his historical sense, a quality entirely lacking in Lloyd George—became increasingly apparent as time went by. So did the central irresponsibility of Lloyd George. (pp. 104–5)

Two months after presenting this paper John Ehrman was struck down by poliomyelitis and the doctors were fighting for his life. An early breathing apparatus had to be utilised. (The four boys had received the vaccine but he had not.) While immobilised he recorded books for the

²⁰ *The Spectator*, 18 April 1958.

²¹ *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th series, 11 (1961), 101–15.

blind. Upon recovery he no longer had the use of one leg.²² But he was determined to remain as active as possible. Outings in rough terrain were eagerly anticipated, and he and Susan soon purchased an old house on a hillside in Corfu and restored it; it became a favourite spring and late-summer retreat for the remainder of their lives together.

The Younger Pitt

When the author asked Susan Ehrman why her late husband chose to study the younger Pitt her reply was swift and succinct: ‘He always wanted to do Pitt.’ He undoubtedly pondered it from time to time during the years 1948–57 when he was engaged in historical tasks chosen for him by others. The question remains: why Pitt? In reality he never publicly provided an answer except to say in the Preface of the first volume that ‘various developments in our knowledge of his times enabled us to look again’ at how Pitt ‘met the conditions and turned them to advantage’.²³ This was more like a justification of his choice than an enticement.

A reviewer of the final volume mused ‘Writer and subject are so comfortable with one another that the reader imagines them shaking hands on their first meeting in Elysium.’²⁴ Yet personal affinity had its limits—quiet and steady bearing, genuine competence, and gentlemanly conduct, to be sure, though Pitt too often did not treat people he met with appropriate courtesy whereas John Ehrman always did. Regarding personal life, Ehrman was lucky enough to marry the woman he loved and, as their eldest son said at the funeral, ‘For 63 years they found the key to happiness, working as a pair, always full of joy in each other’s company.’ In contrast, the Younger Pitt appears to have been for reasons unknown—and quite unlike his father—terrified by the thought of acquiring a female partner.

Ehrman’s principal motive lay in the public sphere. When he returned to Cambridge in 1945 he had thoughts of ‘trying to do something on Harley and the politics of Queen Anne’s reign’, but G. N. Clark dissuaded

²²I recall being shocked to see him on forearm crutches in the early 1960s. He had been my Cambridge Ph.D. supervisor to whom I had been referred by George Kitson Clark, who had taught him before the war. My draft chapters were discussed in an upstairs room at the Garrick Club after a nice lunch.

²³J. Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt: the Years of Acclaim* (London and New York, 1969), p. xii.

²⁴*The Economist*, 20 July 1996.

him on the ground that it would be ‘full of dangers for a neophyte’.²⁵ It is likely that at Charterhouse and Cambridge he had learned that Harley was a politician who also cared greatly about policy. Pitt’s durable and conscientious commitment to responsible governing undoubtedly attracted Ehrman: the predominant concern of all three volumes is to ascertain the challenges that Pitt assiduously laboured to meet.

Possibly this enquiry may be carried further, into the sphere of personal political values. In a letter to me in January 1976 Ehrman remarked, probably in response to some comment I had made about the deplorable state of politics in both Britain and America at that time: ‘I disagree with Dr. Johnson about the effect of public affairs on private satisfactions.’²⁶ He may have been referring to the couplet wherein Johnson observed how little of what ‘human hearts endure, . . . laws or kings can cause or cure’ or had in mind the assertion that ‘living under one form of government rather than another’ is ‘of no moment to the happiness of an individual’, perhaps both. In any case, he knew that William Pitt the Younger avowed the English constitution as forged in the Revolution Settlement of 1689 to be his guide. That Ehrman himself placed a high value on the English constitution is evident in the closing paragraph of his paper on Lloyd George and Churchill where he made it a point to observe that, despite the dire challenges of the world wars, both men preserved the constitution’s essentials.²⁷

The first volume was published in 1969. A number of reviewers did not comprehend Ehrman’s purpose. Some thought the book too long; others complained that Pitt was insufficiently visible.²⁸ These complaints were often joined to a questioning of why a biography should include detailed discussions of every issue confronting government. Was Ehrman actually writing a ‘life and times’ instead of a political biography, as he claimed?

²⁵ Ehrman, British Academy memorandum.

²⁶ To the author, 6 Jan. 1976.

²⁷ See above, p. 157.

²⁸ A peculiarly unfriendly review in *The Times* (Saturday Review), 18 Oct. 1969 came from J. H. Plumb, who had praised Ehrman’s book on William III’s navy. After gushing appreciation of Fox, Pitt’s merits are dismissed and it is stated that ‘Pitt always gets the benefit, and more than the benefit of every doubt’ from Ehrman (a point on which other reviewers disagreed). The review ends with a judgement that Ehrman had ‘attempted a task beyond his powers’. Plumb felt that his own acceptance as an accomplished historian was too slow (see D. Cannadine, ‘John Harold Plumb 1911–2001’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 124, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows*, III (2004), 269–309) and may have considered Ehrman’s acceptance unfairly rapid. I am grateful to Professor David Cannadine, who wrote that memoir, for suggesting where I might find this review.

Colonial issues and worldwide trade along with diplomacy and European trade occupy 189 pages.

Ehrman wished to show what could and could not be done in these spheres. To show how Pitt manoeuvred between the constraints and opportunities, and to understand the choices he made, a comprehensive view of the circumstances seemed necessary. Although Pitt is absent in the chapter on India (Henry Dundas handled the government's dealings with the East India Company), in other spheres he was much involved, not only in decision-making but also execution.

Perhaps his most comprehensive effort concerned trade. In December 1786 a London newspaper observed that Pitt was engaged in 'no less than a general arrangement of the commerce of the greatest commercial power that ever existed, with almost all the great commercial powers of the world' (*The Years of Acclaim*, p. 502). It appears that in an early stage of his research Ehrman had grasped the dimensions of this vast undertaking—'a succession of unexpected findings'—and wisely decided to publish the details of the commercial-treaty negotiations in a separate book.²⁹ Only one negotiation, the important one with France, produced a treaty, but the total effort strongly suggests the influence of Adam Smith, both in respect to free trade and to the desirability of trading with Continental Europe. As will be seen, this effort did not signify that Pitt valued European trade more than transoceanic.

As to the latter, he very much wanted to restore liberal access to the valuable market that was now the United States. Still, he believed there was a factor more important than trade (as Smith allowed). Ehrman states that he 'never sacrificed "navigation" to the principle of free trade'. When, in an August 1785 interview, John Adams 'argued the ill effects of continued protection' Pitt replied that the Navigation Act 'would not answer its end, if we should dispense with it towards you' and added that Americans could not blame Englishmen 'for being attached to their ships and seamen which are so essential to them' (*The Years of Acclaim*, pp. 335, 341).

Ehrman leaves no doubt that Pitt's motivation for ending British participation in the slave trade was grounded in humanity and morality: 'I hope', he said in a famous speech of spring 1792, 'we shall hear no more of the moral impossibility of civilising the Africans.' Still, the 'whole oration' illustrated Pitt's customary approach—'the reconciliation of an

²⁹J. Ehrman, *The British Government and Commercial Negotiations with Europe, 1783–1793* (Cambridge, 1962), quotation on p. vi.

ideal . . . with arguments . . . designed to satisfy the objections of practical men' (*The Years of Acclaim*, 401–2).

In the field of foreign affairs during the 1780s Pitt cared little about Europe: 'He wanted to avoid continental entanglements, his interests lay elsewhere.' As one British envoy remarked, he had 'concluded a permanent Alliance with that most formidable of all Powers, the Power of Surplus' (*The Years of Acclaim*, p. 516). Nevertheless, as Ehrman skilfully narrates, in his cautious but firm handling of the challenge posed by Amsterdam radicals aligned with France in 1787 Pitt restrained some overly eager envoys while alertly assessing and taking advantage of emerging developments (*The Years of Acclaim*, pp. 520–38).

A reader of the three volumes should not fail to notice that 'handling of finance' was 'perhaps his favourite occupation, the work in which he felt most at home. He knew that most people were bored by the subject', but a 'financial issue could always rouse him, when apparently greater issues might not' (*The Years of Acclaim*, p. 280). Most historians, it may be said, are bored by the subject, and in most histories dealing with Pitt's era it appears only when the much admired British financial system collapsed in 1797.³⁰ In this first volume Ehrman makes us see the importance of Pitt's dedication and skill in the aftermath of the American Revolutionary War. The annual charge of interest on the National Debt was £9m; the permanent taxes which could be used to pay this charge amounted to about £10m. It was, as Ehrman remarks, a 'nightmare'—'an annual charge which was largely responsible for an annual deficit which in turn was increasing the debt on which an annual charge must be paid' (*The Years of Acclaim*, p. 280). In addition there was a pressing need to deal with unfunded Navy bills and other wartime bills which amounted to over £14m. If annuities were to be employed in providing long-term funding of these, more permanent taxes would be required, and a new permanent tax was something that no ministry wanted to ask of Parliament. Pitt tried a Shop Tax—it was loudly unpopular and had to be withdrawn—but his 'main object was to increase the yield from *existing* taxes'. His attention turned to smuggling, a big business which was estimated to divert an amount equal to one-sixth of the customs revenue. The duties on tea were very high. Pitt proposed steep cuts in the existing rates—to one-quarter or less. What is fascinating, as Ehrman reports, is how shrewdly the change had to be carried out: to cover the two-year

³⁰ A noteworthy exception is J. S. Watson, *The Reign of George III, 1760–1815* (Oxford, 1960), pp. 283–93.

delay before the East India Company could get additional supplies to England and prevent the smuggling fraternity from making most of it, large quantities had to be bought secretly in Amsterdam; this needed government approval and Pitt was in the thick of it. A good deal has been made of Pitt's Sinking Fund. It was designed to inspire confidence in the National Debt and thus enable interest payments to be reduced. But the hidden force behind his almost magical financial success was what would today be called economic growth, and it appears that Pitt was aware of this. Ehrman found among notes and reports of a speech evidence of Pitt's concern for the volume more than the balance of trade, noting how the 'accumulation of capital [which] arises from continual application of a part at least, of the profit obtained each year, [serves] to increase the total amount of capital to be employed in a similar manner' (*The Years of Acclaim*, pp. 274–5).

Pitt's friend William Wilberforce once said that [Pitt] suffered from 'the necessity of . . . speaking upon subjects of a low and vulgarising quality, such as the excise on tobacco, wine, &c. &c.' Ehrman remarks: 'These impressions could be dangerous, when a clerk-like care for figures was not much admired. But in the right hands, as Pitt well knew, it was a source of the greatest strength' (*The Years of Acclaim*, p. 280). Great Britain was fortunate in having at this critical time a head of the Treasury who seemed to enjoy probing the sums and intricacies. It seems likely that he inherited this trait from his mother Hester Grenville, beloved by all her brothers and demonstrably furnished with Grenville competence—like her brother George but with more common sense—in business matters.

In a trenchant review A. J. P. Taylor commented: 'Time and again the younger Pitt disappears. The policy of the British government in Pitt's period takes his place, and this policy had many dreary aspects.'³¹ One place where Pitt disappears is certainly regrettable. Chapter VI, 'The Struggle for Power', deals with Pitt's ascendancy from the level of a young Chancellor of the Exchequer with a famous name and budding reputation as a debater to the height of leading minister, a position he would retain for the next seventeen years. Yet Ehrman's account of Pitt's role in this process is obscured. Charles James Fox in coalition with Lord North headed the government in 1782. George III detested Fox and wanted to be rid of him. Fox's East India Bill could easily be criticised—unfairly, Ehrman too sympathetically suggests—as transferring the company's patronage to his ministry. During the resulting uproar Pitt took a

³¹ *The New York Review of Books*, 9 April 1970.

calculated risk when he finally accepted the king's proposal that he should lead a new administration. After Fox and North were dismissed and Pitt installed, it was expected that, lacking a majority, the new ministry would initially suffer defeats. Pitt's task, as Ehrman points out, was to demonstrate to MPs 'waiting to be convinced' that his ministry could survive (*The Years of Acclaim*, pp. 128–9).

The task involved trying to defend George III's use of Crown prerogative at this juncture while somehow finding a way to persuade members that he was not merely a compliant instrument of royal power. Ehrman recognises that Pitt's vital asset was the persuasiveness of his speeches in debate, yet the reader must traverse fourteen pages discussing political manoeuvres in which Pitt was rarely involved before reading: 'a new dimension had been added by Pitt's own performance. Starting from a posture of great weakness in a series of gruelling debates, he had held his own, virtually singlehanded, against a formidable array, and had slowly forced Fox himself, at the height of his vigour, to recognise an ultimately hopeless position' (*The Years of Acclaim*, p. 142). Pitt carried the burden of debating almost alone, night after night. Yet the book fails to highlight any of these speeches—a departure from Ehrman's customary method, which is to enable readers to form impressions and conclusions from factual and circumstantial details rather than by simply being told. Nor is anything said about whether they had an impact 'out of doors', a phenomenon that had played a key role in his father's rise to greatness. This is all the more puzzling because the ensuing general election awarded Pitt's administration a resounding victory.

Taylor's other complaint, about policy, asks Pitt, and indeed eighteenth-century England, to be something they were not. Ehrman quotes the economic historian, T. S. Ashton, where he remarked that 'the characteristic instrument of social purpose was not the individual, or the State, but the club', and Ehrman suggests concrete examples: 'from the Jockey Club and the Dilettanti to the Freemasons and Lloyds, from the Society for the Reformation of Manners and the Chamber of Manufacturers to the literary and dining clubs in the taverns. This zest for voluntary associations swelled the demands for official retrenchment' (*The Years of Acclaim*, p. 168). Indeed, aside from the basic need to guarantee security from internal violence and invasion from abroad, retrenchment and reform were Pitt's missions in the 1780s. He sought to render government effective in an age when toleration of cluttered ancient procedures was diminishing. It had 'dreary aspects', to be sure, but its achievements were much approved at the time.

When the consequences of the French Revolution interrupted this mission, Pitt found the reality hard to bear. With great reluctance and fervent hope that the interruption would not last long, he turned his attention to the problems of security; it proved to be a dismaying challenge in both its external and internal expressions. The subtitle of the second volume captures Pitt's disappointment.³²

The external challenge was unprecedented. Pitt's administration would be overwhelmed by persistent failures in a European war that he had wished to avoid. He gave the French Revolutionary government ample warning that the Low Countries should not be disturbed, but after France declared war against Britain in January 1793 she immediately issued threats against the Netherlands. On Henry Dundas's recommendation it was decided to capture Dunkirk. Surprise, an essential factor in a siege, was lost because the general commanding a nearby Austrian army chose to besiege a French stronghold many miles inland, and in early August *The Times* reported that Dunkirk would be the next objective. British troops arrived in time, but the siege equipment did not. Although British arms lacked recent experience in conducting a European siege, Dunkirk's fortifications were not formidable and the Ordnance department's planners overestimated the requirements, so everything came late. Nor was the assisting naval force given its orders soon enough. Despite these delays Dunkirk might have capitulated if the Austrian troops, after their successful siege, had marched towards the coast to rebuff a French army that was, at long last, coming to the rescue. The outnumbered British force had to retreat. Britain had rarely performed well in the beginning of a war, yet everyone knew that France was in chaos and her armed forces in disarray. Success should have been easy, and an important opportunity was lost.

Since a successful siege depends on well-coordinated preparations it is clear that much of the responsibility for the failure lay in London. Ehrman's account makes this obvious.³³ Pitt himself was occasionally involved in relaying orders and did so inconsistently. Moreover, and this was of great importance, neither he nor his close associates understood the rhythm of campaigns. During the Seven Years War his father had been intent on allowing plenty of time for transports to be gathered, loaded and provided with naval escorts; he anticipated that adverse winds and

³²J. Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt: the Reluctant Transition* (London, 1983).

³³He was able to draw on Michael Duffy's thorough and penetrating article, "'A Particular Service': the British government and the Dunkirk expedition of 1793", *English Historical Review*, 91 (1976), 529–54. Duffy gives powerful reasons why Dunkirk was a well-chosen objective.

administrative lapses might produce ruinous delays. The son was far too optimistic. Admittedly, France's political turmoil would throw up new opportunities quite suddenly, so there was little time for adequate preparations. But Pitt's optimism, shared by his colleague William Wyndham, Lord Grenville, was itself a problem. Everything was expected to go right and on time, and under eighteenth-century conditions of warfare, especially where shipping was required (as of course it was in Britain's case), this was far from likely.

Ehrman leaves us with no doubt that Pitt remained dedicated to supporting a comprehensive coalition against the French government's military effort to extend revolutionary principles in Europe. But trying to get coalition forces to focus on the French enemy was a century-old problem. In the case of the Netherlands it was aggravated by the fact that while Prussia, by a recent treaty, was formally responsible for helping to defend the Low Countries, the army on the spot was Austrian, committed to defending its Netherlands provinces. Pitt wished to rely on a cooperative effort by both powers to resist French Revolutionary aggression, but their mistrust of each other was deep and long-standing, and intensified by Prussia's current eagerness to carve out a portion of Poland. Difficulties of this kind foreshadowed the ongoing military and diplomatic disappointments that would characterise Britain's war effort, and Pitt's optimism, stimulated by his hope of a short war, would have pervasive ill-effects.

To readers of this second volume Ehrman conveys not only a realisation of the ill-consequences of Pitt's optimism but also a glimpse of its advantages. Despite repeated military disappointments Pitt did not despair, and because his hopefulness was genuine he was able to impart it to parliament and public. Yet there was one respect in which Pitt's optimism was quite guarded, namely the capacity of the nation and its people to accept the expense of a long war. If he mistakenly assumed that France's finances under revolutionary government would bring her down, he was intensely aware that British finances might not be publicly supported in a long European war. Ehrman makes clear that when this prospect loomed in 1796 Pitt seriously looked toward making peace, but French Revolutionary politics blocked the effort. Ironically, the strategy of pursuing West Indian conquests, which resulted in the slaughter of so many soldiers by disease, proved fundamental to enabling Britain to hold out in the long struggle that lay ahead.

Regarding internal security Ehrman's chapters are thorough and carefully balanced, though more inclined than most writings on the subject to

see that the administration's viewpoint is presented. Perhaps the most interesting discussion concerns Pitt's abandonment of the Dissenters; they had good reason to anticipate that he would repeal the Test and Corporation Acts that rendered them politically second-class citizens, and, as Ehrman points out, the later 1780s were a promising moment for Pitt to act. Yet he did nothing and the moment was lost. This was, Ehrman comments (a rare case where he offers a judgement), 'Pitt's greatest default in the pre-war period'. Observing what seemed to be Pitt's rationale for inaction, he writes, 'When precisely, it might be asked, would Pitt's conditions be fulfilled? His function was not simply to reflect opinion: there are occasions when a Minister should lead and persevere.' He adds that Pitt 'could have reaped a reward in the course of the next few years. For when he embarked on repressive measures . . . he would have achieved a more willing consensus if he had first tried for a moderate reform' (*The Reluctant Transition*, pp. 85, 87).³⁴ As for 'dimensions of unrest', the two chapters dealing with domestic insecurity are, as one expert reviewer commented, 'among the best in the book'.³⁵ Reflecting the extreme anxiety provoked by the unfolding French Revolution among the propertied classes, Pitt and his colleagues overestimated the danger that French Revolutionary ideas might lead to an overthrow of British constitutional monarchy. When the government, particularly alarmed by the resonance of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, moved in May 1792 to suppress all radical publications it thereby announced an irretrievable hostility to political change. In a later chapter, 'Dearth and Discontent', one sees the dangerous mixing of severe food shortages with all this, creating a crisis to which Pitt responded too slowly. At one point, in October 1795, an immense crowd in St James's Park shouted 'No Pitt, No War, Bread, Bread, Peace, Peace' as his carriage passed through.

Six years after completing the final volume Ehrman wrote:

I embarked the other day on a rereading of *The Younger Pitt*—a curious thing to do, but really quite interesting thanks to the passage of time. I find I had forgotten more parts of it than I had expected, and [was] amused to discover how one's perspective can alter with the passage of years. I think less of Vol. III than I did, but more of I, and still obstinately hold II in quite high regard.³⁶

³⁴Betty Kemp, in the *English Historical Review*, 100 (1985), 630 sees Pitt's conduct here as stemming from narrowly conceived political advantage rather than misjudgement. Her review is relentlessly hostile to both Pitt and Ehrman; so was her review of the first volume in the same journal, 86 (1971), 804–7.

³⁵George Rudé in *International History Review*, 7 (1985), 309.

³⁶To Dr Anthony Smith, 28 Aug. 2002, Cambridge University Library [hereafter CUL] Additional Manuscript 9975.

The title of volume III is *The Younger Pitt: the Consuming Struggle*.³⁷ At 854 pages of text it is the longest of the three volumes. In August 1994 when he was almost finished he wrote: 'I don't know about this final volume—maybe a curate's egg. Anyway I enjoyed myself on the way.' He did not enjoy all of it. In late December 1995 came a one-line note: 'Having a rough time seeing my book through the press.'³⁸ The words 'consuming struggle' might well be thought to apply to the biographer as well as his subject, but Ehrman survived.

He might have wondered whether his discussion of Pitt's conduct prior to the king's outspoken rejection of Catholic Emancipation could be one of the bad ingredients of the 'egg'. The failure to pass a law for moderating Catholic political disabilities as a necessary companion to the Act of Union (which eliminated the separate Irish parliament in 1801) was one of the great legislative lapses in British history. To be sure, the blame rightly falls on George III, who stubbornly adhered to the belief that easing Catholic civil disabilities violated his Coronation Oath to uphold the Church of England. But it appears that Pitt made no concerted effort to leave an opening for overcoming the king's veto in future—quite the contrary: when George III announced his intention somewhat publicly, Pitt resigned, and in due course promised never to raise the question again. Ehrman notes that Pitt was ill at the time and also had reason to fear that if he pressed the king too hard, the result would be royal insanity, and everyone expected that the Prince of Wales would seek to change the entire administration. But evidence is presented that Pitt had readily given up on Catholic relief when pressing for the Act of Union. It does not serve to clarify the minister's conduct that the discussion of how the act was passed is separated from the story of royal refusal and Pitt's resignation by 300 pages.

That said, this volume is an impressive achievement. From 1797 onwards dreadful events came thick and fast. The French Revolutionary government's refusal to make peace, the naval mutinies, a run on the Bank of England, two frightening invasion threats, the 1798 rising in Ireland, the collapse of European coalitions, the most serious harvest failure in a century—even these do not exhaust the list. One observes Pitt, now aware that the war against France must be considered interminable, making the politically brave decision in late 1797 to increase taxation and introduce an income tax. It meant an 'invasion of liberty, the prying by the Crown

³⁷ London and Stanford, CA, 1996.

³⁸ Letters to the author, 10 Aug. 1994, Dec. 1995.

into the personal affairs of the subject', and would establish in Pitt's own words an 'inquisition which would be generally invidious', things to be suffered only in a war for national survival. The tax was graduated, carefully avoided direct demands on the poor, and worked (*The Consuming Struggle*, pp. 263–5). In dealing with the great dearth occasioned by the worst harvests (1799–1800) in over a century Ehrman manages to get the details as well as the larger picture right. His clear exposition shows how much more quickly and wisely Pitt dealt with this crisis than the one in 1794–6, both by supporting relief efforts and obtaining food supplies from abroad. Not much could be done except to encourage concrete, visible measures by which the government and ruling classes could demonstrate their concern and provide some amelioration. Pitt recognised it as a very serious matter, involving issues of humanity and trust in government, but also, as Ehrman remarks, 'the forbidding conjuncture of riots and the rising tide of petitions for peace' (*The Consuming Struggle*, p. 314).

What remained unsuccessful was strategic and logistical preparation. One sees, especially in the launching of an expedition to Holland (*The Consuming Struggle*, pp. 246–8), that Pitt and his colleagues never did learn how to plan and execute a major campaign. The larger problem remained: Pitt's continuing desire, strongly reinforced by Lord Grenville, to keep up diplomatic and military pressure in Europe regardless of persistently adverse circumstances. By the year 1800 Dundas was openly—and constructively—critical of the repeated wasteful efforts in Europe which seemed to accomplish nothing but frustration and humiliation. Ehrman's rich texture allows us to move beyond the prevalent yet simplistic criticism that Pitt failed to pursue a consistent policy. The dispute between Grenville and Dundas was grounded in a profoundly genuine question: were there not times when a land war in Europe against Napoleon was utterly fruitless (which Grenville did not wish to acknowledge) while the Royal Navy, equally invincible, might be employed in furthering Britain's worldwide resources of strength during this long war and afterwards? Given this situation and because eventually in this interminable war, as Pitt understood, France would have to be resisted in Europe, Ehrman offers a narrative wherein Pitt is to be commended for trying to keep the two men near at hand, notwithstanding the strategic ambivalence. This does not excuse the profusion of orders and counter-orders that George III himself rightly complained about. In respect to this Ehrman steadily reveals Pitt as a poor war minister, though he does not come right out and say it.

One comes away with a conclusion which Ehrman appears to have intended: that in respect to Great Britain's waging of a long war involving countless adversities and disappointments Pitt had got four big things right. First, he had made certain that the navy would be strong, a matter to which he devoted personal attention during the period of peace in the 1780s. One might recall that within the scope of this final volume (1797–1806) discouragement occasioned by failed coalitions was countered by boosts to morale stimulated by four striking naval victories. Second, he understood that the struggle, however long it was to last, would require economic prosperity, without which revenues, public borrowing and public political support for continuing the war would be lacking. In this connection it should be noted that although the claim that Pitt upheld 'the Establishment' was certainly true in many respects, few persons at the time would have placed in that domain the merchants and manufacturers to whom Pitt gave so much access of his time and consideration in his policies. Third, if his strategic plans undertook too much and relied too often on hopes for a short conclusion, he nevertheless allowed Dundas's plans for Caribbean conquests to go forward in strength. As has often been pointed out, the loss of soldiers to tropical diseases in these campaigns was horrendous, but Ehrman's careful narrative of the European aspects of the war reminds us of the counter-balancing stream of costly reversals there. The fourth big thing is suggested by Ehrman when he writes of 'a development of far-reaching importance . . . what one may genuinely call a more professional, dispassionate appreciation to the problems of government'. Pitt encouraged his assistants to develop this appreciation. He thereby gave 'a modernising tone to the practice of government' (*The Consuming Struggle*, pp. 844–5). Ehrman left it to others to show how these efficient modes of administration improved Britain's ability to wage war—understandably, since the effects became most noticeable during the years following Pitt's death.

Last years

After an exhausting time 'buried—drowned, take your choice—in proofs: horrible things' Ehrman delivered the corrected proofs to Constable on 2 January 1996. Before the end of February he responded to the British Academy requirement to provide a memorandum concerning his early life. He added two afterthoughts. One was his regret that he had tended to

hurry when noting references in his book on William III's navy and had not found time to check them before publication. The other was a bit startling: 'I would like to say that I am more satisfied with my efforts to assist libraries and archives than with my performance in all as an historian.' This was written during the time familiar to authors when exhaustion and doubt dominate anticipation of reviews. It was also written before a conference was organised in his honour at the Institute of Historical Research. On that occasion he was prepared to speak a word of thanks, 'But when they stood up, and seemed unwilling to sit down quietly, the only way to end proceedings was—to end proceedings. A pity really, but very generous of them.' He added: 'I have certainly been uncommonly fortunate in both the number and the tone of reviews.'³⁹

The reviews, many by prominent historians, were indeed numerous and positive. The volume was carefully examined and looked upon as a strong finish. Thorough exploration combined with fondness for laying out tableaux of interacting elements—Pitt regarded George III as a formidable and unsettling element—again resulted in 'acute insight and measured judgement'.⁴⁰ Like Pitt, Ehrman believed in information. Historians working in all aspects of the period turn first to these volumes to discover what the government did and did not do, and why, and this will be the case for a long time. One reason is, as Ian Gilmour observed, 'Everything is seen in the conditions of the day; hindsight is largely absent.' Yet Pitt 'is not submerged beneath the history. The theatre is crowded, the action is continuous . . . , but Pitt is . . . just as he always remained centre-stage throughout his political life.' Many reviewers took the occasion to appraise the whole three-volume accomplishment. Homage was repeatedly paid. Gilmour's closing words capture the spirit:

Pitt's life lasted only 46 years. John Ehrman has spent almost as long researching the three majestic volumes of his biography. Vast stamina has been needed as well as an unrivalled understanding of Pitt, great literary skill, historical sympathy and limitless erudition—a combination of qualities which has produced the major political biography of the last half-century.⁴¹

³⁹ Letter to Anthony Smith, 2 July 1996, CUL MS 9975. The conference was held on 4 May 1996. The April 1998 number of *History* was devoted to publishing the papers.

⁴⁰ Michael Duffy, 'The Premier killed by government', *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 29 Nov. 1996.

⁴¹ Ian Gilmour, 'Centre-Stage', *London Review of Books*, 1 Aug. 1996.

The Economist's reviewer wrote: 'He can take complete pride in everything he has done.'⁴² Clearly, he had ample reason to reconsider his February pronouncement.

Yet it is certain that he wanted posterity to know that he judged his efforts to assist libraries and archives to be of great importance. These were not activities carried on in retirement. It was an 'aspect of my life, . . . [which] occupied a substantial part of it from the late 1940s, and one which increased markedly from the start of the 1970s until the end of 1994'. His own words in 1996 should be recorded:

My time as Hon. Secretary and later Treasurer of the Friends of the National Libraries; on the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art, where I chaired a new subcommittee on archives and helped introduce the reserved purchase fund for documents, administered by the V and A Museum; on the H. M. C.; as the first chairman of the National Mss Conservation Trust, seem to me to have perhaps made a useful contribution in aggregate.⁴³

He was a commissioner of the Historical Manuscripts Commission for a remarkable twenty-one years (1973 to 1994) during which he was always a regular and faithful attender at meetings and in touch with matters between meetings, ready to discuss everything from the allocation of manuscripts accepted for the nation in lieu of tax to the unending struggle for obtaining government funding.⁴⁴ Ehrman was the first chairman of the National Manuscripts Conservation Trust. Lord Egremont, current chairman, states that the organisation 'would not exist without him. I always enjoyed—and learnt from—our meetings, not least because he spoke the most exquisite English. What a fine and generous man and not at all a pushover! John could recognise anything or anyone bogus with unerring accuracy.'⁴⁵

Ehrman's list is not complete. He was chairman of the British Library Advisory Committee, 1979–84. He served as a trustee of the National Portrait Gallery. Richard Ormond, young Assistant Keeper at the time, remembers him as quiet in meetings but helpful at negotiating a contested issue and prepared to offer words to summarise a consensus.⁴⁶ This talent plus Ehrman's experience with the document purchase fund may have enabled him quietly to negotiate a way for the National Maritime Museum

⁴² *The Economist*, 20 July 1996.

⁴³ Ehrman, British Academy memorandum. In 1954 he published a brief history of 'The Friends of the National Libraries' (*The Book Collector*, 3, 1 [Spring 1954], 55–60).

⁴⁴ Message to the author from Christopher Kitching, 21 Jan. 2013.

⁴⁵ Message to the author from Lord Egremont, 1 Feb. 2013.

⁴⁶ Author's interview with Richard Ormond, 4 Nov. 2012.

to purchase the papers of Admiral David Beatty. The list also omits Ehrman's long service on the Council of the Navy Records Society, twice in the office of Vice-President (1968–70, 1974–6). Undoubtedly he served other organisations. The voluntary and philanthropic services taken together were by themselves enough to warrant honours, which he refused. He was a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, and was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1970.

He also undertook a weighty personal obligation arising from inheritance—the responsible disposal of his father's valuable book collection. In 1977 he presented incunabula and sixteenth-century printed books to the British Library. An extensive collection of bookbindings and book-trade lists and catalogues went to the Bodleian Library. To the Cambridge University Library he gave the books exhibiting early type specimens. Other libraries were also recipients of books and materials from his father's Broxbourne Library. Most of the rest was sold at Sotheby's in 1977 and 1978.⁴⁷ Giles Mandelbrote remembers him in connection with his father's collection: 'He was always immensely encouraging and supportive of my interest . . . [in the Broxbourne Library]. At the same time, beneath his kindness there was also steely determination and toughness: I remember . . . the postcards which used to arrive, urging me to get on with it.'⁴⁸ The author remembers those postcards too—kind and supportive but usually occasioned by a (timely) urge to prompt; he was an ideal Ph.D. supervisor.

In the late 1970s he and Susan were preparing to move to the country. She discovered some abandoned structures called the Mead Barns in the village of Taynton near Burford in Oxfordshire and devised a plan for restoring the buildings. A large and congenial library was created to accommodate her husband's books and there was an adjacent study. They moved in 1980; Sloane House was sold: 'Pitt has had to be put aside for some weeks, in this mammoth distraction of moving house. But I hope to start sniffing in Bodley next week, and back to harness thereafter.'⁴⁹ When the second Pitt volume was finished, he decided he must take on a research assistant to help with the third. It was no longer easy to get to the Public Record Office (now The National Archives). Dr Anthony Smith, an Oxford D.Phil. in medieval studies, accepted the position, which he retained from 1983 to 1986.

⁴⁷ Electronic British Library Journal, Department of Printed Books, 1980.

⁴⁸ Message from Giles Mandelbrote to the author, 12 Feb. 2013.

⁴⁹ Letter to the author, 26 Nov. 1980.

After completing the third volume Ehrman thought that his historical labours were over, but soon came an invitation from the ‘New DNB’, now the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, to write the long article on the younger Pitt. He could not have done it without Dr Smith who readily answered Ehrman’s call for help and wrote nearly all of it, making use of the three volumes. As Smith has commented, ‘Certainly he felt the constraints of the summary approach were not best suited to his manner of working and his temper of mind’ and he was ‘glad for me to wield the editor’s pen.’⁵⁰ The task took its toll—on both of them, but especially Ehrman who had an attack of pneumonia in early 1998; ‘no vim or vigour—had to rely on S[usan] to pull me up’. The following November he wrote: ‘I know that 79, as I shall be in the coming spring, is no great shakes these days. But I suppose that the legacy of the polio, which centred on my lungs all those years ago, tells increasingly nonetheless—I was warned it might—and I would be glad to see this undertaking completed’. A typically gentle prompting; but he added: ‘It was extremely kind of you to have agreed to take on this demanding task, and I hope you are not cursing the day. I will do what I can to ease the load.’⁵¹ Proofs were not in hand until early 2003. The result is an expert condensation of the many challenges and undertakings of Pitt’s administration. Worth particular attention are: Pitt’s proceedings antecedent to the war of 1793; all aspects of the difficulties posed by Ireland; the decisions Pitt made during the severe subsistence crisis of 1799–1801; the forming of the Second Coalition; circumstances of Pitt’s resignation in February 1801; and a skilful account of his conduct and ruminations during his three years out of office.⁵²

Ehrman could not do as much as he would have liked to ‘ease the load’. He had always loved to walk, but in March 2000 he reported: ‘my legs just don’t want to take the trouble anymore’. He had managed to give a talk to the Pitt Club in London—‘quite a business working it all out’—but ‘it seems to have passed off all right and nobody threw anything at me’. But in late April 2001 he ‘was carted into hospital in the middle of the night’, a recurrence of pneumonia-bronchitis. His recovery was slow

⁵⁰ Message from Dr Smith to the author, 27 Dec. 2012.

⁵¹ CUL MS. 9975, 2 March 1998, 9 Nov. 1998.

⁵² J. Ehrman and A. Smith, ‘Pitt, William (1759–1806)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22338>> [accessed 30 May 2014]. Ehrman was anxious to make sure that Michael Duffy’s recent biography, which he greatly admired, would be included in the list of sources. It was: M. Duffy, *The Younger Pitt* (Harlow, 2000).

and, as he put it, he ‘staggered on’.⁵³ Reflecting back on the whole experience, Smith wrote: ‘John was quite simply the most kindly, decent and admirable scholar I have ever met and I count it as a great privilege that I was enabled to know him.’⁵⁴

In June 2010 he wrote to me: ‘I have not written you for quite a long time because I could not. I lost the power to write legibly—a maddening experience . . . But, equally oddly it is starting to recede . . . I am now 90, and if I continue to live for a bit longer and you happen to visit this country . . . I would of course love to see you. So here is a line of encouragement.’⁵⁵ Unfortunately he died on 15 June 2011, of pneumonia, six weeks before my planned visit. He is buried in the churchyard of St John the Evangelist, Taynton.

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Note. I could not have written the memoir without help from the Ehrman family. Mrs Susan Ehrman welcomed me to her home in Taynton, answered my questions and shared some delightful recollections. Richard Ehrman facilitated my visit and obtained answers to my numerous questions thereafter; Sir William Ehrman provided a copy of his funeral address at the church and offered leads for learning about his father’s post-war years at Trinity, Cambridge. Hugh Ehrman supplemented my collection of book reviews. Some of John Ehrman’s papers are deposited in the Cambridge University Library.

Mrs Catherine Smith, Charterhouse Archivist, sent me information as wonderful as it was unexpected. I wish to express my gratitude for the help given me by the staffs of the Swem Library of the College of William and Mary and the Williamsburg Regional Libraries.

To Captain Roger Richardson-Bunbury, RN, a friend for decades, I record my heartfelt thanks for his willingness to go to the archives to discover details concerning Ehrman’s naval service. I also wish to thank Joe Logan, Secretary of the Navigating and Direction Officers’ Association, Commander Peter Selfe, Captain K. C. D. Watson, and Rear-Admiral J. R. Hill for their responses regarding the pioneering AIO work done at HMS *Dryad*. For information about Ehrman when a fellow at Trinity, Cambridge I am grateful to Sir John Bradfield and Sir Philip Goodhart.

In connection with his efforts to assist libraries and archives I received valued help from Lord Egremont, Nicolas Barker, Richard Ormond, Giles Mandelbrote, and Dr Christopher Kitching. Michael Duffy has helped me assess Ehrman’s historical

⁵³ CUL MS. 9975, 27 March 2000, 3 May 2001.

⁵⁴ Message from Dr Smith to the author, 15 Dec. 2012.

⁵⁵ Letter to the author, 22 June 2010. Oddly, the post-affliction handwriting appeared more legible to me than the former.

achievement, and Dr Anthony Smith generously shared with me his thoughts about John Ehrman and suggested significant improvements to the memoir while also saving me from errors. Professor Roger Knight gave me his notes of an interview with John Ehrman on 31 March 2008 at Taynton; his wife Jane helped to facilitate my research. Their enduring hospitality, helpfulness, and unwavering kindness I can never repay.