

The Historian William Hague

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William Hague's relationship with history is a complex one. As current British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and former leader of the Conservative Party, he is bound to become a subject of interest for future historians. As the author of two biographies of eminent eighteenth century politicians, he is a colleague to the historians of today. In 2004, three years after his resignation as leader of the opposition, Hague published a 600-page study of the life of William Pitt the Younger, the youngest man to ever become Great Britain's Prime Minister with the second-longest tenure of this office in British history. It took Hague another three years to write a detailed biography of the anti-slave trade campaigner William Wilberforce, a book perfectly timed to mark the 200th anniversary of the passing of the Slave Trade Abolition Bill in the British House of Commons in 1807. Both books have earned significant public acclaim and won Hague several awards as a writer. It is only natural that a lot of the attention dedicated to these biographies has centred on what they can tell us about the politician William Hague, about his principles, aims and ambitions. However, the debate whether Pitt and Wilberforce are the examples Hague aspires to as a politician leaves another important question unanswered: whether Hague's work as a historian can serve as an example to the rest of us.

With Pitt and Wilberforce, Hague has chosen two very different individuals as subjects for his books. Both men attended Cambridge University, both were very young when they were first elected to the House of Commons in the same year, 1780, and both had soon gained reputations as brilliant orators, but this is where the similarities end. Pitt, the son of Great Britain's famous leader during the Seven Years War, the Earl of Chatham, and, on his mother's side, a descendant of the Grenville family, was groomed for political office from the day of his birth. His life seems to have known only one purpose: to become Prime Minister, a goal that he achieved in 1783 at the extremely early age of twenty-four, and to remain in that office, something he succeeded in, with a short interruption from 1801 to 1804, until the day he died in 1806. While Pitt's ambition knew no bounds, there was also no limit to his dedication to his duties. This was rooted in his firm conviction that he could serve his country best by leading it and a complete disregard for his private situation. Hague depicts Pitt as an isolated and solitary figure, a heavy drinker without family, love life or money, hardly any social life and only a very select number of close friends.

One of these friends was William Wilberforce, a man whose friendly and sociable personality was in many ways the opposite of Pitt's and whose political career took a very different direction. The initial reason why this rich, yet in political circles unknown, son of a merchant from Yorkshire ran for Parliament in 1780 was not so much his wish to promote a concrete political agenda, but the lack of any other purpose in his life. This changed in 1785, when Wilberforce, who had spent a considerable part of his youth drinking, chasing women and playing cards, converted to Christian evangelicalism. From this point onwards, a sincere desire to apply Christian principles to all his actions and an overwhelming sense of being held accountable by God for his every deed became the driving force of Wilberforce's private and political life. Wilberforce was never to hold a ministerial office in the government. Instead, he accepted another role in 1787 that was to keep him busy for twenty years: to spearhead the nation-wide campaign against the British slave trade and to press for the abolition of this trade in Parliament. According to Hague, it was ultimately Pitt who convinced his friend to take up this monumental task after Wilberforce had shown his great interest in the abolitionist cause.

As the biographies of two friends, Hague's books complement each other without being incomplete when they are read on their own. While both books are very well written and meticulously researched, Hague's real achievement lies somewhere else: in his ability to analyze the life of two extraordinary individuals without falling into the methodological trap of a 'great men make great history'-approach. It is obvious that Hague respects Pitt and greatly admires Wilberforce, but he does not claim that they single-handedly shaped the historic events that they were involved in. He does not equal Pitt's life to Great Britain's fight against revolutionary France and later Napoleon, nor does he regard the abolition of the slave trade to be exclusively Wilberforce's achievement. Hague dedicates a lot of attention to the circumstances Pitt and Wilberforce lived and worked in, pointing out the many limitations to their agency. In Pitt's case, these included the constant balancing act of having to satisfy King, Cabinet and Parliament simultaneously; in Wilberforce's case, the fact that the passing of his Abolition Bill was for many years impeded by Great Britain's war with France. As a result of this approach, Hague manages twice to achieve what should be the ultimate object of any biography: to not only describe the life of a historic figure, but to use it as an example to draw the reader into a certain period, to raise his interest in a wide range of subjects and to remind him of the complexities of human decision-making. It is this ability to depict both Pitt and Wilberforce as fallible human beings and children of their times that makes Hague's books well worth reading.

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