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PALMERSTON
A BIOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

On 18 October 1865 Henry John Temple, third Viscount Palmerston, died, two days short of his eighty-first birthday. He had just completed his ninth year as Prime Minister and as he lay dying at Brocket Hall in Hertfordshire he could, had he been in a nostalgic frame of mind, have looked back on a career spanning almost six decades and one that included, in addition to two terms as Prime Minister, almost nineteen years as Secretary at War, fifteen years as Foreign Secretary and two more as Home Secretary. It had been a good innings by any standard. As William Gladstone would observe, ‘Death has indeed laid low the most towering antlers in all the forest’.¹

It is striking, however, that Palmerston’s public career took a long time to peak. He was already forty-five when he first entered the Foreign Office in which he was to make his reputation, and by the time he became Prime Minister, in 1855, he had already lived his threescore years and ten. In its obituary, The Times suggested that, ‘Had he died at seventy he would have left a second class reputation. It was his great and peculiar fortune to live to right himself.’² Many had sought to write Palmerston off, politically if not vitally, when he was seventy. Disraeli, for one, sneered from the opposition benches, that Palmerston had become an ‘old painted pantaloon’, and was ‘really an impostor, utterly exhausted, and at best only ginger-beer and not champagne’.³ Yet, although increasingly frail and gouty,⁴ Palmerston in 1855 was neither ‘second class’ nor ‘exhausted’. Such a man would hardly have been able to press his claims to the premiership on the basis that his appointment was, quite simply, ‘inevitable’,⁵ had he neither political backing nor physical stamina enough to substantiate them; Palmerston had both. It was precisely because he had impressed himself on the public stage so effectively by 1855 that opponents and critics were keen to undermine him.

Yet, the ambiguous nature of Palmerston’s immediate posthumous reputation points to an important aspect of his life, which was long and varied, colourful and active, but while incontestably ‘significant’, it remained ambiguous in its apparent import and impact. Palmerston was born five years before the French Revolution of 1789 and yet lived to see the end of the American Civil War in 1865 and his death came only five years before
Bismarck united Germany and altered the balance of power in Europe for ever. Born into the genteel world of Georgian high society, Palmerston lived and eventually died at the head of a heavily industrialised, swaggering imperial nation. The Pax Britannica was also the age of Palmerston. Politically, at home, he lived through dramatic change too: he entered Parliament in 1807 by the rottenest of routes, accepting the seat of Newport, Isle of Wight, on the strict understanding that he never set foot in the place; he left Parliament, according to one recent account, a much reformed and more democratic place and despite his well-known antipathy towards the working classes, believing them likely to kill their children for a drink (what then might they do with the vote?), had emerged as a popular hero to rival any later charismatic leader: Palmerston was the ‘People’s Minister’, long before anyone thought to call Gladstone the ‘People’s William’.

Just as he lived through turbulent and changing times, Palmerston’s reputation has similarly suffered the vagaries of historical fad and fashion and early biographers, determined to see him as ‘something’, created a variety of apparently contradictory portraits and images. Here was the Regency dandy who liked parties more than politics, and yet, standing at a tall desk so that he would not be able to fall asleep at his work, Palmerston happily attended to the minutiae of office, working from seven in the morning to one o’clock the next such that, as one bus driver was reported to observe, ‘He earns ’is wages; I never come by without seeing ’im ’ard at it’. The amorous and charming Lord Cupid was also the abrasive Lord Pumicestone who vexed Queen Victoria and Prince Albert to such an extent that they may well have been drawn to agree with those German conservatives who discerned in Palmerston signs that he was the son of the devil. Politically, too, he defied neat categorisation. As Edward Whitty lamented, essaying a pen portrait of the new Prime Minister in 1855:

> The difficulty of daguerreotyping Proteus would be comparable with the perplexity of a biographer in attempting a sketch of the career of Henry John Temple, Viscount Palmerston. For, though the individuality is, at all stages, identical, there are four different personages to deal with – Palmerston, who was the raging young Pittite; Palmerston, the adolescing Canningite; Palmerston the juvenile Whig; and Palmerston the attaining-years-of-discretion Coalitionist. There is none of the Ciceronian symmetry in the career – beginning, middle, and end; it is all beginning.

All of which has served, all too often, to create a portrait of Palmerston as a mixed bag of contradictions and a man frequently out of tune with his times. Yet it is not enough to dismiss Palmerston as a cynical opportunist, a dangerous politician (and lover) or a cavalier adventurer. If there is no obscuring the fact that this is a complicated life to unravel, then equally there is no avoiding Lord Palmerston. His life and career are interwoven with, and
profoundly affect, the course of modern history. As one of his early biographers noted, in reviewing the work of another:

The route from the Napoleonic Wars to Queen Victoria’s first Jubilee runs, so to speak, straight through Lord Palmerston. That astonishing career bars the whole course of English and, to a large extent, of European history between 1830 and 1865; and if you propose to take your passengers across the intervening years by an honest route which will enable them to see where they are really going, you have got somehow to negotiate the formidable slopes of the Palmerstonian massif. Poor-spirited persons may prefer to travel through this period by following the shady valley of Disraeli’s early life or the comparatively easy gradients of Mr. Gladstone. But their unheroic choice is a mere shirking of difficulties; and if you steer an honest course, you are brought straight up against the massive silhouette of Lord Palmerston’s official life. . . .

That means, to put the problem at its lowest, a truly terrifying accumulation of paper waiting to be reviewed by any investigator of Lord Palmerston’s career, a mountain of material beneath whose frowning crags chicken-hearted scholars slink away to find circuitous routes round the obstacle and easier careers to write about.12

The accumulation of paper is indeed enormous. However, while many previous biographers have been aware of that mountain of material, few have actually attempted, or had the opportunity to attempt, to scale it. Henry Lytton Bulwer and Evelyn Ashley’s official Life, published in five volumes in the 1870s, did make considerable use of Palmerston’s private papers and provided a useful introduction to their subject, but their approach was highly selective, and narrowly focused on presenting Palmerston in a favourable light. Later scholars would in due course come to a study of Palmerston with more searching questions but with due respect for the important work of those such as Herbert Bell, and later Sir Charles Webster, Donald Southgate and Jasper Ridley, previous biographers have sought to assess Palmerston from a selective perspective, using Palmerston’s private papers sparingly or not at all. Only Kenneth Bourne in recent years attempted the task with full access to those papers, but premature death meant that Bourne’s study remained incomplete. Yet as Bourne’s Early Years, a substantial examination of the first half of Palmerston’s life demonstrated, full access to those papers is in itself a mixed blessing: the sheer wealth of detail in Bourne’s account often, as reviewers at the time pointed out, threatened to overwhelm and obscure the book’s principal subject.13 Seeing the ‘Palmerstonian massif’ in perspective is no easy task and past biographers have regularly stated the difficulty of their undertaking. Donald Southgate opined in 1966 that ‘no definitive life can be written until many have slaved at the galleys over many years’, while Kenneth Bourne, sixteen years later, thought there
‘probably never will be’ a ‘satisfactory biography of Palmerston’. 14 Thus did Muriel Chamberlain suggest that although ‘Everyone thinks that he or she knows Lord Palmerston’, ‘Contradictions meet the biographer at every turn’. 15 To make a claim to have produced a ‘definitive’ account is to give easy hostages to fortune, while to see the contradictions as problems is to miss the point. It is in his complexity that Palmerston is most interesting and it is his apparent adaptability or changeability that makes him a valuable medium for understanding the Victorian world. Palmerston himself suggested that the lives of others should be read for the purposes of improvement: ‘In biography read the history of great & wise men avoid the details of the vices & crimes & depravity of mankind, which leave an unsatisfactory and humiliated feeling on the mind, while on the contrary the relation of great & noble actions pleases and elevates,’ he wrote in late 1829. 16 It is necessary, however, to pay some attention to those vices (and crimes and depravity if they exist) if the subject is to be rendered with any accuracy.

Whether a satisfactory biography of Palmerston can be written remains something for others to judge. My intention in this study has been, as far as possible, to ‘make sense’ of Palmerston. He emerges here, I hope, as neither behind nor ahead of his times, but very much of them. I have attempted to understand the Palmerston mindset (indeed, perhaps it is necessary first of all to assert that I believe that there was one) but also to consider how Palmerston was perceived by his contemporaries. I agree with Jonathan Parry that Palmerston was ‘the defining political personality of his age’, 17 but this is not Carlylean ‘great man’ history; rather what follows is offered primarily as a prism through which to view (Whig-Liberal) nineteenth-century Britain while it is to be hoped explaining the life and career of one of its principal characters.

In January 1843, Palmerston’s eye was caught by an article in the Edinburgh Review. The former Foreign Secretary, now sitting uncomfortably on the opposition benches, was evidently struck by what he took to be a distillation of the essence of good statesmanship and copied out an extract by hand:

The statesman who in treading the slippery path of politics, is sustained & guided only by the hope of fame, or the desire of a lofty reputation, will not only find himself beset with incessant temptations to turn aside from the line of strict integrity, but the disappointment he is sure to meet with will probably drive him to misanthropy, perhaps even irritate him to tarnish by vindictive treachery a virtue founded upon no solid or enduring principle. But the statesman who looks in the simple performance of his duty, for consolation & support amid all the toils & sufferings which that duty may call him to encounter; who aims not at popularity, because he is conscious that continued popularity rarely accompanies systematic and unyielding integrity; who, as he is urged to no questionable measures by the hope of fame, so is deterred from none that are just
by the fear of censure such a man may steer a steady course through the shoals and breakers of the stormiest sea; & whether he meet with the hatred or gratitude of his countrymen is to him a consideration of minor moment, for his reward is otherwise sure. He has laboured with constancy for great objects he has conferred signal benefits upon his fellow men. Nobler occupation man cannot aspire to, sublimer power no ambition need desire; greater reward it would be very difficult to obtain.18

To many of his critics, this would have seemed the very antithesis of the Palmerstonian approach to politics. Very often Palmerston was viewed as a superficial politician, forging policies based on a crude appreciation of national honour and power and justifying and grounding those policies in a selective reading of a vociferous patriotic opinion. Yet there is a case to be made for seeing the abrasive Lord Pumicestone, the amorous Lord Cupid and the threatening ‘devil’s son’, cavalier hero and anti-hero of Regency parties and Victorian parliaments, as something more than the jaunty, irreverent and opportunistic politician of popular caricature. Colourful though he might have been, Palmerston was not sufficiently charismatic to sustain a parliamentary career of almost half a century (more than thirty of those years in the highest offices of state) by sheer force of personality alone. Remembered as the quintessential gunboat diplomat, Palmerston resorted to such bullying in only two cases of any great significance, against China and against Greece, and important though such episodes are, they do not define his foreign policy, let alone his political character. Nor does his oft-quoted advice to George Goschen in 1864 when Prime Minister, that the government could not ‘go on adding to the Statute Book ad infinitum’,19 denote a domestic politician of narrow horizons and negligible reforming spirit. By the same token, Palmerston has long remained an elusive character: moving politically from Tory to Whig to Liberal; from reactionary eighteenth-century throwback to enlightened harbinger of late nineteenth-century democracy; the flamboyant and apparently disreputable society beau who was in fact a near teetotal workaholic.

Crucially, Palmerston was very much rooted in a clearly identified intellectual tradition. His exposure to the ideas of the Enlightenment during his days as a student at Edinburgh University at the beginning of the nineteenth century were to provide an intellectual framework within which he would subsequently approach political life. It was not, therefore, mere hyperbole when, sixty years after leaving the city, Palmerston returned to Edinburgh in 1863 and claimed that he was ‘proud to acknowledge – that if I have been in any way successful in public life, and if I have been enabled to steer my course in a manner satisfactory to my own conscience, and meeting the general approval of my fellow-countrymen . . . it has been that in these three years that I passed in this city, I was furnished by able hands with charts and compasses which taught me how to steer my course, to avoid many of the dangers to
which the voyage of life is exposed, and to pursue in safety the career which I was destined to fill.’ Palmerston pointed, in particular, to the value of having been ‘taught that liberality of sentiment which perhaps in those days was not so generally diffused as in the days in which we live’, and stressed the progressive and forward-looking nature of those ideas. Though the liberal idealism of that period had now grown into mid-Victorian orthodoxy in matters of politics and ‘social organisation’, at the time, Palmerston said, those same ideas ‘were struggling against prejudice and limited ignorance for ascendancy in the minds and actions of mankind’. If his commitment to those ideals was sometimes questionable in practice, Palmerston should not be dismissed as a politician lacking principles. His belief in liberal progress, conceived within the carefully prescribed limits of moderate concession to responsible opinion, was sincere and informed his understanding of his political responsibilities and obligations.

Palmerston was also a flamboyant politician. This has, no doubt, affected historical assessments of his seriousness. Thus, as George Francis noted in an article in Fraser’s Magazine in 1846, rather than crush opponents with well-worked arguments, he was just as likely to dodge difficult situations with mockery. Palmerston, he wrote:

 Possesses himself of considerable power of ridicule; and when he finds the argument of an opponent unanswerable, or that it could only be answered by alliance with some principle that might be turned against himself, he is a great adept at getting rid of it by a side-wind of absurd allusion. He knows exactly what will win a cheer and what ought to be avoided as calculated to provoke laughter in an assembly where appreciation of what is elevated in sentiment is by no means common.

Palmerston was serious in his approach to politics, but he was also acutely aware of the need to carry popular support with him. ‘As Lord Carlingford used to say, the secret of Lord Palmerston’s popularity lay in the fact that he was “understood of the people.”’