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Palmerston: A Biography

David Brown. Yale UP

Henry John Temple, better known as Lord Palmerston, dominated the first half of the 19th Century. Secretary at War for nineteen years, Foreign Secretary for a total of fifteen years, Home Secretary for three, and Prime Minister - twice - for nine years altogether, Palmerston remains a giant in British history.

He so dominated British consciousness that he was rarely referred to by his correct title. As an amorous young adult, he was universally known as 'Lord Cupid'. His romantic scrapes were both legendary and notorious after Mrs Brand, one of Queen Victoria's ladies-in-waiting objected mightily to his appearance in her bedroom in Windsor Castle. Later, as a pugnacious nationalist and gun-powder diplomatist, he was better known as Lord Pumicestone. The Germans so loathed him that he inspired the doggerel: 'If there devil has a son, surely he must be Palmerston'. According to the French he was alleged to have reacted to the compliment: "If I were not a Frenchman, I should like to be an Englishman" with the reply: "Yes. If I were not an Englishman, I should like to be an Englishman." Palmerston was also hated by Queen Victoria who thought him rude and a reprobate; abhorred by the Radicals who considered him a warmonger; and detested by his own civil servants who felt that he worked them to death without the slightest 'thank you' or consideration. But finally, in old age, he became "Pam", the almost loveable grandee of Westminster. By now married to his long-term mistress, Lady Copwer, Palmerston's rough edges had been smoothed and instead of sneering at his opponents he used charm to disarm them. He had become the 'people's darling', a symbol of British greatness even though he presided in 1864 over the diplomatic debacle of the Schleswig-Holstein question which ended with Britain humiliated, Denmark conquered, and Prussia poised to redraw the map of Europe.

But the problem with giants is that they are difficult to reduce to a mere figure in a book. They make any attempt at a standard biography look puny and insignificant. This is even more of a problem nowadays when most publishers insist on a maximum of six hundred pages. Dr David Brown has spent most of his academic career delving into the Palmerston archives – it must have been torture for him to leave so much of it behind when he sat down to write the summation of his subject's life. Brown himself delicately skirts round the

problem by saying that it was his intention to 'make sense of Palmerston', rather than produce another cradle-to-grave biography in the style of Jasper Ridley's well-regarded 'Lord Palmerston'. By 'making sense', he means examining some of the controversies and questions that have vexed previous biographers - and then offering his own insights as an elegant coda. This method works particularly well in certain areas, most notably his record as an Absentee Landlord in Ireland. Brown also succeeds in laying out the complexities of Palmerston's approach to Europe during the 1830s and 1840s. "Liberal, constitutional, regimes were always preferred by Palmerston," he writes. First, because they gelled with his own Whiggish preferences; and second, because they were usually "stable diplomatic partners".

Brown is a superb writer and his Palmerston ought to be required reading for all students of 19th century political history. This is a nuanced portrait of an intellectual politician whose jaunty rhetoric belied the subtlety of his beliefs and the sincerity of his actions. Where Brown's 'Palmerston' falls down, however, is in the great yawning lacunae in the areas that are not mired in historiographical controversy. There is something odd, for example, about an authoritative study of Palmerston which only glances at his decades-long campaign to eliminate the Slave Trade, or grants a mere fifty pages to his last government. It makes a reader yearn for volume two. Perhaps, if we are lucky, Brown's publishers will allocate him another five hundred pages.