

William Pitt, the Elder

PRIME MINISTER OF UNITED KINGDOM

WRITTEN BY:

[Vera Muriel White](#)

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Alternative Titles: 1st Earl of Chatham, Viscount Pitt of Burton-Pynsent, The Great Commoner William Pitt, the Elder, also called (from 1766) **1st Earl of Chatham, Viscount Pitt of Burton-pynsent**, byname **The Great Commoner** (born November 15, 1708, [London](#)—died May 11, 1778, Hayes, Kent, [England](#)), British statesman, twice virtual [prime minister](#) (1756–61, 1766–68), who secured the transformation of his country into an imperial power.

William Pitt, the Elder, detail of a painting from the studio of W. Hoare, 1754; in the National ...
Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London

Background And Education

Pitt was born in London of a distinguished family. His mother, Lady Harriet Villiers, daughter of Viscount Grandison, belonged to the Anglo-Irish nobility; his father, Robert Pitt, member of [Parliament](#), was the son of [Thomas \("Diamond"\) Pitt](#), governor of the [East India Company's](#) "factory" at Madras (now [Chennai](#)), India, where he made a vast fortune and secured one of the world's largest diamonds (sold in 1717 to the regent of France). "Diamond" Pitt had returned from India with a despotic temper made devilish with spleen and gout; he quarrelled violently with his wife and declared war on "that hellish confusion that is my family," but he treated his grandson William with affection. Father Robert was mean and [cantankerous](#), and the Villiers blood was notoriously unstable. William inherited the [gout](#), as well as a haughty temper and a strain of manic depression.

Such was the background and the smoky, explosive [inheritance](#) that was suddenly to blaze into genius. But William's passionate temper and Pitt truculence had to be [disciplined](#), so he was sent to [Eton College](#), where he acquired social polish and learned to be aloof and yet agreeable, to be politely [insolent](#). Delicate health and the early onset of gout deprived him of field sports and hunting, but he learned to ride with a good seat and take his port wine, and he enjoyed the select company of clever and well-connected friends—the two [Grenvilles](#) (one to be Earl Temple; the other, George, to be first minister to [George III](#)), [George Lyttelton](#), [Charles Pratt](#) (to become a follower of Pitt and, as the 1st Earl Camden, a member of his 1766 ministry), and other men who would later become influential in politics, as well as [Henry Fielding](#), author of [Tom Jones](#). But Pitt hated the brutal harshness of Eton and determined to have his own sons educated at home. He continued his education at Trinity College, [Oxford](#), but left after a year without taking a degree. He then spent several months at the [University of Utrecht](#) in the Netherlands, probably studying law.

His [classical](#) education made him think, act, and speak in the grand Roman manner. His favourite poet was [Virgil](#), and he never forgot the patriotic lessons of Roman history; he constantly read [Cicero](#), the golden-tongued orator who could yet lash offenders with his indignation. Later, in Parliament, his organ-like voice could be distinctly heard outside the House. This voice, perfect timing, and splendid gestures were worthy of [David Garrick](#), the greatest actor of the day and a personal friend; Pitt's lean, tall, commanding figure, combined with a Roman beaky nose and hawklike eyes—large and gray but turning black when he was roused—overwhelmed all onlookers. To his countrymen he was to become almost a divine portent, a voice from the Delphic oracle.

For the present, possessed of a mere £100 a year, he nevertheless rejected the church, a younger son's last resort as a career. While he was vegetating on a small family property in [Cornwall](#), which he called a "cursed hiding-place" in one of his many letters to his adored sister and confidante, clever Nan (Ann) Pitt, help came from a politically powerful millionaire nobleman, Lord Cobham, who lived in splendour in a palatial mansion and vast park at Stowe, in [Buckinghamshire](#), to which William and his friends paid visits. Cobham sent William abroad on "The Grand Tour" of Europe (only France and Switzerland were visited, however) and later bought him a cornetcy—a commission—in his own [regiment](#) of horse (1731).

Early Political Career

In 1735 Pitt was offered one of the "[pocket](#)" [boroughs](#) his brother controlled, in [Wiltshire](#), and entered [Parliament](#). He belonged to the small group known as "Cobham's cubs" and the "boy patriots,"

the connection of family friends and place hunters whom Cobham was mobilizing to oppose the ministry of Sir [Robert Walpole](#) (later the 1st earl of Orford). Walpole had governed England since 1720, monopolizing patronage, and had—they thought—become too ready to compromise in foreign affairs for the sake of peace. The “patriots” joined other discontented Whigs such as John Carteret (later Earl [Granville](#)) and William Pulteney (later the 1st earl of [Bath](#)) to rally opposition forces behind [Frederick Louis, prince of Wales](#), who was vehemently estranged from his father, King [George II](#).

There were no formal political parties in the 18th century, and political power, together with the financial opportunities it brought, was a gift of patronage from a handful of landowning family [oligarchies](#) and from the monarch himself; nor was there a formal opposition in Parliament, and opposition to the king’s ministry was regarded as factious and even traitorous. Pitt’s maiden speech in Parliament was so critical of the ministry that it provoked Walpole to deprive him of his military commission, to “muzzle this terrible young cornet of horse.”

In 1737 the Prince of Wales made Pitt one of his court officials with a salary of £400 a year. He was still a relatively poor dependent of a powerful Whig clan but already showed an independence of mind and a readiness to appeal to [public opinion](#) outside Parliament that were new in English political life: when Walpole dismissed him from his cornetcy, he ostentatiously drove about London in a one-horse chaise to underline his poverty. His talents as an orator had already become clear. He repeatedly referred to the “voice of England,” which had to be sought outside Parliament because Parliament was so packed with placemen and sinecurists. He claimed to speak for the commercial interests and even for the colonies overseas, the latter scarcely represented in the Commons. He was using arguments that carried far beyond the close interests of the Whig families; but he made lasting and valuable friendship with the rich sugar planter-aldermen of the [City of London](#) in his opposition to Walpole’s cautious handling of the disputes with Spain over West Indian trade.

Walpole at last fell from power in 1742 and was replaced by a ministry that included his old colleagues [Thomas Pelham-Holles](#), the 1st duke of Newcastle, and Philip Yorke, the 1st earl of Hardwicke, with Carteret as secretary of state. Pulteney was silenced by the grant of a peerage. The “boy patriots,” of whom Pitt was the acknowledged leader, were still excluded. They opposed Carteret even more vigorously than they had Walpole. In the [War of the Austrian Succession](#) (1740–48), Pitt, a former warmonger, now vigorously opposed the sending of men and subsidies to check the French by protecting [Hanover](#) (the king’s territory in Germany) and condemned Carteret as a “Hanover troop minister”: for this he was never forgiven by his [sovereign](#).

Pitt insisted that French power should be opposed at sea and in its colonial possessions, not on the Continent. When Carteret was forced to resign in 1744, Newcastle and his brother [Henry Pelham](#) took office and wanted to include Pitt in their ministry, but [George II](#) refused to accept him, though he did accept Cobham, Lyttelton, and Grenville. It was at this time that Pitt first appeared in Parliament swathed in bandages, on crutches, and with a huge gout boot on his foot, parading his illness. But, in the [Jacobite](#) rising of 1745 (the [Forty-five Rebellion](#)), Pitt gained new stature as the one effective statesman.

In February 1746 the king agreed to appoint Pitt joint vice treasurer of Ireland at £3,000 a year, and two months later he became paymaster general of the forces; he bowed very low as he kissed the king’s hands, but George wept with rage. The post of paymaster was one of the most sought after in government, with ample opportunity for corruption. There was an outcry from Pitt’s friends, who suspected he had been bought, but he proceeded to show both his [contempt](#) for moneymaking and his [integrity](#) as an honest but comparatively poor man by ostentatiously refusing to take for himself any more than the official salary of more than £4,000 a year: he put the interest that paymasters before had appropriated to themselves, together with the accounts of the paymaster’s funds, into the [Bank of England](#) and won the people’s hearts again. He introduced many reforms into the administration, and, though he supported the Pelhams’ alliance with [Hanover](#) (which was a change of tack), he tried also to strengthen British naval power.

A [legacy](#) of £10,000 from the old duchess of [Marlborough](#) at this time, left to Pitt “for the noble defence he has made for the support of the laws of England, and to prevent the ruin of his country,” enabled him to indulge in more lavish expenditure and generosity. He spent a good deal on [landscape](#)

[gardening](#) and bought a new property near London. After a furious quarrel, he became estranged from his sister Nan, who had been his hostess for years.

When Henry Pelham died in office in 1754, Pitt hoped for advancement, but, after much reshuffling and intrigue, Newcastle and Henry Fox (later [1st Baron Holland](#)) abandoned him for the sake of expediency. He then became ill and retired to a new house at [Bath](#), groaning "I wish for nothing but a decent and innocent retreat, not to afford the world the ridiculous spectacle of being passed by every boat that navigates the river." An invalid and an aging bachelor, he suddenly fell in love with Lady Hester Grenville, became engaged at once, and was married by November 1754. She was 33 and he 46, and she adored him, possibly from the times in her childhood when he had visited Stowe with her brothers. She was attractive, clever, patient, and eminently practical—particularly about money, arranging mortgages, satisfying creditors, and pouring away her own fortune, in his last years of grandiose extravagance, to protect him.

Pelham, detail of a portrait by John Shackleton, c. 1752; in the National Portrait Gallery, ...
Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London

It proved to be an ideally happy marriage with a well-ordered, loving home and family ("the infantry" Pitt called them); later he was to be found making hay with them at Hayes Place, his house in [Kent](#), going for picnics, and chasing butterflies. He magically became healthy and happy, ready for his last big parliamentary fight for high office. But first, because of his attacks on Newcastle's ministry, he was dismissed, penniless, from the pay office in 1755. His brother-in-law Earl Temple helped with an annuity of £1,000.

Leadership During Seven Years' War

The outbreak of the [Seven Years' War](#) gave Pitt his supreme opportunity for statesmanship. The war began with heavy losses and considerable confusion of policy. The popular demand for Pitt became irresistible, and he declared, "I am sure I can save this [country](#), and nobody else can." In November 1756 he formed a ministry that excluded Newcastle, with the Duke of Devonshire as its nominal head. In June 1757 Newcastle returned to office on the understanding that he should control all the patronage and leave Pitt to conduct the war.

Pitt determined that it should be in every sense a national war and a war at sea. He revived the militia, reequipped and reorganized the navy, and sought to unite all parties and public opinion behind a coherent and intelligible war policy. He seized upon [America](#) and [India](#) as the main objects of British strategy: he sent his main expeditions to America, to ensure the conquest of [Canada](#), and supported the [East India Company](#) and its "heaven-born general," [Robert Clive](#), in their struggle against the [French East India Company](#).

He subsidized and reinforced the armies of [Frederick the Great](#) of [Prussia](#) to engage the [French](#) on the Continent, while the British Navy harassed the French on their own coasts, in the [West Indies](#), and in Africa. Choosing good generals and admirals, he inspired them with a new spirit of dash and enterprise. His hand, eye, and voice were everywhere. By 1759, the "year of victories," Horace Walpole, man of letters and son of Sir Robert Walpole, wrote with reluctant admiration, "Our bells are worn out threadbare with ringing for Victories." Pitt, the "Great Commoner," was known and feared throughout the world. This resolute and concerted policy was too much for [Bourbon](#) France, and, by the terms of the [Treaty of Paris](#) in 1763, Great [Britain](#) remained supreme in [North America](#) and India, held [Minorca](#) as a Mediterranean base, and won territory in Africa and the [West Indies](#).

Pitt had given Britain a new empire besides preserving and consolidating the old. But, before the war ended, he had been forced to resign. In 1760 [George III](#) came to the throne resolved, as was his chief adviser, the [Earl of Bute](#), to end the war. When Pitt failed to persuade his colleagues to declare war on Spain to forestall its entry into hostilities, he resigned in October 1761. He alone was not tired of war. He never considered its carnage or the ruin facing a bankrupt country. He had tended to concentrate the whole conduct of government into his own hands and worked with furious energy. His haughty manner, which alienated many, and his high-handed treatment of affairs had earned him respect and admiration but little friendship.

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John Stuart, 3rd earl of Bute, detail of an oil painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds; in the National ...
Courtesy of The National Portrait Gallery, London

When his resignation was accompanied by a peerage for Hester and an annuity to her of £3,000, there was again an outburst of abuse and scurrility. Just as when he had accepted the pay office, this acceptance of a peerage and a pension for his wife seemed to be the result of a political bargain. As rewards for his immense services they were meagre enough, but it was some measure of his unique reputation for high minded disinterestedness that his accepting them should provoke so much bitter disillusionment. His effigy was burned, and Hester was reviled as Lady Cheat'em. Pitt attacked the terms of the Treaty of [Paris](#) as an inadequate recognition of Great Britain's worldwide success. But, though his popular appeal was soon restored, his career as war minister was over.

Last Years

Pitt fell back on his gout and his gardening. In 1765 an admirer left him a splendid estate at Burton Pynsent in [Somerset](#), where he planted avenues of noble trees. He was frequently at Bath, where they stood up in the Pump Room when he drank the water. He now had the attacks of "gout in the head" that led to bouts of insanity.

When Bute resigned in 1763, he was succeeded by George Grenville, and Pitt's attacks on the administration completed a breach between the two brothers-in-law. Pitt was becoming a champion of liberty, condemning the high-handed action taken by the ministry against a member of Parliament, [John Wilkes](#), whose paper, the *North Briton*, had attacked the King's speech at the opening of Parliament and who eventually had to flee abroad. Inactive in 1764 and 1765, Pitt reentered the stage in January 1766 to deliver a passionate plea for imperial liberty on behalf of the American colonists who had resisted the Stamp Act and to demand that act's repeal.

John Wilkes, engraving from a manifesto commemorating his fight against general warrants and for ...
Courtesy of the trustees of the British Museum; photograph, J.R. Freeman & Co. Ltd.

In July the king asked him to form a ministry drawn from all sections of the houses of Parliament. Pitt's judgment and wisdom were impaired at this time, and, never having paid attention to manoeuvring among political connections, he found it difficult to form a coherent ministry. It was a fiasco rightly called a "tessellated pavement" by his political opponent [Edmund Burke](#). Pitt himself chose the secondary post of lord privy seal, for which he was created earl of Chatham, but this meant abandoning the House of Commons and the possibility of influencing it directly by his oratory there. The "Great Commoner" retired to the Lords and fell ill for another two years, leaving a rudderless government, under the luckless duke of Grafton and [Charles Townshend](#), to abandon his policies. Engulfed in a black fit of insanity, Pitt withdrew completely and in 1768 resigned office. He acquired a group of followers in the House of Commons and, in an alliance with Lord [Rockingham](#)'s group of opposition Whigs, offered a threat to Lord North's ministry, but this opposition was, in the end, without results.

Edmund Burke.

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Pitt's last years were clouded by illness, yet he was to reappear in the House of Lords—with ever greater difficulty—as an elder statesman. He continued to plead for generous treatment of the American colonists though he did not wish to grant them independence, partly for fear of their falling into the hands of France; in 1775 he hurriedly introduced a bill designed to suspend repressive measures at [Boston](#) and to maintain the legislative authority of Parliament over the Colonies while using the Continental Congress established at [Philadelphia](#) as a body for assessing the monetary contributions of each colony. Although the bill was summarily rejected, it indicates how Pitt would have handled the American problem. His last speech, against any diminution of an empire based on freedom, closed a political career that had become devoted to a reconciliation of imperial power with constitutional liberty. Pitt died on May 11, 1778, falling back into the arms of his son William who was reading to him the passage in [Homer's Iliad](#) on [Hector's](#) farewell. He was buried in [Westminster Abbey](#) with all the funeral pomp he could have desired and with public grief.

[Vera Muriel White](#)