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Source: *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 3 (1909), pp. 29–32

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Royal Historical Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3678272>

Accessed: 27-06-2016 08:08 UTC

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A SPEECH

ON THE OCCASION OF THE COMMEMORATION OF THE BICENTENARY OF WILLIAM PITT, EARL OF CHATHAM (*November 15, 1708–May 11, 1778*), AT A MEETING OF THE ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY, NOVEMBER 16, 1908.

By the REV. W. HUNT, D.Litt., *President*.

OUR special meeting to-day is the fruit of a suggestion made to me by one of our Fellows, Mr. Basil Williams, who has devoted much time to the study of Chatham's life. I am sorry that the duties of his profession prevent him from being with us ; indeed, he is now in South Africa.

Although it is not, I am sure rightly, the custom of our Society to commemorate anniversaries, the Council consider that yesterday, the bicentenary of the birth of William Pitt, Earl of Chatham, is an altogether exceptional case, that it is an anniversary which should be observed with gratitude by all subjects of the British Crown, both because of the immediate and of the lasting benefits which that great man's work and words have conferred upon his countrymen. And if it is incumbent on all Englishmen to-day to praise his memory and to lay to heart the lessons he has left us, it is certainly specially incumbent on us who, as a Society, are bound to investigate his work and to extract from it the wisdom that it has to teach. From two of our Honorary Vice-Presidents I have received letters warmly commending the decision of the Council. Lord Rosebery, whose sympathy with Chatham's spirit is well known, has written to me more than

once on the subject of our meeting, regretting his inability to be present ; and I have heard to a like effect from one of my highly-esteemed predecessors in office, the Master of Peterhouse, Cambridge. We are, however, fortunate in that our Vice-President, Dr. Frederic Harrison, alike legist, historian, philosopher, and literary critic, who has written a brilliant little volume on Chatham, will deliver the Address of the evening, and that Mr. Julian Corbett will also speak on Chatham, especially as a war minister and a builder of empire, subjects on which he will speak as a master, for, as you must all know, to his earlier works on the history of England's naval power he has this year added two volumes, conspicuous for their research, originality, and attractive presentation, on the strategy planned by Pitt during the Seven Years' War. From them we shall, I doubt not, hear how he raised England from a state of weakness and depression to such a pitch of glory and greatness as it had never known before ; how under his administration the foundations of Britain's colonial empire were widely extended ; how he taught England to recognise its true destiny, that it should seek expansion, and sovereignty, and supremacy in commerce in distant lands beyond the seas ; and how he has left to us and to those who shall come after us the precious heritage of imperial ideas.

To say that Chatham had failings, and that he sometimes made mistakes, is only to say that he was man ; but I maintain that an unprejudiced study of his career will find in it no meanness of motive. Lofty as his eloquence was, it was not more lofty than his soul. That his policy seems sometimes to have been inconsistent is true. A statesman who can never be accused of inconsistency, if indeed there has ever been such a one, must surely be unfit to guide the fortunes of a nation in times of varying circumstance. And it may be suggested that, in judging of Chatham's consistency, we should look deeper than the formal description of the measures he advocated or denounced ; we should try to understand what, whether rightly or wrongly, they may have

meant to him. For it is only in that way that we shall be able to discover whether, in spite of seeming inconsistency, he was not faithful to a principle, and that principle the advancement of the glory and welfare of England. For example, was his support of the Government's proposal to continue to maintain an army in Flanders at the beginning of 1745 really inconsistent with his philippic against the despatch of reinforcements thither a year before? In words perhaps it was so; not, I think, in principle. In 1744 he had cause to believe that the prosecution of a Continental war was not for the interest of England, but to extend the boundaries or power of Hanover, that 'despicable electorate,' as he somewhat unjustly called it. In 1745 it was another matter. Then it was not Hanover, nor the balance of power, nor the recovery of the *avulsa membra* of the Austrian inheritance that he saw at stake; for danger had come near England, even to its doors. The interest of England seemed, he may well have believed, to demand that an effort should be made to check the spread of the French power over Flanders; for France had already made a serious, though unsuccessful, attempt to invade us; it was sheltering Prince Charles, who was using its hospitality to stir up the rebellion soon to make that year famous, and the Treaty of Worms had had the effect of removing the principal theatre of the war to Flanders, then on the point of being invaded by a vast army under Marshal Saxe, which we and our Dutch allies were by no means prepared to meet.

I will not pursue this subject further, for I must not detain you from the pleasure of hearing Dr. Harrison. But I would urge that Chatham's policy should not be studied in the spirit of a man who gazes on the sun in the hope of finding spots in that blazing orb until he becomes blinded by the consequences of his own folly, but rather with the thought whether he who did so much for England may not at each particular step in his career have been guided by his love, his passionate zeal for his country. In that he was consistent. That I believe to have been the determining motive of his

life, as it was that of his great, perhaps even greater, son. It filled his heart ; it directed his policy ; it burned within him as a flame of fire, and was worthily expressed in an eloquence more splendid than had ever been heard in a British parliament.