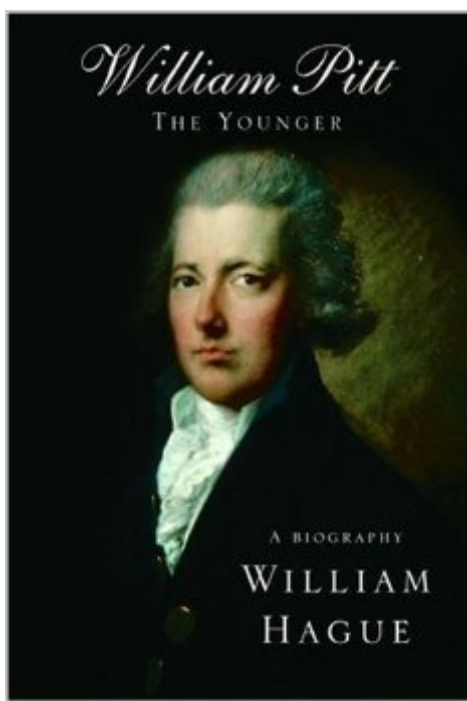


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William Pitt The Younger



Synopsis

William Pitt the Younger is an illuminating biography of one of the great iconic figures in British history: the man who in 1784 at the age of twenty-four became (and so remains) the youngest Prime Minister in the history of England. In this lively and authoritative study, William Hague—himself the youngest political party leader in recent history—explains the dramatic events and exceptional abilities that allowed extreme youth to be combined with great power. The brilliant son of a father who was also Prime Minister, Pitt was derided as a “schoolboy” when he took office. Yet within months he had outwitted his opponents, and he went on to dominate the political scene for twenty-two years (nineteen of them as Prime Minister). No British politician since has exercised such supremacy for so long. Pitt’s personality has always been hard to unravel. Though he was generally thought to be cold and aloof, his friends described him as the wittiest man they ever knew. By seeing him through the eyes of a politician, William Hague—a prominent member of Britain’s Conservative Party—succeeds in explaining Pitt’s actions and motives through a series of great national crises, including the madness of King George III, the impact of the French Revolution, and the trauma of the Napoleonic wars. He describes how a man dedicated to peace became Britain’s longest-serving war leader, how Pitt the liberal reformer became Pitt the author of repression, and how—though undisputed master of the nation’s finances—he died with vast personal debts. With its rich cast of characters, including Charles James Fox, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Edmund Burke, and George III himself, and set against a backdrop of industrial revolution and global conflict, this is a richly detailed and rounded portrait of an extraordinary political life.

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Customer Reviews

From Which the World Should Note Something Particular. Shakespeare. There was something astonishingly particular about William Pitt the Younger. The second son of the Earl of Chatham (Pitt the Elder) was a child prodigy. He was admitted to Cambridge at age 14, elected to Parliament at age 21 and appointed Prime Minister at age 24. Twenty-two years later, of which twenty were spent as Prime Minister, Pitt died at age 46. William Hague was something of a prodigy himself. He gave his first major political address at a Conservative Party Conference in 1977 at age 16. Hague was elected to Parliament at age 28 and became the Conservative Party's leader at age 36, the youngest party leader in 200 years. Hague's rhetorical skills, like Pitt the Younger, are excellent. Some observers (not all of them Conservatives) believed that Hague regularly bested Labour P.M. Tony Blair in debates in the House of Commons. After a losing the 2001 general election and the leadership of his party Hague was asked to write his Memoirs. He indicated that an autobiography was approximately 40 years premature and sat down to write the biography of his idol Pitt the Younger instead. Hague has done an excellent job here. Although meticulously researched this is a readable, popular biography. Hague's prose style is precise and flows very smoothly. Hague quickly takes us through Pitts early years and the events surrounding his first election to Parliament. His impact on Parliament was soon felt and within two years King George III twice asked Pitt to form a new government. It was only when Pitt was certain that he could maintain control of a new government that Pitt accepted the King's offer when it was made for the third time.

William Hague's biography of Pitt the Younger has excited much comment and interest in the UK because Hague was one of the youngest men ever to lead a major political party. As Leader of the Conservative Party in the UK he most certainly had his troubles but he did bring a breath of clean air by virtue of his freshness, commitment and youth. Therefore, it might be fair to say that his own perspective on Pitt would be of exceptional value. However, he has succeeded in writing a very straightforward and excellently researched biography of Pitt without overlaying his own experiences and views. This is excellent because I wanted to read a biography, not a polemic. Pitt was the son of one of the most famous politicians of the 18th or any century - William Pitt the Elder. As a young boy he was brought up in an environment saturated with politics and coloured by scholarship and academia. He became one of the most polished parliamentary debaters the world has ever seen

and his success was down to a firm grounding in how to argue. I am particularly interested in the period during which he served as prime minister: the 1780s to 1806. This was a time of great change in Britain: the industrial revolution, the end of the American wars, increased economic successes, the upheaval in France and the inevitable "world war" of Napoleon. Also, there were new liberal ideas coming forth: Catholic emancipation, an Irish parliament, an end to slavery. Pitt's remarkable achievement was that his sound fiscal acumen allowed Britain to stay solvent, able to afford (just) the long, long Napoleonic wars, whilst at the same time keeping a lid on a fractious Parliament dominated by himself and the always fascinating Charles James Fox.

As a rule, I believe that Americans would be better off if they read and understood more about history. It is important to read widely enough, both in breadth of scope and time, to provide a rich and useful understanding of how things have become what they are. While we cannot read everything, let alone retain it all in our memory, there are certain times, events, and even single lives that can provide valuable structure to our understanding of the world. In my view, knowing more about the history of Great Britain can help Americans understand more about our origins as a nation, provide a richer context for our founding, get a better fix on our own place in the world through time, and how we grew into a dominant power in the world. This particularly fine biography of William Pitt the Younger concerns itself with the time immediately after Britain's American Colonies became the United States up to Pitt's death in 1806 in the middle of the Napoleonic Wars. This is an especially rich time in history because everything was in flux and so much was at risk. The French Revolution of 1789 soon became The Terror. Great Britain struggled to recover from the blow of losing her American Colonies and putting herself forward as a still relevant global power. The United States actually benefited in many ways from the Europeans being so absorbed in fighting each other in these decades. However, that is a story for another time. William Pitt the Younger was the extraordinary second son of the also extraordinary William Pitt. The father dominated the House of Commons for many years including the time during the American Revolution. He was universally loved as The Great Commoner and retired as a Lord.

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