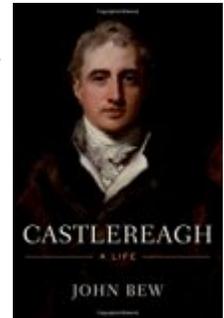




John Bew. *Castlereagh: A Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 752 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-993159-0.



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The life of Robert Stewart, the Viscount of Castlereagh, should be required reading by anyone who wants to be at the center of the action. From his early twenties until his suicide in his fifties he was at the center of Irish politics, the war against Napoleon, and the creation of the nineteenth century's Pax Europa, which lasted until 1914. He was diligent, hard-working, willing to compromise and negotiate, and capable of acts of greatness, cruelty, and more than a little eccentricity (such as his duel with fellow minister George Canning).

Castlereagh's accomplishments were significant and important. As war secretary for Great Britain he was responsible for building the army and navy used by Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, and Horatio Nelson to defeat Napoleon—an army and navy that dominated the globe over the next century and which mobilized, proportional to the population, more men than Napoleon's (p. 575). As foreign secretary, he was responsible for creating peace in his time. The Peace of Paris in 1814 and the Congress of Vienna

were the largest, and most complex, peace treaties since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. These treaties reordered Europe, bringing about a period Karl Polanyi called “the Hundred Years’ Peace.”[1]

Yet for all of these accomplishments, Castlereagh earned the ire of poets, intellectuals, politicians, and the public. Napoleon thought him “a lunatic” (p. 408). Lord Byron, in “Epitaph for Lord Castlereagh,” wrote, “Posterity will ne'er survey. / A nobler scene than this. / Here lie the bones of Castlereagh. / Stop traveller, and piss” (pp. 547-548). Percy Shelley, in “The Masque of Anarchy,” wrote, “I met Murder on the way— / He had a mask like Castlereagh” (p. 463). Other detractors considered him intellectually dim, in league with “foreign tyranny,” and “the bitter enemy of every liberal principal” (p. xxix).

It is from this “Shelley-Byron” (p. xxx) axis of critique that John Bew, in his large, detailed, and excellent *Castlereagh: A Life*, seeks to salvage Castlereagh's posterity. Bew's portrayal of

Castlereagh is as a realist trying to balance political ideals and political practicalities in order to maintain a successful and orderly state. Bew tries to give Castlereagh his due since Castlereagh had the misfortune of not only angering some of the great poets of the day but also lived in the time of Nelson and Wellington—whose memories are well entrenched on every London map and restaurant menu. And with Napoleon looming large over both the age and subsequent historical research, Castlereagh was simply lost to time. His life is worthy of study because it reflects the importance of a good biographer to being well remembered. Socrates had Plato, Caesar had Virgil and Plutarch, and both are remembered well by history. Richard III, on the other hand, had Shakespeare while Castlereagh had Shelley and Byron.

Reviving Castlereagh is not a simple task. Like a nineteenth-century Alcibiades, Castlereagh was simultaneously capable of accomplishing great deeds while alienating nearly everyone around him. He was passionately hated in his own day and had few friends willing to defend him. He was simultaneously for and against some of the great issues of his day: a Protestant Irishman, he supported Catholic emancipation but not Irish independence; he helped end the African slave trade but allowed European peasants to remain in serfdom to conservative kings; he was for government reform on Enlightenment principals but against the extremes of the French Revolution; he was against Napoleon's grand empire but helped create a concert of Great Powers; he was for national sovereignty but against nationalism; and was for British intervention on the Continent in wartime and for splendid isolation afterwards. Bew argues that Castlereagh did what he had to do to help save his country, the United Kingdom (not Britain or England or Ireland), from the dire consequences of revolution, war, and conquest—he was a practitioner of *realpolitik* whose intellectual concerns took second place to his desires for stability and order.

Bew's work is impressive and his endeavor successful. At nearly six hundred pages, it is filled with sentences that are lush with description, information, and endnotes. The book is more novel than dry chronology of events. Having known little of Castlereagh's life I found the book accessible, interesting, and informative; easy to pick up and read. With a notes section a hundred pages long and a bibliography thirty pages long, the book is well researched and dense with quotations. It is not hagiography, either—but more of a spirited defense of Castlereagh. Bew gives Castlereagh's contemporary critiques their space but also illustrates why he thinks the critics are wrong.

The book is divided into three sensible parts. Part 1 deals with Castlereagh in Ireland, where he simultaneously supported Catholic emancipation and Enlightenment ideas for better government while also doing everything possible to tie Ireland closer to Britain and negate calls for Irish independence through the Act of Union (1801). Bew is sympathetic to Irish independence (calling the chapter "Erin's Death") though he emphasizes what Castlereagh thought were the positives of the union—that Castlereagh saw it as a means of better government—and "reprobated the principal of divide and rule" that governed the relationship between Britain and Ireland (p. 573).

Part 2 is about Castlereagh's time in government during the Napoleonic wars. It's the story of his rise through government and the creation of policies to save Britain and defeat France. This is not a macro-view of the war but a diplomatic one. It discusses his relationships with William Pitt, Nelson, and Wellington, but barely mentions the War of 1812 with the United States or the conquest of Cape Colony (later South Africa), nor is much space given to the wars in India. This book is not a "world at war" macro-view evaluation of the period—instead it is very Eurocentric. Great space is devoted to the correspondence between Klemens von Metternich, the chancellor of Aus-

tria, and Castlereagh, creating coalitions, the raising and outfitting of troops, negotiations between various powerbrokers, and ultimately achieving victory on the battlefield.

Part 3 deals with the aftermath of the wars, Napoleon's exiles, the Congress of Vienna, the making of the nineteenth-century world and, finally, Castlereagh's fall from grace. Having won the war and made the peace, Castlereagh failed to lead an unruly Parliament no longer united by war. King George III was against many of his policies, personal enmities colored his decisions, and his political enemies attacked him in the newspapers. He became increasingly paranoid and ended his life by suicide in 1821.

In the book's sixty-three chapters we glimpse the sausage-making of statecraft: diplomatic maneuvering, the back-stabbing correspondence, and secret agreements to divide this and parcel that. We see the political seeds planted for the Irish diaspora; Saxony divided several times between several powers; Poland existing, then not; minor monarchs who were true allies one minute deposed for better allies the next; the slave trade stopped, then revived, then stopped again. The fate of millions hinged on the mercurial interaction of a handful of personalities. Knowing how the nineteenth and twentieth centuries turned out makes this fascinating, if disturbing, reading.

This book was a pleasure to read, not only because it is well written, but it tells the familiar tale of the Napoleonic wars from an insider's perspective. The book is a fascinating view into how states make war and peace, how they decide their self-interest, how competing interests within government battle to lead the ship of state, and how decisions are made and consequences handled.

Bew spends much time on Castlereagh's contemporary critics but then illustrates the consequences—which is especially true when discussing the Treaty of Paris in 1814. It was here that Napoleon wrote that Castlereagh was a lunatic, that the terms he received for Britain in the treaty

were worse than the ones Napoleon would have given Britain had he won the wars. Napoleon wondered what was wrong with Wellington for going along with this program. Yet Bew points out that Britain received an end to the slave trade and, more importantly, created an obstacle to Russian domination of central Europe. Bew's opinion throughout the book is that Castlereagh played a long game of diplomacy which few of his critics appreciated. According to Bew, these treaties, which resurrected France, embraced Prussia, and gave in to the antinationalist demands of eastern monarchs, had the effect of keeping Russia out of central and western Europe (a good example is the fate of Saxony, on p. 385). The "cold war" imagery is particularly strong in Bew's telling.

Interestingly, the events of the twentieth century cast a large shadow over the events described in the book. Castlereagh saw the rehabilitation of Prussia as one of his most important goals yet lamented the creation of a military state so close to "Holland and the Low countries" (p. 387), forecasting the troubles of 1914 and 1940. It is in this foreboding that much of the interest in Castlereagh lies. He helped set up a world that allowed Europe to suppress minority nationalities and colonize the far-flung regions of Africa and Asia, but which was blown to bits in the early twentieth century. The issues of Irish independence, nationalism in eastern Europe, Russian advances into central Europe, the status of Germany, the independence of Poland, the role of secret treaties and the question of British political, financial and military involvement with the Continent seemed settled in 1815 but had arisen anew by 1915 and some, such as the question of Northern Ireland, have still not been resolved.

Castlereagh was a complex figure who was largely disliked in his own time even though his work helped create the greatness of his country. Ultimately I was left wondering why Castlereagh had so few friends willing to defend him. What about him left him so bereft of positive spin?

Bew's take is that he was a practical technocrat--bland in some way, eccentric (as in his duel with Canning) in others. But the banality of evil hardly rises to the level of men exhorting strangers to pee on another man's grave. After reading this biography, it struck me as a shame how it all turned out for Castlereagh. Shelly and Byron won the public relations battle; Wellington and Nelson got the credit for saving Britain as if their armies and navies had materialized out of thin air; in textbooks Metternich--a far more revanchist conservative--gets credit for the Pax Europa of the nineteenth century; and the Act of Union--without Castlereagh's Catholic emancipation, toleration, or incorporation--sowed the seeds of a national nightmare from which James Joyce's characters were still trying to awaken a century later. Reflecting on his mental decline, paranoia, and suicide in 1821, I thought of the old truism, "It's not paranoia if everyone's out to get you." Perhaps Castlereagh, unlike Socrates, simply did not have a Plato to save him from the slings and arrows of a modern Aristophanes. If true, Bew does an admirable job towards reinstating Castlereagh's importance to modern European history.

Note

[1]. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, quoted in Eric Lybeck, "The Myth of the Hundred Years Peace: War in the Nineteenth Century," in *At War with Peace*, ed. Mohammadbagher Forough (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010), 33.

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