

H-Net Reviews

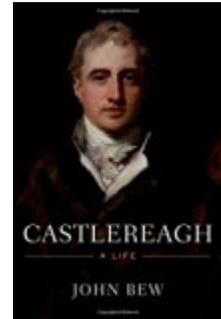
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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

Reviewed by Jerome Devitt (Trinity College, Dublin)

Published on H-War (July, 2014)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



Few of the characters of Irish history have elicited such ire, or dominated the European diplomatic stage in their time as Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh. John Bew's comprehensive new biography seeks to, and generally succeeds in re-evaluating Castlereagh's legacy along two broad historiographic lines; firstly, to challenge the image of Castlereagh as an "unthinking reactionary" (p. xxvii), and secondly, to argue that his early education was broader than previously acknowledged, where his Grand Tour of 1791 served as a formative moment in the development of his later career. That career developed from that of young Irish politician, to a Westminster Cabinet member, and later to the position of the key British diplomat at the Congress of Vienna and beyond, and the biography's structure reflects these shifting phases.

The biography's opening phase, some 160 pages, deals with Castlereagh's early life and political career. Beyond his early Whig position, it tracks his political maturation and deals with his role as chief secretary of Ireland under Lord Lieutenant Cornwallis in the suppression of the rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1798. This period cemented his legacy, within Irish historiography at least, as the prime villain of the period. Bew's use of the private letters of Alexander Knox, however, sheds light on the fact that Castlereagh not only studiously avoided interference with the chain of command (namely the ultimate responsibility of the lord lieutenant rather than the chief secretary for executions), but also that "Castlereagh's inclination was towards clemency when possible" (p. 121). Intrinsicly linked with the suppression of the rebellion was his firm opinion that the best way to reform the Irish "Grattan" parliament was

to bring about the Act of Union, which passed under Castlereagh and William Pitt's stewardship in 1801. Bew scrupulously highlights Castlereagh's position in favour of Catholic Emancipation, a casualty of the process of Union, and a position that may have partially redeemed his reputation in Ireland.

The biography's second section, running to 180 pages, primarily tracks Castlereagh's contribution to the Napoleonic war effort, first as secretary for war (July 1805-February 1806 and March 1807-November 1809) and later as foreign secretary (1812-22). Not only was Castlereagh responsible for a reinvigoration of the army, but his unflinching support for the Duke of Wellington, particularly in the lead-up to and the prosecution of the Peninsular Campaign, highlighted both his administrative skills and his loyalty. Here Bew views the "Grand Alliance" as the centerpiece of Castlereagh's foreign policy, but rather than attributing every diplomatic success to Castlereagh alone, concedes that his primary skill was his opportunism, whereby he succeeded in following military successes with "skill and ingenuity" at the critical moments (p. 313). At Westminster, it is the political plots and conspiracies that most grab the reader's attention, particularly the animosity between Castlereagh and his rival George Canning, leading up to the infamous 1809 duel between the two on Putney Heath where Castlereagh's wounding of Canning's thigh was enough to redeem his honor.

The final section of the biography shifts from winning the war to winning the peace. Book-sized in its own right at 230 pages, it sees the scene shift from the signing of the Treaty of Paris on May 30, 1814, through the Napoleon's "Hundred days," but returns to Westminster to evaluate

Castlereagh as the leader of the Commons under Lord Liverpool. It contains a detailed treatment of the Peterloo Massacre in August 1819 and the February 1820 Cato Street Conspiracy—a failed attempt to assassinate the entire British cabinet in one fell swoop. Castlereagh’s involvement in the aftermath of both events allowed his numerous critics to link these events with his earlier suppression of the United Irishmen, thus cementing his legacy on both sides of the Irish Sea, in radical eyes at least. Here, as throughout the text, Castlereagh’s actions are set against a broader national and international backdrop, giving a nuanced context to the biography.

It is perhaps when dealing with Castlereagh’s demise at his own hand in 1822 that Bew shows his greatest insight. The competing theories are handled adeptly, ranging from his history of mental illness, to the extraordinary pressures of his workload, to the impact of the death of his father, and most interestingly in the possibility that Castlereagh had acquired syphilis while a student at Cambridge, and that it had entered the deadly “tertiary” phase—thus triggering his suicide. Here, as throughout the text, Castlereagh is depicted in humane terms. As both Wendy Hinde and Patrick Geoghegan have observed, it was the humanizing comment of one of Castlereagh’s servants who, when asked whether he had noticed anything unusual in his behaviour at the end replied, “Yes, one day he spoke sharply to me,” that places the conflict between public perception of coolness and private perception of warmth most at odds.[1]

Language, reading, oratory, and poetry are never far from the core of this broad biography. Despite Castlereagh’s paucity as a parliamentary orator throughout his career, Bew highlights that it was the logical structure of his arguments and cool temperament that invariably prevailed in both Dublin and Westminster. It was the Scottish Enlightenment rather than a traditional classical education that influenced Castlereagh, but “a politician with more time, and perhaps more inclination to publicise his personal views, may have been regarded very differently by history” (p. 290). In perhaps the most

methodologically tricky aspect of the work, the ability to accurately assess the influence of the various texts that Bew adjudges him to have read, we are asked to take a small leap of faith, one that is not always convincing. But where this presents problems, Bew more than makes up for the deficiency in the broad literary canvas he presents. It was, after all, the polemicists and poets who helped to cement Castlereagh’s lasting legacy, particularly in Byron’s caustic response to news of Castlereagh’s death: “Posterity will ne’er survey / A nobler grave than this: / Here lie the bones of Castlereagh: / Stop, traveller, and piss!” (p. 548).

An interesting side note emerges from the biography. By drawing widely on personal as well as printed political papers, Bew not only paints a more personable picture of Castlereagh, but also salvages the reputation of his wife Amelia (Emily), who has been relatively marginalized because she “did not reach her husband’s intellectual level” (p. 74). Discussions of her role as an onlooker during the Union debates in Dublin and as a hostess in Paris and Vienna lend a degree of charm to her otherwise cold and calculating husband, and act as a subtle counterpoint to the geopolitical tale being told.

Although almost 600 pages in length, this biography will reward close attention by both specialists and nonspecialists in the period, whether their interests lie in Irish, British, or continental European history. That its subject was considered significant enough by Henry Kissinger to become the backbone of his own 1954 PhD thesis in diplomatic history should not surprise, nor should the reader need to look far beyond this comprehensive text for a genuine insight in the personal and political life of such a controversial figure.

Note

[1]. Patrick Geoghegan, *Lord Castlereagh* (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press for the Historical Association of Ireland, 2002), 62; Wendy Hinde, *Castlereagh* (London: William Collins, 1981), 281.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Jerome Devitt. Review of Bew, John, *Castlereagh: A Life*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. July, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40062>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.