



Photograph by Lafayette

BASIL WILLIAMS

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1867-1950

ARTHUR FREDERIC BASIL WILLIAMS was the eldest child, and the only son, of Frederick George Adolphus Williams, barrister-at-law, and Mary Katharine Lemon, daughter of an eminent London solicitor whose family firm still flourishes. Though this bare fact might lead one to think of him as a Londoner, a member of one of those thousands of middle-class country families which lost all their local colour in Victorian London, that was not how he thought of himself. His father long looked upon east Somerset as his home, and Basil Williams himself could remember 'the rich well-watered country, . . . cattle moving about meadows pied with buttercups, the lush grass reaching up to their bellies'. In his old age he drew up a family history, reaching back to his father's Lockyer ancestors around Ilchester in the late seventeenth century. This was not a mere amusement, nor even a mere act of piety. He believed in the inheritance or the transmission of human wisdom by means of family tradition. In his *Life of Chatham* he thus describes his hero's ancestors:

While these Dorsetshire Pitts had been gradually establishing a family tradition of public spirit and energy in local matters, and sharpening by constant practice their inborn practical temperament, they were also silently gathering strength for the great task of producing men of the same strain as themselves but with that added touch of genius needed to extend their sound principles of public life to the whole English commonwealth. For experience seems to show that genius is no mere *lusus naturae*, but must spring from a land well tilled and cared for in the previous generations: and unless the land is exceptionally rich and prolific, the production of one genius apparently exhausts it.

This may not be exactly scientific, but it was very real to Basil Williams. He even considered the study of ancestors to have a value in practical morality: in the preface to his family memoir, which he addressed to his sons, he gives this reason for deploring the fact that they never knew his parents:

From them too you would have learned more of your forbears on my side than I, perhaps, have been able to tell you: and so been helped to develop the good strain to be found in them and avoid their faults, both of which are apt to reproduce themselves in later generations.

His father was a rather unsuccessful barrister, who lived by law reporting and editing legal text-books; a Liberal turned Conservative, whose deep admiration for Garibaldi was succeeded by an equally deep suspicion of Gladstone; a talented performer on the cornet, who first made his wife's acquaintance as the conductor of a small private glee club. She, by contrast, was Liberal, even Radical in politics; she served on School Board committees and working-class housing associations, took a practical interest in the higher education of women, and verged on unitarianism in religion. Late Victorian London contained hundreds or thousands of households such as this; but both father and mother must have been, in their way, remarkable people, and the impression they left upon their son was deep and lasting. The father's conversations on walks and bicycle rides; their weekly letters, which he kept till his old age; the tastes for continental travel and the Alps, which he derived from them, even adhering in some instances to his father's itineraries—all this sank into his mind and stayed there. Although they were both dead before he was twenty-two, he never ceased to think of them as the great influence of his life. In the preface to his *Life of Chatham*, published in 1913, he wrote:

I feel, however, that it is not merely from books and manuscripts that one can learn to appreciate Chatham. If this book has any merit, it is due less to them than to the example of my Father and Mother, and to my good fortune in having had some experience of military and civil affairs.

Even later, a passage in his *Stanhope*, evidently written *con amore* on the companionship of fathers and sons, shows that he had not yet, at sixty-five, forgotten his own father.

One other thing, which it is relevant to mention, he inherited from his parents. His father, somewhat late in life, came into possession of the remains of a large fortune, mostly squandered in earlier generations. Basil Williams, therefore, had private means of his own, which enabled him to choose and change his career at will (a liberty of which, as will be seen, he took advantage more than once). It also enabled him to pursue the career of historian without holding any academic post till he was past fifty. This must have been a somewhat unusual state of affairs even before 1914. Today it would be a matter of wonder that work so highly professional as some of his early articles could be turned out by an 'amateur'.

He went to school at Marlborough, and hoped to proceed to

Trinity College, Cambridge, of which his father was a devoted son; but he fell ill at the time of the examination, and had to content himself with a scholarship at New College, Oxford. Among his friends there was H. W. B. Joseph; another Oxford friendship with H. H. Joachim was not a new beginning but a revival, for it went back to preparatory school.

Having taken his degree with a First Class in Honour Moderations and a Second in 'Greats', he obtained (perhaps through the influence of his parents' friend Leonard Courtney) a clerkship in the House of Commons. This position suited him well. The long parliamentary recesses gave time for travel and mountain-climbing: Basil Williams's travels were not so strange and adventurous as the cruises of his friend and fellow clerk Erskine Childers, but they made him familiar with most of the countries of Western and central Europe. No doubt he also took time for historical research, which must have occupied his mind already, for his articles in the *English Historical Review*, published in 1900-1, reveal him a mature and accomplished scholar. The clerkship offered not only leisure but excitement. It brought him close to the intense parliamentary life of the 1890's, one of the great ages of House of Commons debate. He took politics seriously, as two later candidatures for parliament show. The toricism which he had shared with his father was changing, or soon to change, towards something more like his mother's liberalism.

An incident which happened in 1896 must have influenced his career. He had the duty of attending the parliamentary committee which examined Cecil Rhodes's complicity in the Jameson Raid. Rhodes, according to Basil Williams's testimony, dominated the committee and the public when he appeared as a witness; and he electrified Basil Williams himself, who conceived a deep, though not altogether indiscriminate, admiration for him and was later to write his biography. Even allowing for the imperialist mood of the time, which pervaded both parties, there is something a little surprising in this admiration: Basil Williams was stouthearted enough, but no swashbuckler—yet he had a weakness for personal magnetism, however employed, which comes out in the biographical studies to be discussed later. Nowhere, perhaps, more than in the biography of Rhodes himself, at the end of which he speaks of 'the gift of dominating personality, which most interests the world, regardless of whether its owner succeeds or fails', and illustrates his point by a comparison between Gibbon and Chatham: 'Gibbon

remains merely a man who wrote a great book, while Chatham, apart from any action, remains a supreme personality.'

Basil Williams's own South African adventures were to begin soon afterwards, for he volunteered for the South African War. He was already a member of the Honourable Artillery Company. He had the good fortune to take with him his close friend and fellow clerk Childers. This seems to have turned the whole campaign into a private lark for him: instead of sleeping in the bell-tent with eleven other soldiers, the two dosed out together under the guns, playing piquet with a greasy pack of cards and talking of all things under the sun. They enjoyed 'the jolly democratic company of the rank and file'; according to Basil Williams, they had gone out as hide-bound Tories, but now began, under this influence, to adopt more liberal ideas. So much, indeed, did they enjoy it that they made it last as long as they could. Basil Williams, in his memoir of Childers, praises him because 'when the battery was sent home and he might have obtained his discharge at Capetown and come home in comfort on a liner, he preferred to stick to the battery to the end and return on a crowded and most uncomfortable transport'. He omits to mention the fact, which we know from other sources, that he, too, came home on the transport.

This military experience remained in his mind, and makes an appearance from time to time in footnotes to his historical works: thus, in a note on the battle of Dettingen in his *Life of Chatham*, he compares the French dispositions with those of the Boers at Sanna's Post—a comparison which is, to our age, *obscurum per obscurius*; and, later still, he compares Stanhope with Kitchener at Paardeberg, 'shoving the men up into battle as if it were into a football squash'. These little touches of reminiscence may not mean very much to a later generation; but they show what he meant when he claimed, in the preface to his *Life of Chatham*, that his ability to write history was enhanced by his 'good fortune in having had some experience of military and civil affairs'.

The whole adventure lasted little more than a year, and he returned to his post at the House of Commons. He occupied his spare time in yachting with Childers and preparing a record of *The H.A.C. in South Africa*. From this safe career he was called away, perhaps by a sense of duty and a desire for a more active career, perhaps by a mere misunderstanding. He was persuaded by one of Lord Milner's private secretaries, home on leave from South Africa, that a responsible and important post was waiting

for him there. This may have been, in principle, true, for Milner's 'Kindergarten' offered all sorts of opportunities to young men who knew how to use power when it was put into their hands. But in this particular instance, no arrangements had been made, and when Basil Williams arrived, having thrown up a safe job at home, nobody knew exactly what to do with him; nor was he disposed to act as a bottleshaver. For a time he was assigned to Lionel Curtis, then Town Clerk of Johannesburg; afterwards he moved on to the education department. In both these posts he made himself very useful with his knowledge of official methods, which most of his colleagues lacked. But, for some reason or other, he was not the man for that time and place. Perhaps he was too rigid, perhaps even too old (for it was the under thirties who flourished best in this, the last outburst of violent creation that the British Commonwealth has known). After three years, when a violent campaign of government retrenchment began in the Transvaal, Basil Williams was among the axed. This highly unpleasant experience showed him at his best. He did not lose his interest in South Africa or his love for it; indeed he contrived, soon afterwards, to revisit it as correspondent for *The Times*, and thus reported the discussions which led to the adoption of the Union constitution. When, moreover, some English newspapers started a campaign, which he considered unjustifiable, against the men who, as it happened, had been responsible for his dismissal, it was Basil Williams who wrote to defend them and to testify to their characters.

In many respects this misfortune was no misfortune at all. Although he did not lose interest in politics—especially imperial politics—he began from this date to turn towards the writing of history as his main career. He also married, in 1905, Miss Dorothy Caulfeild, who bore him two sons and later added very greatly to the success of his professorial career by her grace as a hostess.

His attention seems to have been drawn, from the first, to the study of the eighteenth century. His earliest important publication was a series of five articles in the *English Historical Review* (1900-1) on the foreign policy of Walpole's earlier years. These articles (which had to be seen through the press by a friend because the author was fighting in South Africa) are still, after fifty years, the principal work on the subject; there cannot be many articles in the *Review* which have worn so long or so well. They show, like much of his other work, a sense of Europe as a

whole though, of course, they approach Europe from the British standpoint—a failing (if failing it is) which caused a recent American scholar to label them in his bibliography, by a strange malapropism, as ‘strongly Anglican’.

They were followed in 1913 by a much greater work, the *Life of William Pitt, Earl of Chatham*. This too is still the best book on the subject. It is not a perfect book, for it suffers a little from the *lues Boswelliana*. This temptation is, of course, inseparable from the biographical method of treatment (and much of Basil Williams’s best work was biographical). But there is more to it than that. Much of the historical writing of the Edwardian age was written under the influence of national pride (for example, the histories of British sea-power which came out in a period of naval rivalries), and Basil Williams was touched by this patriotic glow which later disappeared from British professional historiography between the first and second world wars. He was not a jingo: his pride was not offensive, strident, or even unreasonable. But it was there; and Chatham, the victorious war minister, symbolized to him all that was proudest and noblest in British history.

Moreover, there was something about the heroic, or even the energetic, which always attracted him. He found it in a number of eighteenth-century figures, great and small. ‘One need only read Smollett and Fielding’, he wrote in his much later book, *The Whig Supremacy*, ‘or look at Hogarth’s pictures, to see what richly diversified and what independent, self-relying characters were to be found scattered all over this England of ours, some indeed unpleasant but all of them full of juice.’ He never minded the unpleasantness, provided the ‘juice’ was there. After Chatham himself, his favourite member of the Pitt family seems to have been Chatham’s tempestuous grandfather, whom many historians would simply have dismissed as an insupportable old ruffian, bully and bore. He admired Stanhope not only for his broad European outlook, but perhaps even more for his furious energy in dashing about Europe, drinking and begetting children at high speed. In his book on *Carteret and Newcastle* he over-pointed the contrast between the two men, because he so much enjoyed the sweeping, knockabout gestures of the one and had so little sympathy for the fumbling and trembling of the other. He hardly asked himself if there was really more common sense in Carteret’s policy than in Newcastle’s; and, with his usual generous desire to take in good part the behaviour of those whom he admired, he gave Stanhope

credit for having been a 'good European' without examining, as closely as he might have done, an alternative interpretation of Stanhope's policy which would represent it as Hanoverian rather than European. When he was dealing with Stanhope and Carteret, this propensity did not lead him far astray: both men had straightforward characters, and their limitations were, for the most part, too obvious to be ignored—for no historian of Basil Williams's intelligence could delude himself into thinking that Stanhope was a good general or Carteret a successful politician. But with Chatham he let himself go; and it happens that Chatham, though possibly not a subtle man himself (for that is an open question), demands a great deal of subtlety from his biographer—the internal strains and contradictions of his character, which brought him more than once to the verge of madness, are proof enough of that. Subtlety was hardly compatible with the unstinted admiration which Basil Williams bestowed upon his character in general. Therefore, though his errors on the side of idolatry are probably not so serious as von Ruville's errors on the side of denigration, yet he missed seeing some things that von Ruville saw, and neither of them is the perfect biographer. Basil Williams's book, however, is something more than a biography; it is one of the most readable and reliable pictures we possess of the political history of Great Britain between 1740 and 1763.

Even in his historical work, he by no means gave himself over entirely to the eighteenth century. His taste for the heroic, and perhaps the memory of a deep and early impression led him to write a biography of Cecil Rhodes. This, again, is probably the best book on the subject. It is by no means unadulterated hero-worship. He saw Rhodes as 'a faulty hero'; but a hero still. He was fascinated, as he confessed, by Rhodes's 'bigness'; he seems to have assumed, as Rhodes himself assumed, that this 'bigness' constituted what a historian must, after all reservations made, pronounce to be greatness. Therefore, though the book was written *sine ira et studio*, and is by no means an imperialistic tract, yet it hardly takes sufficient account of the possibility—to say no more—that Rhodes's career could be interpreted from beginning to end in a much less favourable light.

While he was writing these biographies Basil Williams was able to devote much of his time to politics. He stood for parliament, as a Liberal, twice in 1910. Like his friend Childers, he was much preoccupied by the Irish problem. They took

part in an unofficial committee which studied the details of a possible scheme of Home Rule and brought out a collection of papers on the subject in 1911. He did not, however, follow Childers into the paths of extremism, and he deplored his friend's growing obsession with this subject. They did their best to keep alive their friendship and that of their families; but it became harder and harder for Basil Williams, the 'moderate', to dispel Childers's monomania, even for a few moments, by reviving the memories of the past. Yet Childers, on the day he was to be shot, sent Basil Williams his love; and Basil Williams, two years later, reciprocated this love, by writing a delightful memoir of Childers. He summed up Childers's character by declaring that 'there was no particle of meanness or treachery' in it, and that 'whatever course of action he adopted—however we may deplore the judgement—it was based on the prompting of a conscience and sense of honour as sensitive and as true as one may meet'.

Before Childers's catastrophe, Basil Williams's own career had taken a new turn—indeed, more than one. He responded at once to the emergency of 1914 by organizing the relief of Belgian refugees. Later in the war, he served as a captain in the Royal Field Artillery and took an active part in army education. He seems to have resumed his political interests and his preoccupation with Ireland after the war; but at last academic life began to claim him. In 1921 he delivered the Ford Lectures in the University of Oxford; from these lectures sprang two of his later books on *Stanhope* and on *Carteret and Newcastle*. In the same year he went to McGill University as Professor of History; and in 1925 he was called back across the Atlantic to succeed Sir Richard Lodge at Edinburgh. It was an obvious choice, for their historical interests were very similar.

He was not an exciting lecturer: middle-aged men do not come up to one in the streets of Edinburgh and tell one, with a glow of pleasure, that they sat under Williams, as they tell one that they sat under Lodge. But he did much for the Edinburgh history school in other ways. He was not content to carry on Lodge's system without change, but innovated to some purpose; in particular, he brought the study of European history into greater prominence, and he would have liked, had he been given the opportunity, to widen the range of choice in other directions, such as American history. An examination of old minute-books shows that he was active, and generally on the right side.

He is best remembered in Edinburgh today for his hospitality. Many people in Edinburgh gave good parties; but there seems to have been something special about the Williamses' parties in Drummond Place. It may have been Mrs. Williams's charm; perhaps also the somewhat unconventional mixture of the company, for one went prepared to meet people out of one's own department and walk of life.

In these later years Basil Williams put forth a remarkable quantity of historical work. In 1932 he amplified his Ford Lectures into a biography of Stanhope. This is, in some ways, his best book: it has the warmth of his earlier biography of Chatham, but a better balance, and it succeeds in doing something almost impossible—in making the European diplomacy of that age appear lucid and important. His *Whig Supremacy* (1939), a volume in the Oxford History, is, by contrast, the work of an old man. He wrote it with gusto, but he clearly had not taken much account of the recent work in the field. One would not say he had not read it, but it had not sunk in; indeed, he did not think very much of it. I criticized this omission in a review; soon afterwards we met, and he let me know, with perfect good humour, that he was not at all convinced by what I had said. He went on writing; and his last big work in this field, *Carteret and Newcastle* (1943), is a highly animated portrait—or rather, pair of portraits—but it does not advance the study of the subject much farther. He had made up his mind about these people before 1914, and he had not seen occasion to change it.

He still kept up his historical interest in South Africa as well: besides a little book in the Home University Library on *The British Empire*, he wrote, as late as 1946, a short study on *Botha, Smuts and South Africa*. In it he drew on reminiscences of the formative period of South Africa's history as a Dominion, which he had witnessed as a soldier, an administrator, and a newspaper correspondent.

He retired from his Chair at Edinburgh, under the age limit, in 1937 and went to live in Chelsea. He might still be seen, shrivelled but bright-eyed, at the Athenaeum or at meetings of the Royal Historical Society, until a short time before he died on 5 January 1950.

He was a mixture of patriotism and liberality, of old-fashioned tastes and up-to-date opinions. He liked ceremony: for example, he concluded his History classes at Edinburgh, every year, in a style which seems to his harassed and slapdash successors almost

too grand to be true. He liked family traditions and heirlooms: he always carried about in his waistcoat pocket a Cromwellian half-crown which his great-grandfather had likewise carried before him, and he took a lively interest in the fate of family portraits and dinner-services. With all this he held political views which were generally considered as 'advanced', and they seem to have become more advanced as he grew older. But his was a thoroughly integrated character. He gave the impression of having inherited a great tradition and carrying it a stage farther.¹

RICHARD PARES

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