

Chapter 1

A Suicide

The inquest at the Brown Bear public house in Horseferry Road, Westminster was inconclusive. No member of the young man's family was there to see his putrefied corpse examined and the pockets of his sodden greatcoat turned out. Daniel Figg, the steward of the family's town house in Old Palace Yard, described the last time he had seen the young man alive. The next day five male relations, including a cousin in Holy Orders, accompanied the coffin to the funeral at St George's parish church, Beckenham, Kent, and saw it lowered into the family vault under the church floor.

William Frederick Elliot Eden had been missing for over five weeks, since his twenty-seventh birthday, Friday, 19 January 1810. During the previous few days he had sent a flurry of notes by messenger to the family's country house ten miles away, Eden Farm at Beckenham. As Lieutenant-Colonel of the Volunteer Corps for the Westminster parishes of St Margaret and St John, one of the civil defence bodies formed to thwart invasion attempts during the Napoleonic War, he had been on duty in London for the Queen's Birthday parade on 18 January. This had coincided with the annual overhaul of the Corps' accounts, and he had been trying for several days to extract the Corps' fund of £600 from the adjutant, a Mr Stables of the Ordnance Office, and deposit it in a new account at Drummonds' Bank at Charing Cross.

He had promised at first to ride home for five o'clock dinner on the Friday. The family would send a groom to London with an extra horse to bring him back. Then, as the weather turned cold and foul, he sent

a message that he thought it too unpleasant for riding and would 'Indulge [him]self in a Chaise'. Then he changed his mind again: he would be busy with the Corps accounts until well into that evening. Since members of the family would probably be in London on the Saturday, he would be able to go back with them in the carriage before returning to his winter work routine on the Monday.¹

As the cherished eldest son, he had done well out of the political manoeuvres of his father William, first Baron Auckland. Since November 1806 he had been Member of Parliament for the pocket borough of New Woodstock, a seat his father had held before him through friendship with the fourth Duke of Marlborough, its patron. From March 1807, when the short-lived, Whig-dominated Ministry of All the Talents had fallen to the Tories and Lord Auckland had lost his final Cabinet post as President of the Board of Trade, William had emerged as a seriously thoughtful member of the parliamentary opposition.

The Aucklands probably knew or assumed that, like many young men of his class, he had a mistress in London. Little social life happened in the winter, when many landowning families and their guests were in the country, but when William was not in Old Palace Yard on the Saturday his parents probably assumed he was happily occupied elsewhere. Things stayed quiet until Monday, when an anxious servant arrived from London with news that William had left the house on Friday evening and had not been seen or heard of since.

Both before and during the inquest, several people helped to reconstruct his movements on the Friday. At nine o'clock in the morning he had called on Stables in nearby Abingdon Street and asked him to bring the £600 in cash to Old Palace Yard. Later he had taken the money to Drummonds' Bank at Charing Cross and opened a military account for it in his own name. A receipt for the amount was found in his greatcoat pocket. He had called on Stables to arrange the evening's work, gone out for a short time to eat, then settled down with him in his lodgings to go through invoices, asking him to bring the finished accounts to Old Palace Yard on the Monday morning.

At about seven-thirty that evening, after an hour or more of rapid, concentrated work, he sprang up and left Stables's room without a word. The stairs and hall were dark, and the landlord, a surgeon named Holt, heard him wrenching and throwing down a long broom which barred the front door. Emerging from the parlour with a candle, he

said facetiously ‘You are shouldering your musket, Colonel.’ William, who was usually polite, blundered wordlessly past him into the street. At Old Palace Yard he accepted tea from the servant Daniel, put his keys on a table, extinguished the candles in the room where he had been sitting and left the house saying he would be back in an hour, at about nine.²

Five weeks and two days later, on 25 February, a Thames bargeman, rowing a skiff to shore from a barge moored opposite Lambeth Palace, saw something he took to be a tarpaulin drifting in the water. When he prodded it with a boathook it turned over, revealing a body that was swollen enough to float but had recognizable features. Fastening it astern he towed it to the shore, where a passer-by guessed it must be the late Mr Eden, for whose discovery a large reward was offered. Two young servants at Old Palace Yard confirmed that the body was William’s, and it was taken to the Brown Bear for an inquest the next day. There were no signs of violence, and the pockets contained a gold watch-seal, some silver, and thirteen pounds (equivalent to over £1,000 now) in notes, so that William did not seem to have been attacked or robbed. A scratch on the face might have come from the riverbed, since the body, which was well preserved for one that had spent so long in the water, had probably sunk to the bottom during the cold weather. Slight warming would have hastened its decomposition, bloating it with gas until it rose to the surface. As in many such inquests, the verdict was ‘Found drowned in the river, but by what means it came there, there was no evidence before the Jury.’³

‘God’s will be done – Lady Auckland and I can only submit,’ Lord Auckland wrote on the day the body was recovered.⁴ Driving into London during the previous few weeks, past the onion fields and drying-grounds on the Surrey side of the river, they must have glanced uneasily down at the steely or muddy Thames water as their carriage rattled across Westminster Bridge. While dismissing the possibility of suicide as completely out of character, they found it hard to imagine how else William could have vanished. Kidnapping, murder, sudden memory loss and elopement all seemed equally improbable. ‘We had so long been so completely *and so securely* happy, that we were ill prepared for an affliction so strange and so inconceivable,’ Lord Auckland protested at the end of January, once he felt able to write about the still unsolved mystery in their lives.⁵

A few days before that he described to another correspondent how he had opened up William’s desks and papers and found everything

in that sort of unfinished arrangement to which he was always accustomed, and which best shows that everything was going forward precisely as usual – bills recently paid at this season; his banker's account from day to day in his own handwriting for eight years; the balance due to himself, including a small draft on the 17th of 15*l* for pocket-money.

William was not in debt; he had left no written clue to suggest that he felt suicidal, and he had sustained his outward image as his father's perfect creation.

You well knew him to possess a mind singularly cheerful, steady, and resolute and well regulated; religious, moral, generous; most kind and most affectionate. Add to these qualities that he evidently enjoyed his existence more than any individual that we know; that he felt himself beloved and respected by a large circle of excellent friends; that he was in the course and earnestness of occupations that amused and interested him; and in the possession and fair prospect of every advantage that life can give.⁶

In a preparatory draft of the letter he added that William had shown no sign of being 'deranged'. He omitted that phrase (or his editors later did) from the fair copy, perhaps because William's behaviour in the adjutant's lodgings that last evening did suggest a moment of unbalance. Was it possible that his life in London hid some dark undercurrent, never mentioned in his letters about work and social arrangements or at home? Certain people who knew things about him may have kept them from the family. The Speaker of the House of Commons, Charles Abbott, noted in his diary that on William's last day he had 'taken leave of a lady with whom he had lived occasionally'. If Abbott or one of his colleagues knew the lady, they might have learnt what kind of leave-taking it had been. Abbott, at least, thought the truth was unavoidable. 'Poor Eden...I am afraid he threw himself into the river.'⁷

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The war, which had shaped so much of William's life, had dragged on almost non-stop since shortly after his tenth birthday. On 1 February 1793, after publicly guillotining the deposed King Louis

XVI, France had declared war on Britain and the United Netherlands. At that time the Aucklands and their nine children had been based at The Hague, where Lord Auckland had been ambassador since 1790. It was his first ambassadorial appointment, with a newly acquired peerage: at that stage only an Irish one, which did not entitle him to a seat in the House of Lords. For the previous five years he had served as a commercial envoy, negotiating a trade treaty with France in 1785-87, then failing to negotiate one with Spain during a year in Madrid.

As an expatriate wife and mother, the future Lady Auckland had been a prickly resident at foreign courts, enjoying French culture and sociability but disapproving of ladies who farmed out their babies to wet-nurses and put their young children in the care of governesses and tutors, barely seeing them until they were grown-up. Instead she had set an example of child-rearing on Enlightenment principles, breast-feeding her babies, engaging dancing-teachers for the older daughters but otherwise teaching the children herself. Her husband had preened himself on his energetic young family, jocularly referring to them as the 'brattery', the 'infantry' or the '*fantoccini*'. Unusually in such a large family, none of the children had so far died. In the Spanish letter-journal he kept for his mother he had recounted fondly how William, aged five, had marched up to the heir-apparent, the Prince of the Asturias, at the summer palace of Aranjuez. Whisking off his own hat and his brother George's, he had shaken the Prince by the hand and addressed him in fluent French. After that he had written the Prince a letter which his parents tactfully pretended to send, and at a Christmas party had accosted him again and been scooped up into the arms of the indulgent royal, who by then was King Carlos IV.⁸

After the outbreak of war, Lord Auckland had waited for several months until the Scheldt seemed securely defended before taking his family home to England. Discontented with The Hague as dull and dowdy, and yearning for Paris even after the fall of the Bastille, he had spent more time in England than in Holland, hoping to negotiate a better deal for himself with the Prime Minister, William Pitt. His three youngest children, however, who had all been born abroad (Henry in Paris, Louisa in Madrid and Charles at The Hague), probably saw England for the first time in May 1793. When the family arrived at Eden Farm, four-year-old Louisa jumped out of the carriage, greeted the steward in an incoherent gabble of Dutch, then dashed away across the lawn waving her arms in the air like wings.⁹

William and George, born less than two years apart, did most things together. After boarding at a nearby preparatory school at Mitcham, where in the summer of 1794, to his parents' grief, their eight-year-old brother Henry died of a fever, they went on to Eton, then to Christ Church, Oxford. But by the time George went up to Christ Church in May 1802, three months before his eighteenth birthday, William had already moved on to the world of public affairs.

On settling back in England, Lord Auckland had been promoted to an English peerage, since Pitt needed his moral support and knowledge of international affairs during his exhausting war ministry. 'We have *bought* a London house,' Lady Auckland had exclaimed to her brother Hugh Elliot, a diplomat in Dresden, on 25 November 1793.¹⁰ It was one of an imposing row of four on the west side of Old Palace Yard, between the Henry VII Chapel of Westminster Abbey and the beginning of Abingdon Street, as illustrated by Thomas Malton the younger in his *Picturesque Tour through the Cities of London and Westminster* (1792).^{*} 'Living over the shop', so near Parliament, was unfashionable in comparison with leasing a town house in Mayfair, but ownership and convenience had their advantages, and Lord Auckland had had his eye on the house for some time. The family would occupy it during the parliamentary and social season, which usually lasted from late January or early February until late June or early July. The five eldest daughters would be launched from Old Palace Yard as debutantes, and Emily would take dancing lessons there from the age of seven, partnered by nine-year-old Lord Richard Grosvenor, whose father owned a mansion on Millbank. (Nearly sixty years later, when he was Marquess of Westminster, she would think him unchanged, 'crude but hearty'. She had been 'engaged' to him at the dancing class, and he 'and the present Lord Colchester fought to know whose wife I was.'¹¹) William would be based in the house after leaving Oxford, and for much of the time would work from home.

He had known since childhood that he was meant to go into politics, and to achieve high government office once he had inherited his father's peerage. As a schoolboy he had paid dutifully close attention to the war with France: the sea battles, convoys, blockades and raids on shipping in the Channel and the Atlantic; the land war in continental Europe, and the campaigns in the Mediterranean, Egypt, Syria and

* See front cover.

the East. In the sixth form at Eton he had delighted his father with a patriotic Latin ode in response to the defeat and death of the French ally Tipu Sultan of Mysore at the battle of Seringapatam in 1799. Lord Auckland quoted the poem in a letter to Richard Wellesley, Earl of Mornington, then Governor-General of India, and commented with self-reflective pride 'I really believe that I do not flatter myself when I hold that your friend William stands as highly in the opinion of His Cotemporaries as a young Etonian can stand.'¹²

He was just nineteen and had spent a year at Oxford when he received an offer to be Private Secretary to his eldest sister's husband Lord Hobart, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies. 'I should have been better pleased if he had been two years older,' Lord Auckland wrote, 'but I did not think myself at liberty to refuse. The Dean of Christchurch, who has the highest opinion of William, will assist me in keeping up his classical pursuits.'¹³ His salary, in his father's words, was a 'trifling' £300 a year, equivalent to over £30,000 today. With the nepotism that was rife among the Whigs, Lord Auckland procured him a temporary sinecure, worth at the time 'at least' £1,000 a year, as vendue-master for Demerara and Essequibo.¹⁴ This would tide him over until he received the reversion of the still more lucrative Tellership of the Exchequer, which his father had arranged for him when he was seven as part of a deal he made with Pitt. (He had been badgering Pitt for a bigger pension, and the reversion of the Tellership was a trade-off.) Unlike the Demerara sinecure, the Tellership counted as government employment and was compatible with membership of Parliament. Those who were lucky enough to be nominated for it sometimes hung on to it for life.

After a year of peace in 1802, the Napoleonic War began in earnest. William lost his job with Lord Hobart (soon to be fourth Earl of Buckinghamshire) when Pitt sacked most of the previous Cabinet on forming his second ministry in May 1804. In September 1806, however, he inherited the Tellership, which paid him a generous £2,700 a year for doing, effectively, nothing. 'We are accompanied by "the Teller" and our four youngest children, & we found here our son George,' Lord Auckland wrote proudly in early October during a round of country-house visits to married daughters and friends.¹⁵ Always keen to promote family members, he made William sack his Deputy, who was earning £1,000 a year, and give the post to George. William then volunteered £600 a year out of his own salary to compensate the Deputy until he found another job.¹⁶ George also

inherited the Demerara sinecure, which William had to give up when he entered Parliament as Member for New Woodstock. The network of patronage and preferment, which appears as an almost invisibly delicate filament in Jane Austen's novels, could be ruthless in excluding any but the well-connected and well-off.

After Pitt died in January 1806, there was a brief Whig triumph when the Edens' friend Lord Grenville formed the short-lived, politically pick-and-mix government known as the Ministry of All the Talents. This achieved one progressive measure, the Slave Trade Abolition Act of 25 March 1807. It failed, however, to achieve its aims of making peace with France, and (in the shorter term) of improving relations with the neutral United States through a commercial treaty, which was intended to resolve the vexed questions of territorial waters and the British treatment of neutral naval and mercantile shipping and personnel. As President of the Board of Trade, Lord Auckland joined the left-leaning Whig Lord Holland to negotiate with the American commissioners James Monroe and William Pinckney, employing William as unpaid secretary to the commission. The commercial treaty was signed on the last day of 1806 but was never properly ratified, and failed to avert the growing tension between the two countries after Grenville's government fell in late March 1807, to be followed by twenty-three years of Tory rule.

Unlike his father, whose political slipperiness had been well known, William entered Parliament as a fully formed, loyal Whig. In June 1807, and again in February 1808, he stood up in the House to lead debates on the subject of neutral maritime rights. Britain and France were involved in reciprocally competitive blockades and sanctions, many of which impacted on neutrals. A new series of Orders in Council, issued by Britain in November and December 1807 in response to previous French decrees, required neutral ships trading with France to put in to British ports to have their cargoes checked for possible military supplies, and to pay a tax when doing so. The response of Jefferson's government was the Embargo Act of December 1807, closing United States ports to ships exporting goods to the belligerent nations or their colonies, and curtailing the number of imports allowed from Britain.

In his speech of 18 February 1808, William objected that the Orders in Council were injurious and unfair to Americans, and that the tax was in breach of the law of nations: a concept some radical Whigs and