

# Introduction

TWO HUNDRED AND THIRTEEN years ago, on December 12, 1751, there died at the age of seventy-three Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke. The epitaph on his grave he wrote himself:

Here Lyes

HENRY ST. JOHN:

In the days of Queen Anne,  
Secretary at War, Secretary of State, and Viscount Bolingbroke;  
In the days of King George the First and King George the  
Second,  
Something more and better.  
His attachment to Queen Anne,  
Exposed him to a long and severe prosecution:  
He bore it with firmness of mind.  
He passed the latter part of his life at home.  
The enemy of no national party,  
The friend of no faction;  
Distinguished under the cloud of a proscription  
Which had not been entirely taken off  
By zeal to maintain the Liberty  
And to restore the ancient Prosperity  
Of Great Britain.

## *Man of Mercury*

After the lapse of more than two centuries it is not without interest to see how far these claims can be substantiated.

Henry St John was born at Battersea on October 1, 1678. The year of his birth was one of the most eventful in an eventful century, for it witnessed the Treaty of Nimwegen, which marked the apogee of Louis XIV, and also the revelations of Titus Oates, which ushered in a period as chaotic as any in English history. The storms raging at the time of St John's entry into the world continued to buffet it throughout his career; unless allowance is made for this fact his life will not be seen in its true perspective.

He was to become a forceful statesman of the type of Disraeli, Joseph Chamberlain and Winston Churchill; but to compare him with any of them, or even with the Younger Pitt, without taking into account the circumstances in which he was placed would be to do him a serious injustice. St John was born in and lived through not merely an era of transition, but of violent change. Twenty years before he was born there had been no king in England, only a 'Lord Protector', and on at least one occasion during his early manhood it appeared by no means improbable that another republic might be established; nevertheless in the interval he witnessed a period when the king was practically absolute. He was but ten when the Stuarts were sent into exile for the second time, yet only six years before his death the grandson of James II was at Derby at the head of a victorious army; he had been in his grave for little more than twelve months when the last Jacobite to die for his principles was executed. In effect, St John passed his life in an age of revolution, and he was the child of his age.

He came of a distinguished family, but one which had been politically much divided of late years, for whereas several members had died for Charles I, a St John had been Chief Justice of the Common Pleas under Cromwell. The future Viscount Bolingbroke was educated at Eton and possibly at Christ Church, but whether he was at Oxford or not he received a very good education. In all his writings there is to be found abundant proof of solid learning, and also of an ability to apply that learning to the problems of the day. Few English statesmen could have written *Letters on the Study and Use of History*, while in his interest in economic matters, as shown by the projected commercial treaty with France, he was in advance of his time. Throughout his works there is extensive evidence that he was deeply read in the classics, not only in Latin but also in Greek. In spite of the distractions of business and pleasure St John remained a scholar at heart. Indeed, the

eloquence and erudition of his writings enables us to understand, even if we are not prepared wholly to share, the wish of the Younger Pitt, that of all the lost intellectual treasures, he would most like to see recovered a speech of St John's.

As soon as the Treaty of Ryswick, in the later months of 1697, made it possible to travel abroad once more, St John went to the continent, where he spent the greater part of two years. This expedition was no 'grand tour' as the term was understood by the fashionable young men of the day, but was undertaken for the purpose of becoming acquainted with the foreign point of view. St John went at the right age, and he was amply rewarded, as those young men always are who do as he did. When later, as Secretary of State, he came into contact with the representatives of other countries, he knew the background against which their careers were set and was acquainted with the public opinion of which, even then, they could never wholly lose sight. During the course of his travels, St John learnt French and Italian, and acquired a cosmopolitanism which was to stand him in good stead. The importance he attached to languages is further emphasised by the fact that he took the trouble to learn Spanish when he was already in office so that he might be no longer dependent upon possibly inaccurate translations of the documents it was necessary for him to read. Thus, during the negotiations which led to the Treaty of Utrecht, he was able to estimate the position which the circumstances of their respective countries would compel the statesmen of the different powers to adopt. He had the inestimable advantage of having studied foreign affairs in his youth on the spot.

St John was thus at considerable pains to acquaint himself with the language, customs, and political conditions of the countries he visited, and this fact is the more important in view of the prominence given by all writers to his immorality at this stage of his career. Goldsmith tells of an old man who had seen St John and some of his companions, in a state of inebriety, running naked across St James's Park. Another biographer assures his readers that St John 'avowedly made his relative, Rochester, his model; and endeavoured in every kind of debauchery to surpass his original'. The late Arthur Hassall writes of his 'riotous life' which 'alarmed his relations', though it is possible that they were not so easily shocked as Mr Hassall. Even Sir Winston Churchill wags a reproving finger when he describes St John as 'a roysterer and hard-drinker, who lived notoriously with a Miss Gumley'. Indeed, if the majority of the stories told about his excesses were to be believed, it

### *Man of Mercury*

would be impossible to discover how St John found time for any other occupation than that afforded by indulgence in wine and women. Such being the case, one is tempted to wonder whether, had he been on the winning instead of the losing side in the political struggle of his day, quite so much would have been handed down to posterity concerning his dissipation.

St John entered the House of Commons in 1701 for the borough of Wootton Bassett, and from the first he voted with the Tories, who were then in a majority. Few men have made so considerable an impression upon the House of Commons at their first entry. He was, on the evidence of his contemporaries, an accomplished and persuasive speaker, who knew how to adapt his argument to the mood of his audience. Not a single speech exists which can be said to be anything like a correct account of what he said, but his written works are sufficient evidence of the vigour and style of his diction. His appearance, too, was eminently in his favour. Tall and graceful, he combined a commanding presence with a pleasing address. Above all, he had the advantage of entering parliament as a member of the opposition, for although his party was in a majority, it was opposed to the policy of William III and his ministers. Such were the position and circumstances of this young MP of twenty-two, who was to be a Secretary of State at thirty-two, and was to be deprived of office for ever before he was thirty-six.

His methods of attracting attention were well suited to the House of Commons as constituted in that parliament. 'You know', he wrote, 'the nature of that assembly; they grow, like hounds, fond of the man who shows them game.' As one of his biographers has put it: 'He had to show them game. He had by his halloo to incite the Tories, to chase and worry Whigs and dissenters, the directors of the Bank of England, and all who presumed to question the infallibility of the High Church party, and the supremacy of the country squires.' St John continued to adopt this policy when Anne came to the throne, and in November 1702 he was one of the sponsors of the Occasional Conformity Bill. In these circumstances there was general surprise when in the spring of 1704 he was appointed Secretary-at-War.

Various conjectures have been put forward as to the reasons for this appointment, and it has generally been surmised that St John owed his advancement either to Harley or to Marlborough. He was certainly at this time on the best of terms with Harley, and Marlborough may

well have owed St John a good turn for his behaviour over the Act of Settlement. But it is surely not unreasonable to suppose that the new Secretary-at-War was chiefly beholden to Godolphin himself, the Lord High Treasurer. To that veteran parliamentarian the young member for Wootton Bassett had acquired a definite 'nuisance value', and the time had come to buy him off. St John was able, so he would not disgrace an office particularly important in time of war; and he was ambitious, so he was unlikely to look a gift-horse too closely in the mouth. Moreover, his appointment would bring some at least of the extreme tories to support a war for the conduct of which he was to be so largely responsible, while it would deprive those who still remained intransigent of their only capable leader. If Godolphin argued in this manner he made two serious miscalculations: St John was clever enough to retain his hold on the diehards, and he had the sense to resign when further complicity in a whig policy would have ruined his reputation.

If office did not reform St John, which was certainly not the case, he displayed a devotion to duty which surprised his contemporaries. He was the fortunate possessor of a constitution which allowed him to indulge in excesses without so impairing his health that he was unable to transact business. How long he would have been able to burn the candle at both ends in this way it is impossible to say, and his early fall from power may well have saved his life. If the Secretary-at-War worked hard, he did so by fits and starts. He would sit up all one night dealing with the work of his office, and the next he would spend with some friends over the bottle. Often he would be at his desk from ten in the morning until eight at night without taking any refreshment, but he never relapsed into carelessness. If he was sometimes unreasonable with his subordinates, he was equally so with himself. St John was never a good-natured man, but at this stage of his career he was, save by his political opponents, generally considered a good-humoured one.

He remained in office until the autumn of 1708 when, under pressure from Marlborough and Godolphin, the queen was obliged to accept a purely whig administration. St John thereupon resigned, and there can be no doubt but that he was perfectly right in taking such a course. He could not have remained in the government without becoming a whig, while by resigning he regained all his old popularity with the tories. Nor was this all: his tenure of office had been distinguished, and he retired with the reputation of a capable administrator.

## *Man of Mercury*

This experience stood him in good stead two years later when the Tories came into office. St John was appointed Secretary of State for the Northern Department in an administration of which the effective chief was Robert Harley. For nearly a century after the Revolution of 1689 there were two Secretaries of State, and their duties were divided by a geographical division of the globe into Northern and Southern Departments. The Northern Department was concerned with British relations with the northern powers of Europe, while the Southern Department had to deal with France, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, the Italian States, and the Ottoman Empire, as well as Irish and Colonial business and the work later done by the Home Office.

The labours of the Southern Secretary were not so great as may appear, for Ireland had its own parliament and administration, and he was little more than a channel of communication between the Lord-Lieutenant and the Ministry. The Home Office work was slight, for most of the existing functions of that department have been created by modern statutes. Thus the Secretaries in the reign of Anne may be said to represent the Foreign Office cut in two, with some miscellaneous business assigned to that department of it which dealt with the southern powers of Europe. St John's fellow Secretary was the Earl of Dartmouth, a son of the nobleman who had been so loyal a friend to James II, but was himself a mere cipher in the Ministry. His masterful colleague assumed control of both departments, and Dartmouth in fact was little more than an Under-Secretary.

Whatever view may be taken of St John as a man, there can be no denying the brilliance of his handling of foreign policy. His conduct of affairs up to and including the Treaty of Utrecht has, for consummate ability, rarely been equalled and never surpassed in the course of English history, and it marks for all time his influence upon national policy. It was successful because it was based upon the realities of the European situation, and not upon theories of his own or upon the facts of ten years before. St John realised that there were two wars: one against France, which the Allies had won, and another against Spain, which they had lost, or were on the point of losing. He never forgot that the original object of the War of the Spanish Succession had been to prevent a French hegemony of Europe. This was the basis of a policy which he had both the vigour and the knowledge to put into effect. He was in close contact with opinion in his own party, and he knew Europe in a way impossible save to those who have studied it on the

spot. If St John had shown the same courage and intuition in home affairs that he displayed in matters of foreign policy, he might well have gone down to history as one of the greatest of British statesmen.

The new administration was bent upon peace, but not upon peace at any price, and in all the diplomatic discussions which have taken place between the English and the French down the centuries it is doubtful if England has ever been more ably represented than by St John. The Marquis de Torcy, the French Foreign Secretary, was no mean antagonist, as became the nephew of Colbert. Zealous, precise and punctilious, he was the eternal type of French diplomatist, who is confident that the world has been created for the benefit of France and who is determined to see that there is no interference with the wishes of the Almighty. Nevertheless, he met his match in St John, for, as Professor Trevelyan so rightly said: 'It was Greek meet Greek, and blade cut blade.' Each statesman knew that the other's need for peace was as great as his own, but St John had the disadvantage that the whigs had committed England to a policy which was incapable of realisation, though to depart from it would be an act of treachery to the Allies. The aim of both negotiators was to arrive at a preliminary settlement, which should then be put before the other interested parties at a conference. To negotiate with an enemy behind the backs of one's allies is never very creditable, though it is often done, but St John had at least the excuse that previous attempts to make peace had been wrecked by the obstinacy of the Emperor and the Dutch. The truth is that by 1711 none of the Allies had clean hands, or anything approaching them, and those who have criticised St John for his attitude have overlooked extenuating circumstances.

In July of 1711 Matthew Prior was sent to Paris, and after three months' hard bargaining a settlement was reached on the main points at issue between Britain and France, and the way was clear for the Peace Conference to commence its labours. This body duly met at Utrecht on January 29, 1712, but before long it reached deadlock over the future of the Spanish Netherlands. When this difficulty arose St John adopted the time-honoured device of leaving the Conference to mark time while the real business was transacted elsewhere, in this case directly between London and Paris. 'Her Majesty is fully determined to let all negotiations sleep in Holland', he told the British representatives at Utrecht.

During the whole of the negotiations St John—or Bolingbroke as he had now become—was the principal factor on the British side, and

## *Man of Mercury*

on one occasion he went over to Paris, where he saw both Louis XIV and Torcy. Finally the Treaty of Utrecht was concluded. Bolingbroke allowed his sense of the dramatic full play. About two o'clock in the afternoon of Good Friday, April 3, 1713, a post-chaise rattled down Whitehall: as it stopped at the Cockpit there alighted, all covered with dust, Bolingbroke's half-brother, George St John, with the treaty in his hand. The Secretary welcomed him on the doorstep with open arms, exclaiming: 'It is the Lord's work, and it is marvellous in our eyes.'

The Utrecht settlement marks the apogee of Bolingbroke's career: he was still only thirty-four when he greeted his half-brother that Friday afternoon in Whitehall; but the summit had already been reached, and what lay ahead was in no way comparable with what had gone before. Nevertheless the conclusion of peace was in itself sufficient to put him in the front rank of his country's statesmen. There is much to be said against the methods he employed to effect a settlement, but in this matter any responsibility must be shared by his whig predecessors in office who had, for party reasons, rendered it impossible to conduct negotiations in any other manner. As for the Treaty itself: its great merit was that, like the Peace of Westphalia, it recognised existing facts. France was the first power on the mainland of Europe; Philip V was the monarch desired by Spain; Britain was building a colonial empire; and Prussia and Savoy were rising states. All these incontrovertible realities were admitted at Utrecht. At the same time precautions were taken to prevent the pre-eminence of France from developing into hegemony, just as the recognition of Philip was a check to any Habsburg inclinations in the same direction. It was all eminently reasonable, and in its main outlines it endured for more than two generations, which is as far ahead as any statesman can be expected to look.

Comparison of the Utrecht settlement with the treaties of Vienna and Versailles is inevitable, if somewhat profitless. In 1815 the negotiators endeavoured to make the world safe for autocracy, and in 1919 they attempted the same task on behalf of democracy: in both cases they proved to be giving mankind the exact opposite of what it desired. Bolingbroke and Torcy ignored such general principles; they dealt with the real, not with the ideal; and their work stood. Much can be said against Bolingbroke both in his public and private capacity, but it cannot be denied that he was a good European, and it was as such that he negotiated the Treaty of Utrecht. It was his greatest service to his country.



Had Bolingbroke been able to have his way, the Treaty of Utrecht would have been followed by a commercial agreement with France and a large step in the direction of freedom of trade between the two countries. In this respect, however, he was too far in advance of his age. The manufacturers rose in revolt, the whigs did everything in their power to foment the opposition, and a number of Tories voted against the Ministry. Bolingbroke was no longer in the Commons to sway members by his eloquence, and more than one of his colleagues was only too ready to give him a fall. The vital clauses in the proposed treaty were rejected by nine votes, and a commercial understanding with France had to wait until the time of the Younger Pitt.

The story of the next few years does not redound to the credit of Bolingbroke. It is not easy to tell from his taking up Jacobitism what he really had in mind unless it was the restoration of James as a Tory puppet. Being utterly without principle himself, it never seems to have occurred to Bolingbroke that the exiled Stuart might prefer his religion to a throne. When such proved to be the case Bolingbroke was without a policy. At the critical moment of the death of Anne he lost his nerve, and shortly afterwards he fled the country. For a space he was Secretary of State to James at the court-in-exile in France, but he was rightly dismissed under a cloud. Subsequently he obtained a restricted pardon from the British government which enabled him to reside in England when he felt so disposed. Had he died at this time he would be remembered today as the chief architect of the Treaty of Utrecht, but on no other score. However, once the use of power was out of his reach, he began to write about the theory of it, and in this way came to exercise a further influence upon English politics.

Disraeli declared that Bolingbroke was 'one of the ablest men who ever lived', and when he made this statement he was thinking in terms of home, rather than foreign policy, particularly of *The Idea of a Patriot King*, which was published in 1749. The book is an appeal to discard the party system and everything for which it stands. According to the author 'a limited monarchy is the best of governments', and a hereditary monarchy the best of monarchies. 'The good of the people is the ultimate and true end of governments', and 'the greatest good of a people is their liberty'. The best way to provide for the continuance of that liberty is by securing the accession of a Patriot King who, though eschewing rule by divine right, will equally refuse to be the mere figurehead of an oligarchical faction. He will be a constitutional

## *Man of Mercury*

monarch, whose power is limited by his consent to exercise that power subject to public opinion expressed in a free parliament. Under him corruption will cease, for a Patriot King has no reason to be corrupt. 'He is the most powerful of all reformers, for he is himself a sort of standing miracle so rarely seen, and so little understood, that the sure effects of his appearance will be admiration and love in every honest breast, confusion and terror to every guilty conscience, but submission and resignation in all.'

It is, of course, difficult to resist the conclusion that a great part of this famous treatise had no other purpose than to flatter the Prince of Wales, Frederick, who might one day be in a position to restore Bolingbroke, and also to belabour the whigs. Yet much of it is of permanent value, and has had its effect upon English history. The conception of the monarch as standing above the parties, representing the national interest as opposed to purely factional interests, was for many years to be the tory interpretation of the kingly office. Disraeli, in particular, always professed his agreement with the arguments advanced in *The Idea of a Patriot King*.

It was not Frederick, but his son George III, who attempted to put into practice the theories of Bolingbroke, and to no inconsiderable extent he succeeded. The decline of Jacobitism assisted him in a marked degree, since it regained for the ruling monarch the support of those who were naturally the bulwark of his throne, but who had been in opposition for two generations. Furthermore, the whig oligarchy was becoming divided and enfeebled, and, after the collapse of the Elibank Plot in 1753 had shown that the danger from the Jacobites was at an end, the whigs could no longer claim that they alone stood between England and the rekindling of the famous fires of Smithfield. George III too, even if devoid of the higher gifts of statesmanship, knew exactly what he wanted, and this is so rare a characteristic in English political circles as to give its possessor a natural advantage over his rivals. George intended to be a Patriot King of the Bolingbroke type, and by the exercise of the royal authority to ensure that the quarrels of the factions were subordinated to the interests of the nation.

How far he might have gone towards the achievement of this goal in ordinary circumstances it is impossible to say, but the American war and his own health proved his undoing. Yet George III never abandoned the attempt to enhance the power of the Crown, and so strong was it even after the loss of the American colonies that the king was able to have his way about Catholic Emancipation in 1801. Six

years later he scored an even more notable triumph: he forced the 'Ministry of All the Talents' to resign although it had a majority in the House of Commons, summoning the Duke of Portland to form an administration. The result of the ensuing General Election showed that the king had interpreted the wishes of his subjects correctly. All this was very much in the spirit of Bolingbroke's philosophy, but George's relapse into insanity and the unstable character of his eldest son may be said to have brought the experiment to an end, though until Victoria came to the throne the personal opinions of the monarch played an important part in the working of the Constitution.

Of Bolingbroke's own career it only remains to add that his death in 1751 marked in very truth the end of an era. The last man to hold high office under a Stuart was now passed from the scene, and children were already born who were to witness the accession of Queen Victoria.

To what extent can Bolingbroke, at more than two hundred years' distance, be regarded as having justified the claim he put forward in his epitaph? That he was in the front rank where foreign affairs were concerned must surely be admitted without question. His handling of the negotiations which led up to the conclusion of the Treaty of Utrecht was masterly, and in the conduct of his country's relations with its neighbours he has been equalled only by Castlereagh and Canning, and perhaps by Sir Edward Grey and Sir Austen Chamberlain in our own time. But for Bolingbroke the diplomatic history of the eighteenth century might have been very different. As a political philosopher he was not in the front rank, but he influenced policy from the grave, which it is given to few statesmen to do. In the rôle of a party leader, too, he made his mark, and in some ways he might be said to have created a precedent in this connection.

So much for the credit side of Bolingbroke's account. There are important items on the other side. In the first place he seems to have been a physical coward, and he lost his head in an emergency, as was clearly shown during the crisis at Anne's death. He knew nothing of loyalty save to his own interests, as his wife, Harley and James III experienced in turn. He could never resist an intrigue, whether of a political or an amorous nature. All in all, he constitutes an outstanding example of a statesman in whose composition there is a great excess of genius over character. Yet, for better or for worse, Bolingbroke left a definite mark upon English history, and whether his career is to be admired or regretted, it cannot be ignored.