

Jennifer Mori, *William Pitt and the French Revolution, 1785-1795*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. xi + 305 pp. Notes, primary source bibliography, and index. \$55.00 US (cl). ISBN 0-312-17308-3.

Review by William S. Cormack, University of Guelph, for H-France, October 1998.

In the eyes of the Jacobins the French Republic's most dangerous enemy was British prime minister William Pitt the Younger. Not only was he the guiding spirit behind the First Coalition against France, but they attributed internal divisions and treacheries to the corrupting power of "Pitt's Gold". The claim made by the Committee of Public Safety's naval expert, Andre Jeanbon Saint-Andre, that the treason of Toulon and the mutiny of the Brest fleet in 1793 were the outcome of a vast counterrevolutionary conspiracy involving Pitt, was not unique.⁽¹⁾ While more sceptical about his machinations, French historians have also portrayed Pitt as the Revolution's arch antagonist. Yet was Britain's war with France in the 1790s an ideological crusade, of which Pitt's repression of British radicals was part and parcel? This is an important question for the broad history of the revolutionary period, and Jennifer Mori's well argued and meticulously documented study shows that the answer is far from simple.

There is considerable ambiguity regarding the Younger Pitt's stance towards the French Revolution. This is reflected in the British historiographical division between the "conservative legend", which portrays Pitt as the steadfast opponent of revolutionary anarchy and thus hero of emerging "Toryism", and the interpretation of "liberal descent", which suggests he was a Whig reformer until the emergency of 1792 set him against the expansionist Revolution. Mori contends that referring to Pitt's speeches alone can be misleading and cannot explain his multiple and contradictory policies as prime minister. Instead, she seeks to clarify the distinction between his carefully constructed public image and his private opinions. Mori explains the rhetoric and actions of the Pitt ministry from 1785 to 1795 in terms of their intended political effects, and not in terms of deeply-held intellectual conviction.

One of the book's principal themes is that complex European diplomatic considerations motivated Pitt's policies before and during the Revolutionary War. Before 1789 Pitt was determined to restore British power while avoiding continental confrontations or entanglements. The crisis of the Old Regime had rendered France diplomatically impotent, as the Prussian invasion of the Dutch Republic in 1787 made clear, and Pitt saw official neutrality toward the Revolution as the best means of keeping peace while maintaining British freedom of action. In 1791 the ministry withdrew into isolation rather than join Austria and Prussia in condemning the French Revolution, which Pitt and his cabinet colleagues did not fear. The Revolution was polarizing British public opinion, however, and in 1792 the ministry sponsored the Royal Proclamation against Seditious Writings and condemned Tom Paine's *Rights of*

Man. Mori argues that Pitt's motivations for thus checking dissidents was the desire to show France and other foreign powers that the British government was secure at home. In November 1792 the ministry was shocked by the new French Republic's intention to open the Scheldt to navigation, in defiance of existing treaties, and by its decree of fraternity and assistance to peoples wishing "to recover their liberty", but Pitt's bellicose rhetoric and encouragement of loyalist organizations were intended to strengthen the government's international image. Similarly, following the outbreak of war in 1793, Pitt sought to reassure the Dutch of British commitment to defend the international status quo with his militia proclamation and the Alien Act. While the ministry attacked revolutionary principles in public statements, for much of 1793 it remained neutral towards political developments in Paris. According to Mori, this contradiction reflected a war strategy based more on traditional British interests than on ideology. Pitt's government aimed to cripple French power, but was reluctant to impose a Bourbon restoration: this was apparent in the British occupation of Toulon from August to December 1793. Yet Toulon marked a shift towards a war of principle. The Revolutionary Government identified Great Britain as France's main enemy and prepared to invade England, while in January 1794 Pitt's ministry committed itself to total war and, after Prussia made peace with France in April 1795, to supporting royalist counterrevolution. Even before the failure of the Quiberon expedition in June 1795, however, Mori argues that Pitt began to retreat from ideological war. His underestimation of French strength in 1793-94 convinced him that complete victory was possible and in 1795 it led him to believe that the Directory would negotiate a peace settlement: in both cases the ministry wanted to keep its options open.

Security concerns rather than international diplomacy lay behind some of Pitt's domestic policies during the Revolutionary War, but Mori stresses that the government's campaign against sedition and treason was neither premeditated nor driven by conservative ideology. Pitt moved the suspension of Habeas Corpus in May 1794 because the cabinet was convinced that the threat of French invasion was real and that British radicals planned an armed uprising to support the landing and to discredit the government. This initiated a crackdown which culminated in the state trials of radical leaders for treason in the summer of 1794. Yet juries acquitted the accused, the ministry cancelled the remaining trials and restored Habeas Corpus in June 1795. These measures were responses to a specific crisis, according to Mori, and thus were dropped when the crisis passed. Similarly, the Treasonable and Seditious Practices Act and the Seditious Meetings Act of 1795 represented the government's vigorous response to the mob attack on George III three days following the London Corresponding Society's mass meeting in October. Pitt was not afraid of the movement calling for parliamentary reform, but of the violence it seemed to unleash

and he believed that the radicals hoped to coerce his government into a premature peace with France.

Indeed, Mori's Pitt is a statesman with the spirit of a reformer. In 1785 he moved a bill for the reform of parliament and of the electoral process, and he consistently supported calls for the abolition of the slave trade on the basis of sincere humanitarian and intellectual conviction. Pitt was influenced not only by Adam Smith but also by the larger sweep of the Enlightenment. Unlike Edmund Burke, from whom Mori distinguishes Pitt intellectually as well as politically, he did not see anarchy and terror as the inevitable result of the French Revolution's initial principles, for which Pitt had some sympathy. First and foremost, however, Mori's Pitt is a politician. He recognized clearly that his ministry's power was based on a governing consensus in Britain, which by 1792 was moving to the right. While never abandoning his personal sympathy for various liberal reforms, Pitt adopted a public image as the staunch defender of the status quo both at home and in Europe to secure and maintain the broad support of the landed gentry as well as the London financial interests. This consensus did not preclude toleration of some dissent, but in the context of war Pitt would not countenance radicalism which openly sympathized with the enemy.

Mori marshals an impressive array of evidence from parliamentary archives and official documents, as well as private papers and correspondence, to support her conclusions. Despite her wide-ranging and careful research, Mori's book contains a small number of factual errors: the French National Convention abolished slavery in 1794, not in 1795 (pp. 31, 220); republican authorities delivered Toulon into Anglo-Spanish hands in the name of Louis XVII, not of Louis XVI who had been guillotined seven months earlier (p. 159); Toussaint L'Ouverture was not the leader of black republicans on Guadeloupe, where Victor Hugues freed the slaves and called for insurrection on neighbouring islands, but on Saint-Domingue (pp. 220-221); Howe's naval victory was over Villaret-Joyeuse, not Villeneuve, and came on the "glorious first", not the fourth of June 1794 (p. 241). These quibbles aside, this book represents a significant contribution to the study of the French Revolution as well as to British political history. Mori's emphasis on the international context of the breakdown of relations between France and Britain, in keeping with the work of scholars like T. C. W. Blanning,⁽²⁾ is important, and her explanations for Pitt's policies should remind historians of France that public opinion had also become crucial across the Channel.

While Mori's picture of Pitt as a moderate who was intellectually opposed neither to Enlightenment ideas nor to the existence of a French Republic is entirely convincing, she perhaps underplays Pitt's ideological opposition to certain aspects of the French Revolution. Pitt wanted to see a government in France which enjoyed sufficient stability and authority to negotiate with Britain. Such a government would need to recognize international agreements, but revolutionary authority denied the legitimacy

of any such limitations on the "People's Will". Historian Alfred Cobban explained revolutionary war and tyranny in terms of this idea of popular sovereignty, and quoted Pitt as one who recognized its danger: "They will not accept, under the name of Liberty, any model of government but that which is conformable to their own opinions and ideas; and all men must learn from the mouth of their cannon the propagation of their system in every part of the world."⁽³⁾ Certainly this was political rhetoric, but it suggests a continuity between Pitt's denunciation of the 1792 decrees and his horror at the dictatorship of the Revolutionary Government during the Terror. It also accounts for his antipathy towards domestic radicals who sought to rouse popular support by attacking the legitimacy of the government. Yet the claim for Pitt's opposition to revolutionary popular sovereignty neither makes him a conservative ideologue like Burke, nor does it suggest any fundamental challenge to the cogent arguments of this very fine study.

Notes

1. Jeanbon Saint-Andre, *Rapport sur la trahison de Toulon*, (Paris, 1793) and *Rapport sur les mouvements qui ont eu lieu sur l'escadre de la Republique, commmandee par le vice-amiral Morard de Galles, ...*, (Brest, l'an II).
2. T. C. W. Blanning, *The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars*, (London & New York, 1986) or "The French Revolution and Europe," in Colin Lucas, ed., *Rewriting the French Revolution*, (Oxford, 1991), pp. 183-206.
3. *Parliamentary History*, xxx, 278 (1 February 1793); cited in Alfred Cobban, *In Search of Humanity. The Role of the Enlightenment in Modern History* (London, 1960), pp. 186-187.

William S. Cormack
University of Guelph
wcormack@uoguelph.ca

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