William Penn's Legacy provides a brief and thoughtful, if at times somewhat repetitious account of the period it covers. Possibly a few additional and more specific examples of those frequent "endogamous" marriages (pp. 81, 87) mentioned, or of actual business transactions between Philadelphians and Lancastrians might have added flesh to a clearly written analytical summary of the Quaker policies which Tully finds so conducive to stability between 1726 and 1755.

Rosemont, Pennsylvania

Caroline Robbins


In The Elder Pitt Stanley Ayling has written a biography which supplements rather than replaces Basil Williams's standard work, William Pitt Earl of Chatham (1913). Ayling presents a post-imperial, antiheroic view of the great British war minister. While not denying the genius of the man, he attempts to humanize his subject, and the result is that one sees more of Pitt the politician and less of Pitt the empire builder.

Almost half the book is devoted to the period before Pitt began his war ministry in 1756. His career was shaped by his early association with two opposition leaders: Lord Cobham and Prince Frederick, George II's son and heir. Through the prince Pitt became an ally of the trading interests in London and provincial cities. Thus Ayling attributes Pitt's lifelong advocacy of commerce to this early political association rather than to the fact that Pitt's grandfather had made a fortune in trade in India. In Parliament, Pitt soon made his mark as an eloquent opponent of the government, and during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748), his denunciation of English reliance on Hanoverian troops made an enemy of George II. Indeed it was the repugnance which the king felt for Pitt that kept him out of power, until the crisis of the Seven Years' War made it impossible for any government to survive without the participation of the Great Commoner.

The centerpiece of Pitt's career was the period 1756-1761, when he led the nation to spectacular global victories over the French. Ayling minimizes the originality of Pitt's ideas on war aims and strategy, stressing instead the energy and thoroughness with which,
unlike his predecessors, he organized the war. For example, Ayling denies the novelty of Pitt’s emphasis on attacking the French in North America, but gives him full marks for inspiring and directing those campaigns. The author skillfully narrates the complicated military and diplomatic history of the war, as well as the frictions between Pitt, his principal colleague, the Duke of Newcastle, and other ministers. Yet one wishes he would occasionally interrupt the narrative for summary and analysis, for in his matter-of-fact and detailed accounting, Pitt fails to emerge as a valid character.

During the sixties and seventies, whenever his deteriorating health permitted attendance in Parliament, Pitt vigorously opposed government policy (except for his own ineffective second ministry, 1766-1768). Ayling criticizes his views on two important questions during this period: first, his shortsightedness in condemning the Peace of Paris (1763) because it did not utterly destroy French naval power. Yet Ayling never properly explains the origin of Pitt’s lifelong conviction that France must be humiliated; second, Ayling stresses Pitt’s overestimation of American loyalty to England and his failure to understand American rejection of the distinction between external and internal taxation. Ayling concludes that had Pitt been able to assume power during the 1770s, he might have delayed but not prevented American independence.

Pitt’s ill health is necessarily a constant theme of the book. The author elucidates the various species of gout as understood in the eighteenth century and relates Pitt’s suffering from it to his periods of mental depression. He accepts the theory that Pitt was a victim of manic-depression but sensibly refuses to divide his career into neat segments of successive manic and depressive stages. He also devotes considerable attention to Pitt’s very happy domestic life.

The emphasis of the book is on political process rather than substantive issues, and on Pitt’s ambition rather than the development of his ideas. Yet Pitt’s ambition was tempered by his commitment to certain principles, as the author admits. Hence the book would be more valuable were Ayling to balance his admirable narrative of how Pitt got to power with a fuller exposition of the formulation of his political convictions. As it stands, the work is a scholarly and objective but not a definitive history of the life of William Pitt.