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Thomas Pitt

From the painting by Kneller at Chevening

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THE LIFE
OF
THOMAS PITT

BY

SIR CORNELIUS NEALE DALTON
K.C.M.G., C.B., M.A., D.C.L.

Sometime Scholar of Trinity College, Cambridge

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PREFACE

THOMAS PITT, grandfather of the great Earl of Chatham and owner of the famous Pitt diamond, was appointed Governor of Fort St George at a very critical time, when the East India Company, after carrying on a lucrative trade in India for nearly a century, had found themselves in a very dangerous position. Some eight years before, during their disastrous war with the Mogul, they had been deprived of their prosperous factories at Dacca, Patna, and Hugli; and the only foothold left to them in Bengal on the conclusion of an ignominious peace was a settlement newly founded in the face of great difficulties and sacrifice of life on a part of the present site of Calcutta. At home their Royal Charter, which purported to give them the monopoly of the Eastern trade, had become practically a dead letter by a resolution of the House of Commons, which had declared that “all subjects of England had an equal right to trade to the East Indies unless prohibited by Act of Parliament.”

Whilst Pitt was on his voyage to India to take up his appointment, the monopoly of the Eastern trade was conferred by Statute on another Company, subject to the condition that the Old Company were to be allowed to retain such rights as they possessed

for three years, in order to enable them to wind up their affairs. The New Company promptly appointed and sent out to India as their representatives Presidents for the three Presidencies of Bombay, Madras and Bengal, who were invested with extraordinary powers, and were followed by a squadron of men-of-war, escorting an ambassador appointed by the King to negotiate a new treaty with the Mogul. They arrived some twelve months after Pitt had taken over his Governorship: and a bitter struggle ensued between them and the officials of the Old Company. In Bombay they persuaded the Mogul's Governor of Surat to seize and imprison the President and chief officers of the Old Company. But in Madras and Bengal Pitt steadfastly refused to recognise their authority or to have any dealings with them, maintaining that the recent Act under which they claimed authority, continued the Old Company in their possessions and rights for the next three years. In the meanwhile the King's ambassador, Sir William Norris, who had had no previous Indian experience, not only failed to attain his object, which was to obtain additional concessions for the New Company, but by his refusal to accept the conditions offered him, so irritated the Mogul that he issued a peremptory edict, interdicting all English trade in India, and ordering the seizure of the effects of both Companies and the imprisonment of all Englishmen throughout his dominions. In pursuance of this order, his general, Daud Khan, marched with a large army against Madras, and demanded the surrender of the town and the estates of the Company, threatening that

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unless these demands were complied with, he would take the Fort by storm and put its defenders to the sword. Full details of the siege that followed are contained in the Consultation Books of the Fort, which are still in existence. It ended in the withdrawal of Daud and his army, and the restoration, on payment to him of 25,000 rupees, of all the Company's goods that they had raided. His failure to reduce the Fort conduced greatly to the restoration of the waning prestige of the English throughout India; and during the remainder of his Governorship, Pitt continued on more friendly and intimate relations with the Mogul and his officers than any of his predecessors or successors. His successful resistance to the New Company and Daud enabled the Old Company to obtain far more advantageous terms than they could otherwise have hoped for, when the two Companies were subsequently amalgamated. After their amalgamation he retained his position as Governor for several years, during which he obtained further valuable concessions from the Mogul; completed the fortifications of Madras; and by his able administration and business capacity developed the resources and trade of the settlement, raising it to a position of prosperity and influence which it had never before attained.

It is only of late years that the great value of the work thus done by him has been recognised by historians. Appreciative references to it occur from time to time in Bruce's *Annals of the East India Company* (1600–1708), published as far back as 1810, but they are not of a character likely to attract the

attention of the general reader. No reference whatever is made to him in the very scanty notice of the early transactions of the Company given in James Mill's *History of British India* (1818). The earliest published details of several of the more important events which occurred during his Governorship appeared for the first time in Mr Talboys Wheeler's *Madras in the Olden Time*, compiled from the Official Records and Consultation Books of Fort St George and printed in Madras in 1861. But until the publication by the Hakluyt Society in 1889 of the third volume of Hedges' *Diary*, which contains *Documentary Contributions to a Biography of Thomas Pitt*, by Sir Henry Yule, President of the Society, little more was generally known of Thomas Pitt than that he had been the owner of the famous Pitt or Regent diamond, the Governor of Fort St George, and the purchaser of Old Sarum and other Parliamentary boroughs. In 1892, the publication by the Historical Manuscripts Commission of the Fortescue Manuscripts preserved at Dropmore, threw fresh light on many of the incidents disclosed by the researches of Wheeler and Yule, besides containing new materials of historical interest relating to Thomas Pitt and his family. These three publications, produced independently of one another from different sources, require to be carefully examined and read together in order to form the basis of any coherent and trustworthy representation of the main lines of his career, or any fair estimate of his character. Invaluable as they are, they by no means exhaust the authorities now available for this purpose. Year by year these

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have accumulated: and they have recently been supplemented by the publication in the Indian Record Series, of Colonel Love's exhaustive work, *Vestiges of Old Madras*, which besides other additional information on this subject contains a reproduction of the only copy known to be extant of the *Prospect of Fort St George and Plan of the City of Madras Actually Surveyed by Order of the Late Governor Tho. Pitt, Esq.* A copy of this engraving is reproduced in the present work by the permission of Bodley's librarian.

The accumulated contemporary evidence now available affords good grounds for a revision of some depreciatory estimates of Thomas Pitt's character, which have been formed, even by his admirers, on the strength of isolated passages in his very voluminous correspondence, disclosing as this evidence does the circumstances in which the letters containing these passages were written. Neither Wheeler nor Yule had access to the Dropmore papers: and the editor of those papers seems to have had no knowledge of Wheeler's or Yule's researches. No similar extenuation can be pleaded in the case of the German historian, Von Ruville, who in his *Life of Chatham* has taken a very unfavourable view of Pitt's integrity, and has alleged that his wealth was "unrighteously acquired"; that he was "corrupt"; and "a miser in the worst sense of the word"; and that his famous diamond "dominated his every thought and action" for fifteen years. I have dealt with these charges in the concluding chapter of the present work.

PREFACE

The portrait of Pitt is reproduced, by permission, from Lady Russell's *Swallowfield and its Owners*; the print of the Pitt diamond in the various stages of its cutting, and the facsimile of the letter written by Pitt asking for the opinion of Sir Stephen Evans as to the advisability of buying it, have both appeared in the third volume of Hedges' *Diary*, and are here reproduced with the consent of the Hakluyt Society.

I have also to express my grateful thanks to the Rev. A. C. Almack and the Rev. W. H. Cook for the courteous welcome, assistance and information given by them to me on my visits to Blandford St Mary and Stratford under the Castle, for the purpose of verifying facts in connection with Thomas Pitt.

C. N. D.

May 1915.

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