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978-1-107-68153-8 - Bolingbroke's: Defence of the Treaty of Utrecht:

Being Letters VI–VIII of the Study and Use of History

With an Introduction by G. M. Trevelyan

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G. M. TREVELYAN, O.M.

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INTRODUCTION

This reprint consists of numbers VI–VIII of Bolingbroke's *Letters on the Study and Use of History*. It has been decided not to reprint the first five letters, which are of greatly inferior interest to the modern reader, and only serve to obscure the great merit and importance of Letters VI–VIII. The first five letters are a lengthy argument, served up in a somewhat pedantic and obsolete style, on the value of historical knowledge as the basis of a philosophy of human affairs. Of very different interest is the practical illustration of these principles in the portion here printed.

The first dozen pages of Letter VI show the acute and powerful mind of the author generalizing on the causes and character of the Reformation and the rise of the national monarchies, with an insight that even at this day is suggestive and illuminating, and is indeed astonishing if we consider that it was written in 1735–6, before the dawn of modern historical study, before the era of Robertson and Gibbon.

A more detailed account then follows of the rise of the French hegemony in the seventeenth century and the dangers that overshadowed Europe as a consequence.

It will be observed that the author of the Treaty of Utrecht was deeply impressed with the danger of the overgreat power of France during the previous half-century, and the duty of England to maintain the "balance of power" against Louis XIV. Bolingbroke blames Cromwell for not seeing this in the 'fifties; and the Tory

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leader calls Charles II's reversal of the Triple Alliance and his Dover Treaty "equally wicked and impolitic" (pp. 43–44), an opinion that may profitably be noted nowadays, when there is some tendency to praise all Charles's actions as indiscriminately as it was once the fashion to blame them. To Bolingbroke, William of Orange is the hero of the age, as he was to his brother Tory, Matthew Prior, another chief agent in the Treaty of Utrecht.

Bolingbroke praises William III, first because he taught England to play her proper part in resisting France, and secondly because of the moderation of his aims and methods in giving effect to this policy. Bolingbroke, indeed, puts himself forward as the true heir to William's wise European designs, and there is an important element of truth in this paradox. In the first place the Tory statesman clears the ground by admitting that he and his party were wrong in attacking the Partition Treaties by which at the end of his reign William tried peacefully to solve the problem of the Spanish succession by the partition method eventually followed at Utrecht after a dozen years of war. Bolingbroke also admits that his party was ill-advised at that period in disarming England by disbanding the army (pp. 69–70). He goes on to praise William for making a partition of the Spanish Monarchy the object of the Grand Alliance of European powers formed in 1701. He points out that Utrecht carried out the terms of William's Grand Alliance both in principle and in detail.

In Letter VIII he defends himself as the author of the Treaty of Utrecht, as carrying out William's original design of a dozen years before. With this argument goes a detailed attack on the impractical character of the policy of Marlborough and the Whigs from 1706 onwards, when,

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having won the war, they refused to make peace except on condition of the Austrian Charles being king at Madrid. He shows how they persisted in this design, for years after it had become clear that the Spaniards would not have him, that the military conquest of Spain was impossible, and even after the death of his brother Joseph had made Charles emperor at Vienna. After that, the Allies were in fact fighting to reunite the Spanish and Austrian possessions of Charles V, at the expense of the balance of power in Europe.

In this defence of the general lines of the Tory peace policy of 1710–13, particularly in the matter of Spain, which the Whigs continued for many years to denounce as “infamous,” Bolingbroke has, in my opinion, completely made out his case. Macaulay thought so and said so, though Seeley afterwards reiterated the old-fashioned Whig condemnation of Utrecht, for reasons which appear to me too speculative with relation to the later history of the “Family Compact.”

One last point of great interest should be noted. On pp. 123–7 Bolingbroke admits that the French power ought to have been further reduced by the terms of peace than it actually was at Utrecht. More fortresses, in his opinion, ought to have been taken from France along the border of the Netherlands—Lille no doubt in particular. Having thus admitted that his work at Utrecht was not wholly satisfactory, Bolingbroke proceeds to defend it as having been the best attainable in the circumstances, owing to the factious conduct of the English Whigs and the European Allies. He argues that these confederates resisted the making of any peace at all, and that therefore the Tory Ministry had to conspire with the French Ministers in the cause of peace against the Allies and the Whig

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Opposition. Therefore it was impossible to continue to exert proper pressure on France and extort from her the uttermost fortress. Owing to the conduct of the Allies, peace would not be got at all unless the peace was of a character the French would, in their reduced condition, be glad to accept.

This very remarkable and frank argument of Bolingbroke's ought to be carefully considered by historians before they pronounce upon Utrecht and the proceedings that led up to it, particularly on the withdrawal by the Tory Ministry of the British army from the fighting line. If the argument is not to be swallowed wholesale, neither is it to be rejected with contempt. It is so nice a matter that I have no wish to prejudge it here.

The detachment which enabled Bolingbroke to confess the inadequacy of some of the terms of Utrecht, while defending its main outline particularly as regards the disposal of the Spanish throne, is the detachment of retrospect after more than twenty years. The reader must remember that he is reading the words not of the Henry St John of 1710–12, but of the Bolingbroke of 1735–6, a man chastened by long years of proscription and exile, trying to recover by his pen what he had lost by his actions; a man purged by a long penance of that violent partisanship that had made him, in an hour he never ceased to regret, the Pretender's Secretary. He looks back here upon his former self and his former actions from the standpoint of a political philosophy that was not quite that of Henry St John. With this warning, I commend the admirable pages that follow to the sympathy and judgment of the reader.

G. M. TREVELYAN

August 1932