

## “The Last Great Englishman”

**The Great Duke**, by Sir Arthur Bryant, *New York: William Morrow and Company, 1972. 492 pp. \$8.95.*

**Wellington: The Years of the Sword**, by Elizabeth Longford, *New York: Harper and Row, 1969. 548 pp. \$10.00.*

**Wellington: The Pillar of State**, by Elizabeth Longford, *New York: Harper and Row, 1972. 472 pp. \$10.00.*

### I

FOR THE PURPOSES of intellectual history it may reasonably be argued that there have been four crucial moments or watersheds in the formation of the Western world as we know it now. In other words, each of these four were “ideological” explosions which made a genuine difference in the configuration of things—a seemingly irreversible difference. And on these surges toward modernity have turned the fortunes of the race, European and otherwise. But the English Revolution of the 1640’s, the French Revolution, the American Civil War, and the Russian Rebellion of 1918 are not best explained as unfoldings from the *Zeitgeist*, pages in an impersonal schematic survey drawn up in the manner of Vico, Marx, or Hegel. For men, as embodiments of personal will, stood at the center of these movements, shaped their course and finally determined their consequence: men whose lives, in stark human terms, resonate with and summarize the meaning of their day. As protagonists or antagonists, they make their particular moment concrete. And assuredly Arthur Wellesley, the Iron Duke of Wellington, is one of this special company.

Of course, it is impossible to separate the life of Wellington from that of his great adversary or from the sequence of events which brought that enterprising Corsican to power. For Wellington in the first half

of his career successfully opposed Napoleonic France in arms; and in the second or political phase of his life (after 1815), he set himself against the inheritance of Bonapartism and the spirit of revolution which in France had inevitably assumed that final form. The measure of his success in both connections is profoundly significant for those who see history as the inexorable progression of impersonal forces over and through the singularities of space and time. In other words, the Duke is proof to the proposition that men or nations of men can make their own fate—proof that it is possible to “turn the clock back” or to “reverse a trend.” Despite a clear evidence of probabilities to the contrary, Wellington triumphed, Bonaparte was overcome. Jacobinism and its consequences in statism and the worship of speed or mass was not incorporated into the sociopolitical experience of the English-speaking peoples. That terrible abstraction, *la volonté générale*, was broken upon the ridge above La Haye Sainte and driven back, to the wild tune of Wellington’s pipers, into the salons of the cognoscenti. Certainly there is encouragement for the reluctant determinists of our own era in the events of this one man’s life—needed evidence, I believe. And therefore the books here under review seem, in a way that many of their readers may not notice, especially timely. But to explain I must return to Bonaparte and follow the Great Duke’s own maxim: “Occupy high ground and then invite a stand-up fight” (*Pillar of State*, 158).

### II

SIR ARTHUR BRYANT has long been acclaimed as one of the finest contemporary English historians. Though capable of the closest, most specialized work, especially in military analysis, he belongs to the great tradition of Clarendon, Goldsmith, Hume, Robertson, Froude, Macaulay, and Trevelyan. Yet unlike many of his predecessors in popular history, Sir Arthur is free of the pernicious Whig or futurist bias identified

by Herbert Butterfield as the besetting sin of the discipline. The British past is to him an inheritance, not a burden. And it is this general gift, this proprietary feeling for the national character and for the prescription of the national testimony, which makes of his work on Wellington the general a useful counterpoint to the more inclusive biography here bracketed with it. For Bryant makes explicit the way in which the Great Duke's military adventures in Holland, India, Portugal, Spain, and France were finally an extension of his political philosophy; how Arthur Wellesley was listening to archaic "ancestral voices" when he understood himself to be "retained for life" by Crown and Constitution; and therefore how he was preparing throughout his pre-Waterloo years to form an army that was an incarnation of the English temper, to strike with that army a death blow against the armed doctrine which imperiled that temper, and thus, by seizing the center of the European stage, to shape the course of the next one hundred years.

Wellington, of course, had his great fore-runners in this role. Brought to my mind are William the Marshal, Earl of Pembroke under John and Henry II; Lord Talbot and his son (in Shakespeare's *I Henry VI*); and Sir Edmund Verney at Edgehill. Each of these great captains personified the "spirit of proud subordination which makes an army [or a nation, in the old sense] and which has nothing to do with servility" (*Bryant*, p. 299). Each made of the force they led a "family" (*Bryant*, 298, 303, 346, 436), understood the maxim that leadership "requires one who has authority in his face as well as at his back" and that the relation of leader to led depends upon the former's "ability to generate confidence" out of his own person (*Bryant*, 108, 79). And each affirmed the very English equality of manhood which comes with honorable service in the line, the rule that he who is with the king on St. Crispian's Day shall be by him called "brother" (*Henry V*, IV, iii, 50-67). But Wellington comes very late to be grouped with these exemplars of an

older England—an England bound by blood, not interest. And the marvel is that this fact did not hinder or intimidate him in the least. As a "cadet of the ruling Protestant ascendancy of Ireland his vision of the world was that of an aristocrat struggling to preserve order, peace, and civilization in an untidy welter of violence, confusion and unreason" (*Bryant*, 184). Furthermore, he was never of any opinion but that Napoleonic France was unreason incarnate and its master a rank Promethean bent upon driving all Europe into "the bottomless abyss of one arbitrary will" (*Bryant*, 233, 279). Indeed, because he was an antique Englishman, because Napoleon and imperialism hidden under rhetoric offended his inmost self, Wellington was able to recognize his campaigns as "war to the knife" and therefore, with grace and quietude, to communicate his own inflexible view of their desperate significance to the men who marched beneath his banner. And finally, after Waterloo, he was, with the authority of that triumph behind him, successful in persuading a great many of his other countrymen to adopt a similar opinion, to believe that something had—at least for a generation—been determined outside of Brussels.

Sir Arthur Bryant's narrative is superbly rendered, full of telling scenes and swept along by a vigorous flow of comment and quotation. The book is what we have learned to expect from him, quick with the current of the times and the tempo of their unfolding. Nor are we, as readers, ever allowed to forget how much these events mattered. "Old Nosy" was a personage to all of his soldiers. "The Duke" became one for all of England, an erect figure in a tall grey hat to whom, for reasons made clear by this biographer, every man uncovered as he passed.

### III

THE COUNTESS OF LONGFORD has written a remarkable biography of another kind. The inclusive counterpart of Bryant's essay

on Wellington the soldier, it is likely to serve our age as the definitive study. For it rests upon a deliberate absorption in an absolute mass of evidence. And its second volume, concerning the difficult problem of the Duke as statesman, does more than merely complete the image established in its first. When I began to read the dust-jacket of *The Years of the Sword*, I was somewhat uneasy upon learning that the former Lady Pakenham was a Laborite by party persuasion. Her distant familial connection with the "Iron Duke" did not seem a sufficient insurance against revisionist mischief. And her work was being praised by all the wrong people. But these preliminary reservations were driven from my mind as I read through her almost one thousand pages. For Elizabeth Longford is English before she is socialist; and that is her common denominator with the Duke. English, I say, in a sense that implies the priority of cultural identity over all philosophical, social, or political persuasions. Indeed, her work, as does Bryant's, takes us back to that age when party politics and the labeling of men by ideology were exceptional and aberrant developments, still out of place in the healthy social organism that was Albion. I am still surprised that it is possible for an adherent of the Labor Party to shed this feature of her modern identity and recover for us the transpolitical character of Wellington's public life. Yet I am also encouraged by the development; for it signifies that something from that earlier Britain still lives in the grim context of the contemporary United Kingdom.

Both volumes of the Longford opus are held together by a simple theme, the Duke's idea of "the almost mystical union between himself and the state" (*Pillar of State*, 147). In one respect this sounds modern enough. Yet Wellington's notion of the *patria* was really no different from Burke's very traditional formulation: a vital, almost immortal incorporation of the living, dead, and yet unborn. And the Duke gloried not in control of this state or in the intellectual grasp of its nature-in-becoming, but rather

in service to its immediate needs. His will was to defend a given. And such a will has indeed an almost counterrevolutionary, ideological force when informed by a genuine love for what *is* given—especially a constitution, with a monarch as its steward and visible embodiment.

Thus the determination with which Wellington "stuck to his post," the old "coster-monger's donkey" (his own self-description) whose involvement in any business of the realm gave to its execution, even in the eyes of his enemies, a special legitimacy (*Pillar of State*, 331). Hence his support in Lords for a number of bills which he personally disapproved, and his conflicts with French and Austrian "ultras" whose general cause he supported. As general and royal minister his motto was ever that "things must be made to work," that there should be "no factious opposition" to measures certain to carry—certainly no opposition that might threaten consequences worse than those of the measure itself. We think immediately of the Reform Bill of 1832 and the collapse of ministries of which Wellington made a part. The continued health of the polity was his primary concern. Anything could be put right again later—that is, if England remained England.

But it is a mistake to forget Wellington the private man, the unpromising boy who learned early that self-imposed rules "make it second nature for men to do the right thing" (*Bryant*, 195). The Countess of Longford never lets us lose sight of the personal ground beneath her subject's career: Wellington's dependence upon friends, especially women; his trouble as head of a difficult family; his small vanities; his gift of phrase; and the gallantry with which he conducted himself in the smallest matters—in affection for old servants, his courtesy to foreign subordinates, in protection of tenants, a fondness for horses and fine dress. Furthermore she keeps before us the man's ability to look reality in the eye, his freedom from all venality or taint of corruption, his modesty in always remember-

ing that "we are sad creatures after all" (*Pillar of State*, 101).

For the Duke was not of one mind throughout his life. Though "he disliked change in his very bones" and, like most of his contemporaries, "had developed a permanent edge on these feelings" in the conflict with France, he was always able to learn, to maneuver his forces so as to preserve their strength, and to remember his own capacity for error. For such reasons he supported revocation of the Corn Laws, carried Catholic Emancipation, and brought on renovation of the universities. And for the same reasons—despite a lifelong hatred for rigid political organizations, a fondness for the customary government by an "association of friends"—he led, and helped to convert into an efficient instrument, a great popular party (*Pillar of State*, 284; *Years of the Sword*, 207). For the alternative was unthinkable: an England with no effective voice for the ancient corporate feeling best denominated by the word "Tory." As the Duke knew, he had no choice in these decisions. For only he, with simple personal authority, could make them stick, could enforce whatever lessons he had learned from harsh necessity. Only he was both a man and an institution. In the days to come Conservative ministers would not often sit in Lords, would not fight duels, answer their own correspondence, or bristle violently at intrusions upon their privacy (*Pillar of State*, 325). In other words, they would not serve without ambition *and* without false modesty. Nor would they often combine social ease with persons from every station and high feudal dignity. And England would be the less for the difference.

There are of course a few things wrong with the Countess of Longford's Wellington: her inability to understand why the Duke made such a stand on parliamentary reform (or to understand that he was correct in seeing it as a "stage before revolution"); her censure of his acid observations on that durable fraud, "The March of Intellect"; her obliviousness toward the incur-

ably radical character of much Chartist rhetoric (*Pillar of State*, 229, 333). But these are her errors, not her subject's: errors that do nothing to diminish the validity of her portrait. The Duke had an almost infallible foresight into the ultimate designs of his enemies—a foresight which sometimes compelled him to give battle under terrible circumstances, when the issue was great enough to force him out. Hence he could so early recognize in Napoleon the soldier tyrant of Jacobinism whom Burke had predicted during the Terror (*Years of the Sword*, 396). And for the same reason, he could regard only with trepidation a national mood which found its panacea in legislation and legislation alone.

#### IV

WE NOW INHABIT the politicized world whose oncoming Wellington so long forestalled. Napoleon has had many successors. Furthermore, even the English no longer "know they are doing wrong" to "hurl the little streets against the great." Only Sir Winston Churchill has given his country anything like the familial unity summed up one hundred years before him in the Duke's standard peroration:

I am the servant of the Crown and People. I have been paid and rewarded and consider myself retained. . . .

But Churchill we should recall was a Conservative, not a full Tory. He thrived on politics and was not long a soldier. In addition, he was an intellectual of sorts. Elizabeth Longford's hero therefore deserved a great national mourning even more than his recent rival in these honors. For, as she fully persuades us, he knew the old Tory secret, belonged to those he served. And his passing, like Churchill's, enabled him to bring them together in spirit one time more. After considering Arthur Wellesley as he is represented in these masterful biographies, we must agree that Tennyson's majestic farewell struck just the proper note:

Lead out the pageant: sad and slow  
As fits a universal woe,  
Let the long procession go,  
And let the sorrowing crowd about it  
    grow,  
And let the martial music blow;  
The last great Englishman is low.

Reviewed by M. E. BRADFORD