

CHAPTER XVII

EPILOGUE

I

To the story that has here been told of Charles Fox's life and character, there is little that I now can add. He was a man greatly loved, and greatly memorable. He is, perhaps, the greatest figure in the history of parliamentary opposition in England. If we think that, had he lived another ten or twenty years, he would have become also a great English minister, we have the support of Gibbon, who said that Fox, "in the conduct of a party, approved himself equal to the conduct of an empire." His public life had the supreme virtue of fearlessness. Frances Lady Shelley, in her *Diary*, notes a conversation with one of his secretaries in 1814, when she was told that Fox, on coming into office, was approached, in accordance with the custom of the time, by "writers of various newspapers" for employment. A number of them were already in pay of the government. "Mr. Fox, in an interview, told them that they must expect neither money nor encouragement from him, and desired that they should all be paid up to that day. He then discharged them." It is a significant straw.

The devotion of his many friends has been a theme of this book. With a political vision far in advance of his time, his was a lonely mind, but he was never a lonely man. To the many instances of this personal attachment, two may be added. When Coke of Norfolk heard of his death, he wrote: "You do not need to be told how deeply I regret poor Fox. I not only mourn him as an individual, but as the greatest man in Europe." And in All Saints' Church at Hertford may be seen the words that Lord John Townsend devised as his own epitaph:

“The friend and companion of Mr. Fox, a distinction which was the pride of his life, and the only one he was desirous might be recorded after his death.”

There was a Mr. Rose here and there, but even among Charles's political antagonists, few were able to speak much ill of him. Gillray himself had moments when he was off his guard, and the *Anti-Jacobin's* tirades were damp squibs when Fox was the mark, though it must be allowed that not Canning but the very inferior Ellis was then usually the poet of the occasion. Wilberforce knew what his slavery campaign owed to Fox's support, but in other respects he had small sympathy with the sedition-monger of the Whig Club, and the man who “has not one religious friend or one who knows anything about it.” But when Fox died, he wrote: “So poor Fox is gone at last. I am more affected by it than I thought I should be.” And nearly twenty years afterwards, he could add: “Fox was often truly wonderful. He would begin at full tear, and roll on for hours together without tiring either himself or us.” And, again, “He was truly amiable in private life.”

In the same way, Lord Malmesbury had found himself violently at issue with Fox on public affairs since the Whig breach of 1793. And yet he, too, could pay his tribute in 1806: “No country within the short space of six months ever lost two such able statesmen as Pitt and Fox . . . a loss felt less at the instant than it will be some time hence. They left no equal in their line, and after such superiority the nation will not be contented with moderate abilities. Fox lived long enough to be regretted by all, as he certainly acted his part most ably and honourably from the time he took office.”

II

And, in conclusion, there is the word of George III., the King whom Fox for thirty-five years in the ardour of his liberalism had fought on the Marriage Act; on Catholic Relief, on Dissent, on India, on Slavery, on America, and on France. In 1828, John Cam Hobhouse told Lord Holland that he had heard from Grey that "the King liked Fox in his last administration, and no one else." Holland denied it, saying that when he had an audience of the King after Fox's death, George said no word of his late minister. But against this we have the evidence of Trotter, who says that during Fox's last illness "the whole Royal Family manifested respect and sympathy for the great patriot." Which in itself might not amount to much as testimony, but that it is supported by more definite authority. Lord John Russell was told by the Duchess of Gloucester, the King's daughter, that she was with her father when he received news of Charles's death. The old man, so mad and so brave, said that the country could ill afford to lose such a man, and then, "I never thought I should have regretted the death of Mr. Fox as much as I do." It was a strange conclusion to one of the most relentless feuds in English history.