

George Canning

Tory PM 1827 to 1827

"The happiness of constant occupation is infinite."



Biography

George Canning was born on 11th April 1770 in London to an Anglo-Irish family of minor gentry but with straightened circumstances. His father was a failed businessman and lawyer who died the year after his son was born. His mother returned to acting to support her family. Canning showed great aptitude at an early age and his uncle, Stratford Canning, was persuaded to take guardianship of him. This allowed him to attend Eton College where he excelled and Christ Church, Oxford. He practised law for a couple of years before entering politics in 1793 as MP for the rotten borough of Newtown on the Isle of Wight with the help of William Pitt the Younger. He rose rapidly as a Tory MP although his sympathies initially were more liberal, Whig. However the excesses of the French Revolution caused him to lean towards conservatism.

Canning married Joan Scott (1776–1837) the daughter of Major-General John Scott on 8 July 1800, with William Pitt the Younger as one of his witnesses.

George and Joan Canning had four children:

- George Charles Canning (1801–1820), died from consumption
- William Pitt Canning (1802–1828), died from drowning in Madeira, Portugal
- Harriet Canning (1804–1876), married the 1st Marquess of Clanricarde
- Charles John Canning (later 2nd Viscount Canning and 1st Earl Canning) (1812–1862)

George Canning was an enthusiastic follower of Pitt the Younger, resigning from his post as Paymaster General in 1801 when Pitt resigned as Prime Minister due to the King's opposition to Catholic Emancipation. Popular, witty and intelligent, he gained an early political following as an excellent public speaker. He was one of the first politicians to campaign heavily in the country, making many speeches outside Parliament and was known for his opposition to parliamentary reform and his advocacy of Catholic emancipation. When Pitt the Younger again took on the

office of Prime Minister in April 1804 Canning was appointed Treasurer of the Navy. He lost this position on the death of William Pitt in 1806 and did not hold office during Lord Grenville's administration.

In 1807 he was made Foreign Secretary under the Duke of Portland. Given key responsibilities for the country's diplomacy in the Napoleonic Wars, he was responsible for planning the attack on Copenhagen in September 1807, much of which he undertook at his country estate, South Hill Park at Easthampstead in Berkshire. This was his greatest success. By outmanoeuvring Napoleon at Copenhagen and seizing the Danish navy.

However, he quarrelled badly with the War Minister, Castlereagh, over the deployment of troops. When Castlereagh discovered in September 1809 that Canning had made a deal with the Duke of Portland to have him removed from office, he was furious. Demanding redress, Castlereagh challenged Canning to a duel, which was fought on 21 September 1809. Canning had never fired a pistol and completely missed, whilst Castlereagh wounded his opponent in the thigh. Both men resigned as a result of the incident.

A few weeks later, Canning was disappointed to be passed over as the choice for Prime Minister in favour of Spencer Perceval. His anger was such that he refused a high profile post in Perceval's government. However, following Spencer Perceval's assassination in 1812 he accepted office under Lord Liverpool as ambassador to Portugal. He returned to join the government as President of the Board of Control in 1816.

He later replaced his old rival as Foreign Secretary in Lord Liverpool's government after Castlereagh's suicide in 1822. Once again, he made a successful Foreign Secretary, especially in preventing South America from falling into French hands.

The new king George IV disliked Canning, who had supported his wife, Caroline, in the estrangement between the royal couple. This led to efforts to frustrate his foreign policies. Canning, however, successfully built wide public support for his policies. The historian Paul Hayes argues that he scored major achievements in diplomatic relations regarding Spain and Portugal, by helping to guarantee the independence of the American colonies of Portugal and Spain. His policies ensured a major trading advantage to British merchants and supported the Americans' Monroe Doctrine. The historian G. M. Trevelyan stated:

For five years England had been guided by the genius of Canning, and seldom have so much brilliancy in so much wisdom combined to produce such happy results. The constitutional medium through which that genius worked was the loyal friendship of the prime minister, Lord Liverpool.^[1]

Canning replaced Lord Liverpool as Prime Minister on 10 April 1827. Neither the Duke of Wellington nor Sir Robert Peel accepted posts in his government so he set about forming a coalition with the Whigs under Lord Lansdowne and the Tories split between Peel and Wellington's Untra-Tories and the Canningites.

On 8 August 1827, after spending barely 5 months in office, 119 days, Canning died suddenly from pneumonia at Chiswick House. His last words were 'Spain and Portugal'. He holds the record for having served as Prime Minister for the shortest period of time. He is buried in Westminster Abbey.

He has come to be regarded by some as a 'lost leader', with much speculation about what would have happened had he lived.



In 1859 the title of Earl Canning of Kilbraham in the County of Kilkenny was created for the Conservative politician and then Viceroy of India, Charles Canning, 2nd Viscount Canning. He was the third and youngest son of George Canning, George Canning's widow, Joan, was raised to the Peerage of the United Kingdom in honour of her husband as Viscountess Canning, of Kilbraham in the County of Kilkenny, with remainder to the heirs male of her body by her late husband.

The first Earl Canning was childless and on his death in 1862 both titles became extinct.





[Statue of Canning](#) in [Parliament Square](#), London, by Sir [Richard Westmacott](#). Erected in 1832. ^[67]