Durham, 1st Earl of Biography

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Biography

John George Lambton, 1st Earl of Durham (1792-1840), was the tactless and energetic English statesman best known for his report on Canada, which laid the basis for the country's Dominion status.

John George Lambton was born in London on April 12, 1792. After attending Eton College, he joined the dragoons in 1809 but resigned in 1811. From 1813 to 1828 he was a member of Parliament. In 1830 he was made a privy councilor, created a baron, and appointed lord privy seal, and he also entered the House of Lords. He had a hand in preparing the First Reform Bill of 1832. In the same year he was made ambassador extraordinary in succession to St. Petersburg, Vienna, and Berlin, and he was rewarded for his service by being created viscount the following year. For the next 2 years Lord Durham led the advanced Whigs but in 1835 went once again to St. Petersburg as ambassador to Russia.

In 1837 Lord Durham returned home and in the next year was appointed high commissioner to Upper and Lower Canada and governor general of the British provinces in North America. Revolts in both Upper and Lower Canada in 1837-1838 had warned the British government that the Canadians were demanding responsible government and that the situation could not be ignored. Durham spent 6 months in Canada. He sent political prisoners to Bermuda--with which step he exceeded his orders--and it caused his fall.

But upon his return to Britain, Lord Durham published his famous *Report on the Affairs of British North America*. In it he enunciated the principle that the executive branch in Canada would have to make its peace with local interests by instituting a system of responsible government, revising the land ownership laws, fostering immigration, and providing a system of municipal government. He also urged that Upper and Lower Canada be united so as to outnumber the French Canadians. Durham died shortly after his report was completed, in Cowes, Isle of Wight, on July 28, 1840.

Energetic, vain, and high-spirited, Durham tried to keep the Canadian issue nonpartisan in British politics. It is arguable that it was not so much the tactless Durham who created responsible government as the able colonial secretaries and governors who followed him and implemented it.