



The Great Man: Sir Robert Walpole: Scoundrel, Genius and Britain's First Prime Minister

Edward Pearce

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The year 1721 has many splendours: great houses built by William Kent, fine pictures and the fruits of commerce. But there are also thirteen public hanging days a year, drunkenness is endemic, organised crime rampages through the streets. And politics are ferocious. Only a generation earlier, The Pretender failed to take the Crown; the new King is cursed as a damned foreigner; James's followers - the Jacobites - conspire and are persecuted; the South Sea Bubble collapses. Robert Walpole, once imprisoned for financial chicanery, assumes political control and becomes 'Prime Minister'. He personally detects a Jacobite plot, is dismissed in 1727 on the death of George I, recruits the new King's clever wife, Caroline, and bounces cheerfully back. Coarse, corrupt and cynical, Walpole dominates King, Parliament and Government until 1742. This is Mr Worldywiseman, keeping England out of war for twenty years and setting up a stable and growing economy. All politics of a kind we can recognise today begin with Robert Walpole. And here, in Edward Pearce's elegant book, he is brought vividly back to life.

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