



THOMAS BABINGTON MACAULAY

(1800-1859):

REDISCOVERING A VICTORIAN LIBERAL

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Libertarian
Alliance



I discovered Macaulay quite by chance in March 1979. My English teacher was absent one day, and I found myself in his classroom with nothing better to do than browse through a pile of old textbooks that had sat on a shelf as long as I could remember. One of them was called *The Art of Précis*, and contained passages of about 500 words from all the usual English writers. The book fell open at an extract from Macaulay's 1847 speech on education. He was describing the illiteracy of the labouring classes. I know now that he was mistaken in his facts, having taken these from an enquiry that would be considered biased and untruthful even by New Labour standards. But at the time, I was less interested in the accuracy of his claims than in the artistry with which he made them. There was a contrast in his prose between the superficial elegance of expression and a forward drive in the underlying rhythm that I had never seen before and that I could only compare to the music of Beethoven. From just those two paragraphs, I realised that I had discovered a great writer.

HE FIXED ME AS A WHIG

Within a few days, I had acquired his *Critical and Historical Essays*, and I read them as I had never read anything before. I was minded of Keats on first looking into Chapman's Homer:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When some new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific — and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise —
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

I moved on to his *History of England* and all his other writings, and read them with the same besotted admiration. I read and reread him over the next ten years. I went through two editions of his *Essays*, the first having come apart from the continual thumping of pages. Macaulay did not make me either a libertarian or a conservative — I was both before I found him. But he did help make me a peculiar kind of libertarian and conservative, owing nothing to Ayn Rand or Murray Rothbard, and owing nothing to the 20th century writers who generally pass as great conservatives. He fixed me in my opinions as a Whig of the early 19th century, placing I think an indelible stamp on nearly all my judgements of history and politics and literature.

He also did more than anyone else to shape my style of writing. Gibbon and Hume and several others had some influence, but none

so much as Macaulay. Even without conscious imitation, someone so admired and so often reread — and especially by someone so young as I then was — would have had a determining influence over me. But for several years, I consciously tried as hard to write like Macaulay as Procopius did to write like Thucydides. I used expressions that only he used. I avoided words and expressions that he might not have approved. At university, I plagued my tutors with endless references to his works and imitations of his style. I think the effort failed. But so far as my writing now is clear and balanced, and ideas follow each other in logical order, this is part of my debt to Macaulay.

MY TASTES HAD MOVED ON

I lost sight of him during most of the 1990s. Sometimes, I was out of the country and had no access to my books. More often, I was busy and had little time for old favourites. Early in 1999, however, I took down his *Essays* and turned to the review of Sir James Mackintosh. I cannot describe the shock of disappointment. It was like meeting one's first love again after twenty years of adult life. Was it this plain face that had once set me trembling, this dull, matter of fact voice that used to sound so musical? I suddenly found that the sneering contempt of John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold had much truth in it. Macaulay, I decided, was trite in his judgements and in his style both vulgar and affected. I no longer found his dogmatic optimism a mere blemish, but a serious fault. It distorted his view of history; and as he was one of the Ministers who carried the first wave of reforms in the 1830s, it led him into helping set off a constitutional decay that I found culminating in the age of John Major and Tony Blair. No longer my hero in literature, he came to seem almost a villain in politics.

Of course, age brings maturity, and it should have been no surprise that my tastes had moved on. My likes and dislikes in art and music had changed. Writers like Rider Haggard and the Baroness Orczy, whom I had admired as a child, had lost their charm, just as composers like Mahler and J. S. Bach were now appreciated where they had once seemed dull or noisy. What was wrong if I now felt differently about Macaulay? The answer lay in the intensity of the old regard. In rejecting him, I was rejecting a part of myself. If his style was vulgar and affected, what about mine? I put him away, and for the next two years avoided that area of my bookshelves.

Then, last Sunday, I took down his *History of England*. At first, he was just as disappointing as last year. Did I really once think a writer great who could refer to "Latian porches" when he meant Roman architecture? Did I really once admire that booming, anti-theatrical style and those silly exaggerations? For an example of this latter, take these words that I read yesterday morning and so can find without too much looking:

Such were the designs of James after his perverse bigotry had drawn on him a punishment which had appalled the whole world. (*History of England*, Chapter VII — vol. 1, p. 689)

"The whole world"? Does he mean that William's landing at Torbay was a matter eagerly discussed in the summer palace at Peking, or that pilgrims on their way to Mecca argued over the merits of the Toleration Act as opposed to the Declaration of Indulgence? Does he believe that events in England were much noticed even in western Europe outside the foreign ministries and a few religious houses? This is a rhetorical exaggeration copied from Cicero, and in Cicero I cannot think it other than a fault. But the ancients at least had the excuse of not knowing how big and diverse the world was. Macaulay in 1848 was a man who had spent three years in India and who had directed a war with China. He should have known better than to refer to local facts as a matter for the "whole world". If this were a single case, it would be absurd to complain. But the words I quote above are only once instance of what repeated on average once every five pages I now find very provoking.

Or for bad rhetoric, take this on Charles II:

He wished merely to be a King such as Lewis the fifteenth of France afterwards was; a King who could draw without limit on the treasury for the gratification of his private tastes, who could hire with wealth and honours persons capable of assisting him to kill the time, and who, even when the state was



Libertarian Heritage No. 21

ISSN 0959 566X ISBN 1 85637 525 0

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

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Dr Sean Gabb is the editor of *Free Life*, the journal of the Libertarian Alliance. This piece was first published on the internet as *Free Life Commentary* No. 53, on July 24th 2001, as a review of *The History of England*. Issues of *Free Life Commentary* are archived at <http://www.btinternet.com/~old.whig/flcomm/flc.htm>

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

brought by maladministration to the depths of humiliation and to the brink of ruin, could still exclude unwelcome truth from the purlieus of his own seraglio, and refuse to see and hear whatever might disturb his luxurious repose.

(*History of England*, Chapter II — vol. 1, p. 136)

After I had broken up and recomposed this sentence into plainer English, I nearly put the book away again. Happily, though, I kept reading; and I now find that this was the low point of my new relationship with Macaulay. The loved one had scratched and burped and let out an idiot laugh — but then had somehow resumed in part the broken sway. I do not think I shall ever again regard Macaulay as I did when I was twenty, and this gives me pain. But he is, for all his faults, a great writer, and his *History of England* does place him very high among both ancient and modern historians.

HIS OVERALL PICTURE CAN'T BE FAULTED

Looking behind his lapses of style, there is much solid artistry that I do not find in many other English writers. The first two chapters, for example, are like an approaching military band — faint at the beginning, but growing insensibly louder. The history of England before 1685 is clearly narrated, but only briefly and in its essentials for the earliest centuries. The Norman period receives more attention than the Anglo-Saxon, the Plantagenets and Reformation still more. The reign of Elizabeth is almost a narrative, though not so much as the reign of James I — though this still is brief as the epitomes of longer works that survive from ancient times. The Restoration is described in some detail, and the reign of Charles II is treated with a detail that lets the main characters stand out as individuals. At no time in this approach from the distance is there any perception of raised volume. It is an effect that any writer would be proud to achieve, and I cannot imagine how Macaulay must have laboured over it. His purpose is to explain as briefly but fully as possible why the events of the 1680s are important; and he succeeds perfectly.

We then come to Chapter III, the description of England in 1685. I know that other historians have spent the past 150 years attacking Macaulay's judgements. But I do not think his overall picture can be faulted; and it is astonishing how he compresses into a hundred pages an account that other historians would with less effect have made into an entire book.

And now, with Chapter IV, his themes and characters introduced, we come to the main part of the history. This is a masterpiece of narrative. Given reasonable application, anyone can write a narrative of sorts. It needs only a gathering of information and its arrangement into a sequence of events. But to make that sequence flow as if naturally requires skills of the sort that perhaps only a dozen historians in the past 2,500 years have possessed.

THE CORRELATION OF FORCES

And what a narrative it is. It is the most stirring account of one of the most stirring events in English history. It opens with the cause of liberty at its lowest ebb before the 20th century. For 80 years, the Stuart Kings had been trying to introduce into England an absolute government on the European model. The first two Kings of that house had been unsuccessful. The first had been wise enough not to push himself against the settled opinion of more than half the nation. The second had lacked wisdom, and had lost his throne and his head in the reaction that followed his attempt on the old Constitution. But the third, while formally accepting the Restoration Settlement, had been far more effective. A secret Catholic and out of sympathy with English ways, Charles II had been both skilful and lucky. He had survived the blaze of paranoia that followed discovery of the Popish Plot, and rallying the old Cavalier Party that had stood by his father and everyone else who feared another collapse into civil war, had stood forward at last to stamp out its embers. He was assisted by a burst of economic growth that had now made the revenues granted him for life large enough to manage without having to call a Parliament to secure new taxes. At the same time, he was building an efficient state machine and army independent of the landed interests with which he was expected to share power. Though an idler with less force of intellect than his grandfather and less force of character than his father, he died with

the Stuart dream on the verge of realisation. Another 20 years of his openly Catholic brother and any children his brother might have by his Catholic wife, and the parliamentary Constitution of England might be expected to wither away as the Estates General had in France.

The first meeting of Parliament in the new reign shows the correlation of forces. The Whig opposition is utterly broken, its leaders dead or in exile or silenced by fear and long discredit. The Tories are in the ascendant. Even without the remodelling of the boroughs, they would have had a majority. As it is, James faces a Parliament not much different from one in which he could have named all the members. Without a division, it votes him for life the largest supply ever granted in England. Such opposition as emerges over the next few weeks is tiny and forced to hide itself under a thick covering of loyalty. It is made still weaker by Monmouth's rebellion — an attempt mad in its conception and doomed by its feeble and divided leadership. Macaulay's account of the Battle of Sedgemoor is masterly in its economy and fullness. We can see the rabble of farm workers officered by amateurs as it stumbles forward in the mist — crossing one ditch that was expected, and then another that was expected, and then falling into another that no one had expected, and then crashing into the middle of a professional army superior in numbers and in its arrangement. The bravery of these amateurs is nothing, their desperation only sufficient to delay the inevitable slaughter.

Macaulay carries us effortlessly through the capture of Monmouth and his futile abasement in London before his uncle James, and then through the terrible vengeance unleashed on the western counties as Jeffreys conducts the last judicial massacre seen in England. The rebellion is over, and what opposition remains in Parliament is nullified by bringing the session to an end.

THE WHOLE NATION UNITED

But then, just as all seems hopeless, England's luck begins to change. So long as his victims are only Whigs and dissenters, James has the Tories solidly on his side. But now he has the power, he reveals a policy that none of the High Church Tories had anticipated in all the years they were crying up the doctrine of boundless obedience to the Lord's Anointed. He does not want to share power with the Anglican Establishment and its supporters. He wants to displace it and rule as the Catholic King of an increasingly Catholic country — a country in which civil liberty and the rights of all Protestants will be as viciously flouted as in the contemporary France of Louis XIV.

It soon emerges that the fastest way to favour with James is conversion. Protestants are dismissed and replaced with Catholics. The Roman Church is unlawfully tolerated and then encouraged. The English Church is oppressed by an unlawful and arbitrary commission of the Executive. There is the beginning of an effort to remodel the universities and place Catholics in charge of education and scholarship. In England, the Army is enlarged and disciplined contrary to law, and increasingly recruited from Catholics. In Ireland, the administration is increasingly handed over to Catholics — this meaning a dismantling of the English ascendancy there that outrages all Protestants of whatever degree, and even disturbs English Catholics.

Within four years, by forcing the pace of change and failing to conceal its ends, James has alienated all but a small number of Catholics — and perhaps a minority of these — and die-hard Tories and those who owe all their advancement directly to him. But he is not yet strong enough to proceed in the face of every interest group. He still needs a Parliament to regularise his new Constitution — to disestablish the Church of England, and to remove those guarantees of due process that hold him from destroying his opponents under colour of law as he is already doing in Scotland. So he tries to recruit the Protestant Dissenters to his side. After years of hating them for their heresy and their rejection of his title — after years of cruelly persecuting them in Scotland — he suddenly starts speaking the language of advanced religious toleration and courts them to join his attack on the Anglican Establishment. Will they take the offered alliance that will release their ministers from prison and let them worship in public? Or will they and the Anglicans

decide after a century of mutual hatred that a Protestant is a Protestant, and that there is less dividing the stained glass of a cathedral from wooden floors of a meeting house than divides either from the elevated host of a Catholic mass?

And now the Anglicans grit their teeth and promise a full and legal toleration to the Dissenters, and imply a toleration of the Catholics. This the more intelligent Dissenters and Catholics accept, and James finds the whole nation united against him. Undeterred, he presses on. He issues a Declaration of Indulgence, granting an illegal toleration to all Christian sects. When this fails to divide the opposition, he orders it to be read in all the Anglican churches: let the Anglican clergy read it and endorse his policy, or let them explain to the Dissenters why they will not. Now he blunders into the biggest public relations disaster of his reign. A delegation of churchmen led by the Archbishop of Canterbury petitions him not to force the reading on them. He has them arrested and charged with publishing a seditious libel, and has them tried in Westminster Hall. Macaulay's description of the trial and the unanimous support the Bishops receive is a masterpiece of dramatic narrative.

GLORIOUS REVOLUTION

And there is more. As the trial proceeds, James's wife is delivered of a son, and the scene shifts to Holland, where his eldest daughter by his first — Protestant — marriage is married to William, the Dutch head of state. So far, the Tories have held from active opposition, convinced that James will not live forever, and that he will be followed on the throne by a good Protestant who will end this counter-Reformation. But, with a male heir who will himself be brought up a Catholic, it no longer matters whether James will live another five years or thirty years: the policy will continue. William cares nothing for England. But he leads the resistance in Europe to the hegemonic ambitions of Louis XIV. Despite his brilliant diplomacy and his competent military skills, he is gradually losing this contest. Let England be transformed from an eventual ally into an enemy, and he will certainly lose. He actively helped James with information and military support against Monmouth, and has refused any dealings with the Whig refugees in Holland. Now, he is invited by representatives of the newly united English opposition to intervene in England. He gathers his material forces, and by diplomacy as skilful as any seen in Europe assembles a coalition in support that includes the King of Spain, the Austrian Emperor and even the Pope — all more terrified of France than worried about heresy — and lands with a small army at Torbay. As it passes down the Channel, Macaulay describes the fleet as follows:

[It] spread to within a league of Dover on the north and of Calais on the south. The men of war on the extreme right and left saluted both fortresses at once. The troops appeared under arms on the decks. The flourish of trumpets, the clash of cymbals, and the rolling of drums were distinctly heard at once on the English and French shores. An innumerable company of gazers blackened the white coast of Kent. Another mighty multitude covered the coast of Picardy. Rapin de Thoyras, who, driven by persecution from his country, had taken service in the Dutch army and accompanied the Prince to England, described the spectacle, many years later, as the most magnificent and affecting that was ever seen by human eyes.

(*History of England*, Chapter IX — vol. 2, p. 74)

Once he has landed, William avoids all the mistakes that led Monmouth to disaster. He brings over the important men in every locality he passes through. He stops his march on London in Hungerford and invites James to a conference. But in London or in Hungerford, he seems already to have won. As the days pass, all the leading politicians in England — even James' youngest daughter, Anne — come over to his side. At last James is left alone in Whitehall. He might still be able to snatch some kind of victory. He might march on Hungerford at the head of his remaining forces, and draw William into a battle that, whatever the local outcome, would leave James as King of England. But he loses his nerve. He gathers up his wife and son, cancels the writs for the Parliament he has been persuaded to call, and slips away to exile in France.

The end of Chapter X, following the coronation of William and Mary as Joint Monarchs, is one long burst of the most brilliant

oratory. This was a Glorious Revolution, Macaulay explains. It saved England for a liberty that existed nowhere else in the world, from where it could at last be spread through the world. It was the foundation on which every later victory for liberalism was grounded. It was the origin of the Great Reform Act, freedom of the press, of the abolition of the slave trade, of the civil equality of the Catholics and Dissenters, of all the wealth and power and goodness of Victorian England. As I read that peroration again, all the doubts that had crowded thick about me in the earlier chapters slid away. I know Gibbon and Hume intimately well. I have read Tacitus and much of Livy in the original Latin. I have read Thucydides in the best translations. I am not aware of anything in these historians able to match for splendour and force. Macaulay is not the running ostrich to which he once compared John Dryden. And if he is not quite an eagle, he is certainly one of those winged dinosaurs who got aloft and stayed there. For all his faults, he does rank among the greatest historians.

ECLIPSE

I grant, this renewed admiration may owe something to parallels between the situation of England then and now. It may be that the broken and scattered opposition to the Stuarts reminds me of our own Eurosceptics — the Monmouth rebellion an extreme summary of how the Conservative Party has been behaving these past four years. Perhaps the new attack on England will raise up an unexpectedly wide and united opposition. Perhaps we shall have another William to come and “heal the nation's grievance”. Perhaps. More fastidious historians, I know, despise Macaulay for making history into a justification of his political career. It can be argued against that he saw his politics as validation of his history. Whatever the case, he was read in his own day in the light of contemporary politics; and if he can be read equally well today in that light, I see no reason to deny the added force.

But who else will read him? His reputation is gone. According to Lord Moran, Winston Churchill paid a visit in 1954 to the Longman publishing company, which had published Macaulay from the beginning. Speaking to the family member then in charge of the firm, he asked how much Macaulay was now being sold. “Macaulay” he learnt, “was not read now; there was no demand for his books.” His reputation, come the middle of this century, was dead. It had gone into decline after the Great War; and by now, he had become just another of those writers who are granted classic status on condition that no one shall be expected to read them.

Overwhelmingly, the few references to him that I have read in books and magazines published since the last War have been negative. By 1979, a savage attack on him in *The New Statesman* could go completely unremarked in the “Letters” page. And he could be plagiarised without any chance of discovery.

Why this eclipse? It was not his style, I think. Though lush by the standards that have prevailed since the 1900s, Victorian prose as a whole has never lost its appeal. Carlyle, Dickens, Matthew Arnold, Newman, and many other writers, have remained in print throughout the past ninety years, and have been studied and appreciated in the universities. Moreover, all that can be said against Macaulay's style can often be said against theirs with magnified force. Carlyle, in particular, frequently verges on the unreadable — perhaps a German who learnt English in Glasgow could write like that, but not anyone else.

HE HAS GONE THE WAY OF THE OTHER VICTORIAN LIBERALS

Most likely, it was his liberalism that caused the eclipse. This also has been eclipsed. There has been a modest revival since about 1975. But to the average reader of the past few generations, it seems fair to say that a Victorian liberal has made scarcely more sense than a Jacobite.

John Stuart Mill is the great exception. But then *On Liberty* is a philosophical text that cannot be ignored even by those who hate it. Equally, his *Principles of Political Economy* are a classical work in a discipline that has itself very largely remained an island of liberalism in the collectivist sea of our age.

Macaulay, however, was not a great economist. Nor was he ever thought much of a philosopher — though his attacks on the Benthamite radicals is very good philosophy in the empiricist tradition. And without the academic support that attaches to these, he has gone the way of the other Victorian liberals. He is one with James Mill and Lecky and Spencer and Samuel Smiles and Morley, and all the others whose names are mentioned in the histories of the age, but whose works are almost never opened by the ordinary reader.

Were I more religious than I am, I might observe that the falling open of that book in 1979 was more than a happy accident. As it is, I will conclude with the hope that I have encouraged someone by this review to go out and find Macaulay. He is in most good second hand bookshops. Even early and potentially valuable editions can be had for just a few Pounds. If he can work on another anything like the magic he worked on me, I shall not have written in vain.

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