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0521602661 - Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of
Modernism, 1870-1970

Michael Bentley

Excerpt

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Introduction

In deciding what to offer the Wiles Trust for their annual series of lectures in 2003, I hit on the title 'English Historiography in the Age of Butterfield and Namier'. Traces of that concentration still exist in this published version, especially in chapters 4, 6, 7 and 8 which are revised versions of the original lectures. But what I had in mind to attempt in the series was not a simple description of what Butterfield and Namier had written, nor even an analysis of their arguments and eventual antagonism. Instead I set out to use these two historians as icons or symbols of opposed modes of thought that I recognized in the inter-war period and through into the 1950s and 1960s. One of them, epitomized for this purpose in Lewis Namier, saw the task before historians as one resting on the destruction of what had gone before, especially the so-called whig theory of history, and the substitution of an aggressive new methodology and ambition designed to make twentieth-century historiography more modern and sophisticated. The other epitome, for all his well-known criticisms of the 'whig interpretation', reacted against the process of modernization that Namier and others embodied and sought to reinstate an idea of history as a narrative art concerned with the lives and souls of humanity. The small scale of the Wiles series and the distinction of the invited panel that accompanies it made this focus conceivable: I was addressing an audience who knew the historical material well and had even been personally involved with the lives and work of my protagonists. For the book, however, it was clear that this would not do. Many readers will have only the haziest sense of who Butterfield and Namier were and lack any helpful context in which to situate them, while the argument between them itself draws on terms and assumptions that only those close to the period will find intelligible. So I sought a path that would widen into a more general discussion of the issues raised and take the argument far beyond the two historians with whom I had started.

This thinking took me towards stipulating 'modernism' as an organizing idea within English historiography in the century or so after 1870 and deciding to provide a fuller account of what it involved. The term

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has never been defined or explained: indeed it is rarely used at all. Tutors in the universities who find themselves teaching classes on the impact of 'postmodernism' on historical writing know all too well the student who says, in effect: 'If this is postmodernism, does that mean there was something called modernism that it's supposed to be "post"?' This book says that there was, or at least that it may be helpful to conceptualize the period under some such rubric; but before we can make any sense of it we have to think about the language in which English historiography tends more commonly to be conceived.

Every historian, at whatever level, who takes an interest in the development of the subject will have heard of the 'whig interpretation of history' and appreciate that this way of thinking about the English past held great sway in the nineteenth century at the hands of famous narrative historians such as Macaulay, Freeman and the inevitable Bishop Stubbs. Most historians, at least at the higher levels, will have heard of 'postmodernism' as a comparatively recent mode of thought that has preoccupied some people working in the humanities for the past thirty years or so and which they associate with the masters of Parisian obscurity: Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva. In between the epochs in which these formations became dominant – the whig and the postmodern – stands the history that dare not speak its name, not least because it does not have one. Some would describe the years between (say) 1890 and 1970 as a period of 'positivism'. Others might reach for the more sneering 'empiricism'. Defenders of the achievements of these years would prefer to talk about a period of growing 'professionalism'; or they look back with some nostalgia on post-war times when history came to be thought of as a form of 'social science'. Each of these ways of characterizing the period offers a glimpse of something important about a facet of its nature. I prefer to talk about an *age of modernism* because I want to introduce the reader to a broader and more sympathetic conception of these important years than any reduction of them to a single way of organizing the past or to a side-swipe against an outmoded style of historical writing seems likely to do. The essential nature of that modernism – its origins, distinctive characteristics, achievements, weaknesses and consequences – is what this book sets out to identify.

Constraints of time and space have made the definition less articulate than it might have been if set in a still wider frame of comparative study. It would have been a valuable and challenging task to place the developments discussed here in a European and American context to a greater degree than has been possible: this must await its own authors. But at least we have an opportunity here to think across a significant era of

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development within a highly significant state and try to chart the transitions and repercussions that surrounded the modernist project in England.

'Modernism' encourages one form of primitive understanding if only by telling us that it came before 'postmodernism'. But it also encourages a misconception that postmodernists tend to share because of their confidence – sometimes plausible, sometimes absurd – that the onset of a postmodern era should be seen as some authors now see the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century – as a fundamental threshold across which all serious thought must pass if it is to acquire intellectual respectability. This mood consigns some of the greatest historians of the twentieth century to a purely local interest as embodiments of a discredited genre. The modernists themselves made matters worse, moreover, by going out of their way to imply that they did not constitute a genre of any kind. They saw themselves as intelligent, critical historians approaching the technical work of history in a systematic, increasingly professional, way and thinking about the task of historical enquiry, when they turned their mind to it, as the application of a higher common sense. Individualists to a man (and woman after 1918), they saw their common work as no more than a random mosaic of writing with no connecting tissue beyond the intentions and interests that make people write about the past. They would have disliked and probably resented any attempt to see English historiography between 1890 and 1970 within a common frame. Although this book has been written partly in their defence, therefore, they would have hated it because it probes assumptions and connexions whose existence they would have denied and it brings onto the page private reflections never intended for sharing. That is the price of writing critically about historiography: the subject does not want to tell you what you want to know.

There is another misconception which helps explain why this book is arranged in a particular form. All talk of 'ages' asks for trouble, in one sense, by asserting beginnings and endings that prove notoriously hard to ground in documentary evidence. In the case of English historiography over the past two centuries we face a pre-cast list of 'ages' that this book wishes to challenge. The familiar story is that whig historiography flourished until it became undermined by a new breed of historian before the First World War and then was crushed by the cultural collapse of the conflict itself. What followed – the subject of this book – is then seen as a featureless period of professionalization and inward-looking technical history until the new Enlightenment dawned sometime after 1970 and we slid into the postmodern condition. In fact the 'Prelude' that begins this study argues that whig history survived *alongside* modernism in

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England as a continuing critique of its tendencies. The first part of the book then explores some of the categories that had been central to the whig understanding – constitutional history, the place of religion, imperial history – in order to demonstrate how bifocal the age of modernism often was and the degree to which this complexity is deepened when we think about the relation between past and future in the minds of our historians, which is the point of chapter 4. It shows the sense of dislocation in the historical community in a period that is often thought of as dedicated to a particular series of purposes and projects. Indeed, by the end of the first part of this book the reader may be forgiven for wondering whether there is anything distinctive about 'modernism' at all.

The second half of the book suggests that there is. Having reviewed some of the preoccupations of the whig interpretation and examined their persistence in the twentieth century, the text focuses on what is new within the work of historians in these years and discovers important new territory among their projects – especially in the fields of economic and social history – but also reports a widespread commitment to the idea of modernization as a value, a sense that history needs somehow to be brought up to date. It demonstrates, too, that political history also found new breath, not least in its obsession with the English parliament: a whig subject treated now in a modernist style. Chapter 6 selects a case study in the relationship between the new approach and its critics by examining how the eighteenth century underwent transformation at the hands of the modernists, Lewis Namier pre-eminent among them, but only by stirring latent resentments among its critics, among whom Herbert Butterfield deserves pride of place. In effect we watch the conflict between the modernizing tendency and a reviving whig mood working itself out within discussions of eighteenth-century politics. Topics and case studies are important to the case being made here and a longer book would have far more to say about them. But still more urgent is the issue of methodology because if topics are plural, method suggests commonality across the diverse enquiries made by historians. Chapter 8 in many ways is the most important of the book in revealing how modernist historical method was envisaged and with what results. The final word, like the first, is about transition. The whigs were not 'superseded' by the modernists and modernism did not simply disappear in the face of postmodernity. Neither, however, did their modernist projects survive in the form in which they had recommended them during their years of dominance. Complicated currents in the culture between 1960 and 1980 turned English historiography away from the world they had complemented and called a different one into being, an age that we think of as our own.

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Prelude: after the whigs

The whig history of England was a Bad Thing, most modern historians would agree. It worked, they might say, simply as a form of English literature and supplied uplift and emotional satisfaction rather than a careful and scholarly account of evidence. It sought too wide an audience for its own good and reduced the difficulties of real historical 'research' to swirling narratives of progress, improvement and derring-do. It rested on an implicit idea of the superiority of English culture in which the constitution continued to represent the most beautiful combination ever framed, in which the empire seemed no more than a natural outcome of character and enterprise, in which God was tolerant of Nonconformists but remained Himself a moderate Anglican. If it were triumphalist, it announced no triumph of the will, for that would suggest the intentions of the braggart. Rather, the whig historians told the story of a disposition bred into the national stock over a thousand years, one whose crucial adjectives – 'manly', 'frank', 'decent', 'staunch' – bonded naturally to the favourite collective nouns of England – 'people', 'nation', 'state', 'race'. And in accomplishing its stories the whig tendency fostered purposes and directions within the time-line of English development: always looking over its shoulder from a particular present that it sought to defend and evangelize. Constantly digging in the past for roots and seeds that would one day flower in national life, the whigs fertilized their creations with a special form of genius which made mere historical phenomena look like today's cherished institutions and conventions. Or their plants would come up instead as heroes, for whigs saw them as symbols of the grand narrative that was the English past, rather in the way that saints embody theology and bring its lessons down to the level of the common man. Through the nineteenth century, this mode of history that came to be called 'whig' acquired great strength: it so dominated the way in which the Victorians' past became framed that it becomes hard to think of anybody writing then who did not in some sense reflect its preoccupations. Even raging reactionaries such as Thomas Carlyle or Sir William Alison embedded their anti-Whig

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proposals in a whig-historical form. Narratives varied in their force but narrative itself never did: it held a monopoly on how to write about the past and did not even begin to weaken before 1890.

Who, then, were 'the whigs'? Often they did not belong or subscribe to the group of progressive politicians known as capital-W Whigs, in the sense of people committed to a moderate reformism in politics with a particular relationship to what later became known as the Liberal party, though many of them replicated the recommendations of that political outlook in their historical writings. (It may help emphasize this distinction to indicate the political formation known as the Whigs with their capital letter and to render the historical whigs with a lower case one: that will in any case be the practice followed here.) The historical whigs formed an interlocking dynasty of authors with perhaps Henry Hallam and Thomas Babington Macaulay at one end of their period of dominance and William Stubbs, J. R. Green and E. A. Freeman at the other end.¹ In the early years – say from 1820 to 1850 – the tendency reflected an eighteenth-century heritage that celebrated the Glorious Revolution in which William III of the Netherlands had replaced – almost bloodlessly – the despicable Catholicism and tyranny of James II and substituted, via his successors, a new age of Protestant stability and prosperity with its constitution that supposedly secured through its checks and balances ways of guarding against interest-groups or democratic enthusiasms. It recognized, too, an historiographical enemy in David Hume whose *History of England*, written polemically to attract readers and backwards chronologically to guarantee speedy sales, had appalled right-thinking men for its sympathies with Charles I and therefore the cause of absolutism.² Having given the years after Charles's execution their due and extolled the eighteenth-century system of governance for which it had been the precondition, the nineteenth-century whigs instead allowed their minds to wander further back into the mists and to construct an ingenious and persistent account of English origins in Saxon forests, with a series of roles for the Norman Conquest, the tyranny of King John, Magna Carta, the first parliament of the realm and a crescendo of constitutional success, interrupted only by the malign Tudors, that culminated in the Bill of Rights of 1689. The other end of the nineteenth century became messier. The simple-mindedness of early whigs disturbed the later ones who wanted to mix a whig temperament with an awareness of science that their century had made *de rigueur*. In

¹ The reader will meet all these people again, and their biographies, in the pages that follow. Detail need not detain us now.

² David Hume, *History of England* (6 vols., 1762).

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the hands of the Tory William Stubbs, Bishop of Oxford, for the medieval period and S. R. Gardiner and C. H. Firth for the seventeenth century, whiggery acquired an intellectual pedigree that its forebears neither possessed nor wanted. The overwhelming narrative supplied by Thomas Babington Macaulay, possibly the most widely owned and read history of England in the nineteenth century, now raised not only eyebrows but the flicker of a smile among those who believed that they had moved to higher ground. Accelerated by the sceptical power of a new breed of historian epitomized in the brilliance of F. W. Maitland, whiggery had begun its turn downwards (we are told) and met its Waterloo on the Somme.

It is a plausible and suggestive story: rise of the whigs in the age of Romanticism; annealing of the whigs in the age of science; annihilation of the whigs in a total war their world-view could not countenance. But it amounted to a way of thinking about the history of modern English historiography that betrayed two strange characteristics. First, it dealt in stark sequences divided from one another by a single threshold. Before the First World War a prevailing whig disposition supposedly suffered corrosion from a style of forensic enquiry that turned out to be more critical, more searching, more intelligent than its predecessor. The war then brought not only death, pain and loss but also futility; and, though whiggery could face the obvious consequences with a brave face, it had no stomach for – more importantly, it could give no account of – pointlessness. Always a doctrine of encouragement towards a progressive future that was contained in the past, whig history had nothing to say, the argument runs, when faced with a future-towards-death. So the very conditions that would give rise to the bleak recommendations of existentialism in the twentieth century were the same ones that suppressed the possibility of a whig cosmology after 1918. A second characteristic of this cast of mind lay in its having no vocabulary in which to talk about what came after the whigs. Quite simply, there had been a period of whig attrition before the war, after which the disposition had disappeared under the weight of tragedy. The historians who survived then built on the foundations of anti-whig historical writing and did something else, something altogether better but nameless, and they are the basis on which our historical profession now rests. The whigs died and left behind as the new voice of history . . . , well, *us*.

This book is going to worry about both of these assumptions. To begin with, the whigs did not die: they survived science, they survived Maitland; they found ways to survive the First World War and by keeping their heads either down, or at least out of the universities, they survived the twentieth century. True, their approach to history became

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unfashionable even as their celebrated avatar (and Macaulay's great-nephew), G. M. Trevelyan, rose to his peak of popularity with a general reading public. They lost the commanding heights of the academic economy to hard-nosed professionals and found themselves the butt of insufferable condescension from scholarship boys, even scholarship *girls*, from schools they had never heard of, located in towns far from Oxford and Cambridge and the British Museum. But they did not die. Their own stream of tendency, an idea precious to all whigs, took them away from glorious pronouncement and towards a form of distressed criticism, as though trying to remind the new culture that it owed something to the past's legacies. Modern people should think about what kind of society would result, whigs seemed to be saying, if history became a row of small-minded monographs written by authors calling themselves 'doctor', whose life-experience and sense of English culture extended no further than taking cups of tea in the Institute of Historical Research. The view that historians needed to write about Life and ought to get one of their own in order to do so has survived into the era of the tele-don, as has the notion that books are for reading by a wide audience rather than for reference purposes among a self-sealing elite. Indeed, in what we nowadays call the postmodern condition, whig presupposition has revived to a surprising degree, and it is the successors of the whigs who now look outmoded as the defenders of a narrow and unrewarding mindset, over-impressed by scientific method, under-impressed by the need to communicate their thinking to a wider audience, more responsible for killing history in its best sense than preserving it.³

'Postmodern' fashions have contributed to throwing doubt on the second assumption, that whig romanticism was succeeded by 'proper' history that we all now practise. The whigs themselves did not know that they were whigs, at least not until Herbert Butterfield told them that they were in 1931.⁴ The post-whigs, similarly, had no sense of identity with their own era until a phase of thought came along that enabled posterity to shape it for them. After the whigs came the modernists, as we shall call them,⁵ but no one could *see* 'modernism' until it became a contested or superseded entity itself, and only now is it becoming apparent that we lack a definition, even an understanding, of what preceded our own age. Just as we leave the earth in an aeroplane and, looking down,

³ This line of thought is taken further in Peter Mandler, *History and National Life* (2002).

⁴ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931).

⁵ It will be obvious that by 'modernists' I mean not historians of the modern period but historians of all periods who share the thought-world of a persuasion called 'modernism'.

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assimilate the entire landscape in a glance available to no one on the ground, so modernism remained a comprehensive, unremarked environment for historians in England for a century after 1870 until observers could leave it behind, conscious that they had moved somewhere else. Anyone who grew up during the later phases of modernism, absorbing its teaching as a form of practical common sense, recognizes this lack of definition instinctively. For modernists, history – very often mixed up with ‘the past’: it didn’t seem to matter much – was dominated by ‘the evidence’ which had to be ‘analysed’. ‘The evidence’ was mixed up with ‘the sources’ and both were taken to be finite and constricting. The whigs and all other forms of apprentice-historical scholarship had ‘distorted’ the ‘truth’ of the matter by becoming emotionally involved with their story and by insisting that history had to be a story in the first place. Modernized history did not do this or, if it did, that was because it had fallen into the hands of a bad historian whose ‘interpretation’ of ‘the facts’ was ‘biased’. So in the universities – rarely in the schools until later – we were made to study ‘documents’ because these were the bedrock on which all our ‘interpretations’ would be built; and important as these various views might be, the point of it all lay in transcending the partialities of viewpoint in order to ‘get at the truth’. The task of writing history, therefore, had an investigative aspect aimed at ‘the sources’: one began with ‘research’ in order to acquire ‘the facts’ and having retrieved or ‘discovered’ them, the project involved writing a text that gave a fair, accurate and balanced account of what had been found. Ideally, the historian wore the white coat of the laboratory and brought to the art of writing about the past a dispassionate objectivity. History might be difficult but its objectives as a truth-claiming ‘discipline’ demanded the same dedication to method and clear-thinking as biology or physics which it resembled far more than the fictional literature beloved of the whigs. The post-whig historian might make the past sound dull or implausible or befuddling in its detail. (S)he would never make it sound ‘picturesque’ or ‘quaint’.

I have inflected the last paragraph with quotation marks in a way that no modernist would feel is helpful or necessary. Teachers of history at any level who taught classes in England in 1920 or 1945 or 1960 would tend to read these words and phrases transparently as part of a conventional wisdom about the subject and rarely see the need to go beyond them or to reverse some of the assumptions on which this entire fabric rests. For one of our postmodern critics, on the other hand, looking down from the skies over Paris, the language of modernist history should be read simply as a hegemonic discourse that operated through internal, and essentially arbitrary, codes. Here we shall picture it differently, for

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modernism was never as hegemonic as it believed and it was always more than a discourse or system of language-games. I shall speak of it instead as a *persuasion* (a modernist word, if not an English one⁶), by which I intend to suggest an open cosmology which contained a particular view of history as a learned discipline at its centre, but which also surrounded itself with supple, unspoken consensus and changing forms of legitimation that enabled it constantly to reinvent itself until new and unwelcome versions of counter-argument began to make themselves felt after 1970. Dates pose difficulties in thinking about the modernists and it is not productive to obsess about them. Speaking broadly, we might say that Stubbs, a Tory with a whig historical understanding, may stand as bench-mark for a sophisticated version of whiggery. We shall constantly refer back to his *Constitutional History of England* (1873–8) for guidance about the assumptions of that tradition. For a modernist exemplar at the end of the period of dominance of this strand of thought, one could not do better than cite G. R. Elton who committed himself passionately to modernist methods and objectives and dismissed those who failed to follow him as naive, dim or (worse) untrained. His most important statements outlining his attitude appeared in the 1950s and 1960s and, though he died only in 1991, raging against a very different world, it will do little violence to him and others to suggest that 1970 marks the onset of a challenge to the modernist outlook in English history. In thinking about English history between 1870 and 1970 we shall study a century dominated by some celebrated historians, then, but neither the century nor the historians are the subject of the book. The focus is on modernism as a persuasion: a set of attributes, a collection of presuppositions and enthusiasms, a cast of mind.

How to resolve that persuasion into focused language poses major problems of approach and organization. It would be possible to present a theoretical critique of the modernists by deploying the deconstructionist tools of a later generation in order to invigilate their texts and show them wanting. But the point of doing so seems unclear since it would merely show that the historians under consideration were unaware of some postmodern themes such as textuality and representation and that they remained untutored, a mixed damnation, by Foucault and Derrida. They would be blamed as modernists for not having been postmodernists. More intelligent might be an attempt to portray these historians in their own terms and allow their attitudes and assumptions to drift through the book as a cumulative impression, and this is what I have

⁶ One thinks at once of Marvin Meyers's marvellous book *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford, CA, 1957), but there are other examples.