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978-1-107-00397-2 - The Life and Thought of Herbert Butterfield: History, Science and God

Michael Bentley

Excerpt

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Introduction

When Sir Herbert Butterfield died in 1979, he had already lost most of his audience. Those in the second half of their life might recall *The Whig Interpretation of History*, if they had been made to read it at school, though its rubbishing thirty years later by E. H. Carr in *What is History?* provided fresher memories. Or they may have had on their shelf at home *Christianity and History*, which had created a flurry of interest on both sides of the Atlantic in the early 1950s. The postwar British generation heard, many of them, the radio broadcasts – often in school – or the endless lectures that Butterfield had delivered to the Historical Association or the columns he occasionally contributed to the press. But it was all a long time ago: they knew the name, the Yorkshire voice perhaps, but little else. For the professional historians, among whom Butterfield had spent most of his life, he remained a considerable force but one marked by failure. He had never written the books he had set himself to write; he had never survived the dismissal of him by Sir Lewis Namier; he had enjoyed over-promotion to distinguished chairs of history and the Mastership of a Cambridge college where his inadequacy had become more apparent than his qualification. In Cambridge, where he had his closest circle of friends and enemies, he attracted love and reverence from some but no smaller contempt from others who patronized him for his working-class origins, lamented his supposed closeness to the Third Reich, dined out on canards about his private life, resented his successful career and turned it into a form of intellectual abdication. He had not written enough to count, supposedly, and what he had written no longer held sway. He was yesterday's man. The historian of European civilization since the Renaissance, the pioneer student, in England, of the history of historical writing, the historian of science, the commentator on postwar international relations, the Christian critic of a liberal and secular society: these things had slipped below the horizon when they had ever risen at all.

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Butterfield did not lack admirers but he had never built around himself a 'school' of pupils who could together help raise the fallen flag. Some of those whom he had taught or who came into academic contact with him assuredly went on to major careers. One thinks at once of J. H. (now Sir John) Elliott, historian of early-modern Spain, of John Pocock and his work on the history of ideas and historiography, of scholars working on eighteenth-century English politics such as Frank O'Gorman, who took his devotion to Butterfield into the heart of the enemy camp in the University of Manchester. Part of the master's teaching, however, revolved around a view of anti-charisma: he felt that no teacher should impose a personality or a doctrine on those whom he taught but rather seek to challenge or develop the particular insights offered by the person seeking guidance. He took more pleasure in leaving auditors no longer knowing what they thought as they closed the door than in winning them over to a point of view. No less damaging for his posthumous prospects, his detractors *did* construct research schools in Cambridge; and no pupil of George Kitson Clark or J. H. Plumb or Geoffrey Elton was likely to learn that Butterfield ought to figure among his or her role-models. For a man whose last substantial book appeared in 1957 these portents did not promise longevity, and given a personality for whom sociability never overcame emotional and intellectual isolation it seemed likely that his gifts would die with him.

That all of this was unfair hardly matters: reputations do not root themselves in fairness. It seems more striking that many of the allegations proposed by contemporary critics were, quite simply, wrong. Historians who do not write anything do not bequeath bibliographies of published material running to some 180 items, 10 of which are substantial books. Unconnected and trivial public figures tend not to leave a collection of manuscripts and correspondence arranged under 531 headings, before one even starts to think about the private material not yet deposited. Scrutinizing that material shows that the rumours about pro-Nazism rested on a mangled understanding of how his mind worked. The rumours about his sex-life were hilarious and mad. More damaging and persistent, the constant allegation of 'failure' held at its core an unspoken definition of success that made a wooden professional class feel better about itself and spoke more of his detractors than about him. One does not have to *like* the kind of man Butterfield was or respect the subjects towards which he turned his mind in order to see that systematic demolition of him normally rests on falsity.

Rescue from untruth was not available at his death and the lifeboat could not be launched for some years. Some studies, usually by sympathetic

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commentators, helped to revive the reputation, within limits.¹ Butterfield helped students of his work by granting interviews and corresponding with authors, though he deprecated the idea of a biography. One result (an important one) of such contact over a number of years appeared in C. T. McIntire's studies of him, though the author stressed that he had never intended a formal biography and concentrated *faute de mieux* on material that Butterfield had made available to him. Only with the depositing of selected manuscripts in Cambridge University Library in January 1980 could the work really begin of ordering the chaotic material and reassessing Butterfield in terms that he had not himself originated; and significant publications have appeared since then dealing with particular slices of Butterfield's intellectual engagements. Indeed he became in some ways more significant in the twenty years after his death than he had appeared in the last twenty years of his life. Whilst these initiatives made their mark on the surface of scholarship, moreover, a sea-change rolled beneath and brought about a questioning of previously held assumptions about what 'history' – the subject – should amount to and how it ought to be prosecuted. Butterfield died just as the mists of postmodernism rolled towards the British shore. He never knew about it and had he known he would have been appalled because all forms of 'relativism' in thought disturbed him. Half of him had always been a 'modernist', with a vision of truth accessible to correct methods of investigation and of achievement defined as its capture.² But the other half had equally obsessed that it was somehow not enough: that one needed to see human studies in the round, place personality and pluralism at the centre of the work, restore value and meaning and flesh where scientism left behind bone, wave-whitened, dried in the wind.

The combination of new archival resources and a changed intellectual temper committed to undoing modernism's bogus certainties helped Butterfield's posthumous rise. Namier's star faded as the thought-world he had so effectively made his own no longer looked attractive. Undoubtedly

¹ In 1970 a *Festschrift* edited by J. H. Elliott and H. G. Koenigsberger had gone some way: see *The Diversity of History: Essays in Honour of Sir Herbert Butterfield*. But the first major study of Butterfield as an international thinker appeared fifteen years later: Alberto R. Coll, *The Wisdom of Statecraft: Sir Herbert Butterfield and the Philosophy of International Politics* (Durham, NC, 1985). Since then significant publications have included C. T. McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield: Historian as Dissenter* (New Haven, 2004); Keith C. Sewell, *Herbert Butterfield and the Interpretation of History* (Basingstoke, 2005); and Karl W. Schweizer and Paul Sharp (eds.), *The International Thought of Herbert Butterfield* (Basingstoke, 2007), plus an array of studies printed in learned journals.

² I have discussed the precursor of postmodernism in *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism 1870–1970* (Cambridge, 2005).

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Butterfield's Christianity constrained his appeal; but it did not prevent new readers of his work from sensing that, for all his eccentricities and errors, he had been *right* about so much but in an environment that wantonly rendered him liminal. He no longer seemed out of step with an age that wanted to put the theory back into history and which began to include courses in 'historiography' as part of the university curriculum. His judgements about international relations found new amplification in a culture that made 'IR' its own subject. Religion, far from going away, reasserted its resistance to a crass materialism and celebrity culture and insisted on its place in historical understanding.

Come the millennium, I had an opportunity to take stock of these elusive shifts in the privilege of delivering the annual Butterfield Lecture at The Queen's University, Belfast.³ It was a preliminary and in many ways unsatisfactory survey of where Butterfield stood in current estimation. But it had the advantage of placing me in contact with Dr Peter Butterfield, the elder surviving son, who attended and commented on the lecture. We agreed at once that the importance of Butterfield *père* demanded a biography, whatever he himself had thought about the matter. A previous commission having apparently faltered, I offered to attempt the project with the support, but emphatically without the control, of the family. Peter at once accepted those terms, but only when everyone felt comfortable did I receive the private archive: a small collection of material including Butterfield's nocturnal journals and jottings, plus (much later) a box of letters relating to Butterfield's second son, Giles, who died in tragic circumstances. This collection, aided by the vast archive in Cambridge, documents discovered elsewhere and of course the dizzying mass of Butterfield's published and unpublished writing, have formed the basis of this biography.

How to present his story? Chronology is plainly important because the Butterfield of 1950 emerges looking a very different man from the Butterfield of 1930. So one way of addressing his life would be to write a simple chronological account, month by month, year by year, and that would have certain attractions in showing change over time. But this biography is intended as an analysis of the thought as well as the man: what is interesting and important about Butterfield, after all, is the nature of his ideas and what his writing had to say. To include that perspective while trundling along in a narrative of his life would involve glancing repeatedly

³ The lecture was later published as 'Butterfield at the Millennium', *Storia della storiografia*, 38 (2000), 17–32, but its content is superseded in this biography.

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in different directions and following diversions, never giving the ideas the time they need, always darting from one subject to a very different one, even on the same page. A conventional approach has not been followed here, therefore. Instead I have chosen to think more thematically about Butterfield's concerns without in any sense abandoning the ambitions of a biographer. Time has its due attention: our subject is young at the beginning of the book and old at the end of it. But I have allowed myself to indicate time's presence through a series of overlapping transparencies, as it were, each containing a facet of Butterfield's lived experience which none the less gains from its layering over another one. And every time another transparency joins the rest, the lines featured in the whole become more sharply visible.

Three trajectories enjoy particular prominence. History dominated Butterfield's conscious mind, God his spirit, and science, in its broadest sense as a view of how truth may be attained, operated as a constant undertow when he investigated how the world worked. Together, these elements make up a field of force without which Butterfield's mind makes only limited sense. They appear implicitly throughout the book as an intertwined vine, but I have chosen to abstract elements of them in Part II in order to carry out a more serious inspection and evaluation, since they represent the three most important constituents of Butterfield's intellectual life. Readers interested only in the details of his life may pass immediately to Part III if they wish; but those seeking to understand what made Butterfield tick should go with him the extra mile in following his mental patterns and interactions. Not least, it strikes me that a focused treatment of his ideas is what Butterfield would have wanted in a biography rather than an anodyne reference to them *en passant*, and that is why I have proceeded in this way.

Meanwhile, the life, as opposed to the mind, receives the sympathy it deserves, which is not always a kind thought. Protecting Butterfield from lies and misunderstanding is one thing; whitewashing him quite another. This book contains revelations and judgements that will disturb, and may hurt, people who knew him and who loved the persona presented to them. One of Butterfield's social devices took the form of a radiated humility and simplicity. The first was real, the second a rhetorical blind. Behind the blind one finds the complexities inevitable in one so intelligent, combined sometimes with cynicism, deviousness and a certain ruthlessness. He had a genuine interest in and sympathy for others but could also behave harshly and misguidedly in his relations with them. Two or three people got under the guard and reached intimacy with him; but his social and family life suggests a certain loneliness of spirit and frequent periods of withdrawal

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that interacted with the austerities of his thought. If the story told here seems unfamiliar, on the other hand, then that in itself makes the case for biography. Nor does the story diminish its subject. One kind of rescue involves saving people from their friends and Butterfield remains too big a man to profit from sentimental concealment.

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PART I

Private intellectual 1900–1945

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CHAPTER I

Brontë country

I

Begin at the famous parsonage in Haworth, now a museum. Emerge, leaving tourists bent over the glass cases filled with minute manuscripts written by Charlotte and Emily and Anne and Branwell. Left is then west, taking one up the hill to Top Withins, the Brontë Falls, the trysting places. But turn instead east, down the hill to Patrick Brontë's church, a hundred yards adjacent. Skirt the west end of the church and strike out on a path leading out of Haworth to the south. Once clear of the churchyard, the paved path peters into a track and a wide valley opens to the left with its busy road running from Keighley, some distance behind, to Hebden Bridge. Our track remains on the western side of the valley, following its contours but hardly rising, only a flash of heather on the right-hand hilltop promising wildness. The contour-line says 750 feet, hardly mountainous, and lush pasture fills the fields marked out by dry-stone walls. Suddenly, one crests a mild rise in the path and uncovers the south-western horizon as an assault of moor: bleak, etched, dark. And as the valley curls round from the left a scatter below of grey-black houses and roofs catches the eye; a single mill chimney among them. This is Oxenhope, just a mile and a half along the valley from Haworth, and the place where the subject of this biography spent his first nineteen years. It is a particular place in a defined milieu – social as much as physical, spiritual as much as economic – and it would be foolish of a biographer to walk away from it without wondering about its power to mould outlook and personality.

The walk will already have stamped an impression of stone and moor. Behind the sense of blackness in the domestic and ecclesiastical architecture stands the nature of this stone itself, for it is particular – millstone grit – and it dominates as much now as when the Brontë family came to Haworth.

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gritstone prevails here, also. As they toiled with their household effects in horse-drawn carts up the steep cobbled street, the older Brontës might have felt strangely drawn to the old familiar texture, which clothes cottage and hall alike, also church and parsonage at the top of the hill. Indeed all the surrounding villages – Oxenhope, Oakworth, Cullingworth, Stanbury and others – wear the same homespun fabric. Nowhere showy, it is a livery that suits the landscape.¹

Up on the hill, the gritstone has bent into waves and jags under the unremitting wind and rain, producing something awesome but menacing. Branwell Brontë, already dark and about to become self-destructive, complained in a letter written in the parsonage about having ‘nothing to listen to except the wind moaning among the chimneys and older ash trees and nothing to look at except heathery hills walked over when life had all to hope for’.² It was not a place for the hopeless. Higher on the moor even the trees disappeared³ and the young Herbert Butterfield, for these were his hills, would run up there from Oxenhope, his village. In old age, feeling sunny and writing for future publication, he recalled how

in this region the Pennines seem to broaden out into a wide belt of mountain ranges so that any long walk will take you through a miscellany of hills and valleys. From the top of the moor the scenery on a sunny day is majestic, and the view of range after range gave me at times when I was young an impression of the sublime which nothing in my adult experience has quite equalled . . . On a hot day you can lie on your back on the moors and watch the lark rising until it has disappeared, so that no sign of it is left except the flood of pouring song.⁴

On a less sunny occasion, however, the darkness came back to him even in the autumn of his life, when he recalled how visitors to his village and hills would normally come in the summer when the Brontë Country looked so benign. They took away

little idea of the grimness of these hills during the winter. For a great part of the year the hilltops provide one with what appear to be the ruins of a lost world, and

¹ G. Bernard Wood, *Yorkshire Villages* (London, 1971), 21.

² Quoted in Maurice Colbeck, *Yorkshire Moorlands* (London, 1983), 151.

³ ‘The face of the country around Haworth is very hilly and bleak, and there are but few trees to arrest the wintry winds.’ Ian Dewhirst, *Gleanings from Victorian Yorkshire* (Driffield, 1972), 37.

⁴ ‘Autobiographical Writings’, BUTT/7. This extended piece of handwritten material forms the only recollection in Butterfield’s own hand on his early life, apart from interviews given to the Canadian scholar, Professor C. T. McIntire, who used tapes he made of them in his study of Butterfield, *Herbert Butterfield: Historian as Dissenter* (New Haven, 2004). For this reason the present chapter will owe a considerable debt to material in Professor McIntire’s account, though it will become apparent that our views diverge significantly.