

## THE LIFE AND THOUGHT OF HERBERT BUTTERFIELD

Once recalled only for *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931) and *Christianity and History* (1949), Sir Herbert Butterfield's contribution to western culture has undergone an astonishing revaluation over the past twenty years. What has been left out of this reappraisal is the man himself. Yet the force of Butterfield's writings is weakened without some knowledge of the man behind them: his temperament, contexts and personal torments. Previous authors have been unable to supply a rounded portrait for lack of available material, particularly a dearth of sources for the crucial period before the outbreak of war in 1939. Michael Bentley's original, startling biography draws on sources never seen before. They enable him to present a new Butterfield, one deeply troubled by self-doubt, driven by an urgent sexuality and plagued by an unending tension between history, science and God in a mind as hard and cynical as it was loving and charitable.

MICHAEL BENTLEY is Professor of Modern History at the University of St Andrews and well-known internationally to scholars interested in the history of historical writing. His *Companion to Historiography* (1997) and popular short guide, *Modern Historiography: An Introduction* (1999) have become bench-texts for courses in historiography. Recently awarded a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship, Professor Bentley is currently writing a comparative analysis of western historiography since the Enlightenment.

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Michael Bentley  
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The young Cambridge don

# THE LIFE AND THOUGHT OF HERBERT BUTTERFIELD

*History, Science and God*

MICHAEL BENTLEY



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*For Pamela, Peter and Robin*

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## *Acknowledgements*

My overwhelming debt is that owed to the Butterfield family, who invited me to write this biography and who did so much to sustain me during the decade in which Herbert Butterfield has been at the forefront of my mind. His widow, Pamela, had already reached her late nineties when first I knew her; but her recollections – sometimes hazy, sometimes sharply defined – have found their way into many aspects of this Life. We became firm friends and it is a sadness that she is not here to see the final product, though she always knew that the book would happen and was so pleased that Butterfield would be taken seriously. Most of my more immediate dealings with family members inevitably involved Butterfield's two surviving sons, Peter and Robin, and after their death grandson Andrew. No historian could have asked for wiser collaborators. They made available private material not normally released and did all they could to make my path smooth. Perhaps because Peter was himself an historian, he saw at once the dangers of 'authorized' biography and accepted instantly my sole condition for attempting the book: that I should need full authorial freedom. More than that, both he and Robin insisted that they did not wish to see what I had written before publication, proof of a real generosity of mind. When I told them that I had to include some observations about Butterfield's personal life, they did not flinch for a second. I made a point of discussing those aspects with them as I went along but they were models of restraint, despite a natural curiosity about parts of their father's life of which they knew little or nothing. They were looking forward enormously to seeing my work in print and it is tragic that they were taken away so prematurely. We all knew that Pamela would not live to see completion but had no idea that both Peter and Robin would die within months of one another before the book's appearance.

Outside the family I have received crucial support from my own University of St Andrews and from the Leverhulme Trust, which made it possible for me to spend a year in Butterfield's Cambridge college, Peterhouse, in

*Acknowledgements*

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2002–3. Present and former Fellows of Peterhouse gave unselfishly of their time and patience in talking to me about Butterfield in ways that complicated but greatly enhanced my sense of him. Dr Philip Pattenden was especially helpful because of his unrivalled knowledge of the Peterhouse archives, and many other Peterhouse debts are recalled below. Three people in Cambridge held unique and vivid memories gained from personal knowledge of Butterfield over a protracted period. Brian Wormald and I became close during his final years and he offered all the help he could, though his memory had clouded in ways that frustrated him. Maurice Cowling never tolerated clouds of any kind and my friendship with him over some thirty years gave me a view of Butterfield untainted by moderation but deeply perceptive. Owen Chadwick, finally, who succeeded Butterfield in the Regius Chair of Modern History, presented me not only with helpful material in his possession but also with his own sensitive thoughts about someone whom he greatly liked and admired.

Interviews and conversations take one so far but ultimately the historian relies on printed and unprinted sources for information and perspective. Libraries play a formative role, therefore, in a book's preparation and I have been fortunate in that the major public archive relating to Butterfield is housed in the Manuscripts Department of Cambridge University Library – a wonderful environment in which to work – where the staff have proved immensely helpful over the years, none more so than Godfrey Waller. I have likewise received valuable help from the staff of St Andrews University Library, the British Library in London and the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

A book that has taken a decade to evolve, among other commitments, incurs so many incidental debts that one hardly knows where to begin in recording them. Often the obligation is not apparent at the time: a casual word that opens a fresh series of thoughts, a note about a source that one may have overlooked or a contact who might have something helpful to say. Or it may be that someone has given substantial thought to a letter fleshing out a particular reading of Butterfield or granted a substantial interview to discuss particular matters. There is something to be said for acknowledging none of these things in order to avoid the rudeness of omitting someone through inadvertence or failing memory. But I feel more comfortable in writing down the names of at least some people who have proved helpful along the way, with profound apology to anyone whom I have failed to record:

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It goes without saying that none of these people bear any responsibility for what I have written or for the ‘Butterfield’ I have depicted in these pages. If anyone does bear passive responsibility then it must be my wife, Sarah Foot, who has lived with Butterfield during the period of our married life in a *ménage à quatre* with King Æthelstan, the first King of England. Resemblances between Butterfield and Æthelstan have proved elusive but the pleasure and pain of biography can be felt in any period and our conversations about how to make an historical life work, for authors as well as their subjects, have contributed significantly to the shape and texture of this biography. I am deeply grateful to her for fellow travelling, as for so much else.

*St Andrews and Oxford*

MICHAEL BENTLEY

I have taken the opportunity of a paperback edition to correct a few factual and typographical errors noticed by readers, to whom I am very grateful. In particular I wish to record my thanks to Lady Chadwick, Sir John Elliott, Professor John Hudson and, in all things Irish, Dr. Margaret Ó hÓgartaigh.

M.B. May 2012

*Abbreviations*

BUTT/	File prefix for material in the Butterfield MSS housed in the Manuscripts Department of Cambridge University Library
McIntire	C. T. McIntire, <i>Herbert Butterfield: Historian as Dissenter</i> (New Haven, 2004)
Miscellany	Descriptor for a collection of private material, including the ‘Journal’, on loan from the Butterfield family and closed to research
Sewell	Keith C. Sewell, <i>Herbert Butterfield and the Interpretation of History</i> (Basingstoke, 2005)
TLS	The <i>Times Literary Supplement</i>

### *Note on manuscript sources*

Citation of documents in the archive described here as the ‘Butterfield MSS’, available to scholars in the Manuscripts Department of Cambridge University Library, gives rise to no difficulty. The material is fully catalogued and each item is uniquely designated with a ‘BUTT/’ preface followed by a file number.

In the case of the private material contained in the ‘Miscellany’ there is no such clarity. The material is entirely uncatalogued at this stage and takes the form of:

1. A loose-sheet journal, kept discontinuously, which sometimes takes the form of a diary but often simply contains ruminations on subjects that Butterfield found pressing or people he wanted to describe. These entries have been described in this biography as ‘Journal’, followed by a date where one is available. Since the date is normally written at the head of the sheet to distinguish it from others, this does not normally present problems of identification.
2. Two small boxes of jottings, memoranda and recensions of academic prose. One of them is marked ‘Early Writing’ and the other, which had no label, I have called ‘Later Writing’. I have ascribed loose papers arbitrarily to these two boxes where any dubiety existed about their provenance. It should be emphasized that citing this material with any precision is fraught with difficulty because Butterfield did not habitually date his jottings. Where a date exists or can be arrived at through internal evidence, then it has been cited. Still greater difficulty follows from a remarkable unwillingness on Butterfield’s part to give a title or label to his private writings. The best that can be done is to offer the first few words of a document as a way of distinguishing it; and since many of these documents are no more than fragments, citations of them will look strange since they often begin in the middle of a sentence.

*Note on manuscript sources*

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3. An incomplete collection of appointment diaries, a small amount of material relating to his visit to America in 1924–5, letters of condolence following Butterfield's death, and surviving material – virtually none now exists – relating to the death of his son, Giles Butterfield. The provenance of documents from these sources is described here simply as 'Miscellany'.