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THE LIBERAL ANGLICAN
IDEA OF HISTORY

Prince Consort Prize Essay

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BY
DUNCAN FORBES



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FOREWORD

HISTORIANS have often observed and commented on the strength of the tradition of 18th century Rationalism in England in the first half of the 19th century, and it is not surprising that the outlook of the 'philosophic' century still generally prevailed in historical theory and practice. Hallam, James Mill, Grote, Macaulay and Scott belonged to the tradition of the Rationalist historians of the 18th century. The presuppositions of their historical thinking were Rationalist presuppositions. They believed, for example, that men are everywhere and at all times mentally the same, though this did not prevent them from believing also, paradoxically enough, that history reveals the moral and intellectual progress of the race, the 'March of Mind'. The belief in the uniformity of human nature was the great stumbling-block which prevented the Rationalists from reaching a truly historical outlook.

No intellectual epoch is homogeneous, and even during the Triumvirate of Hume, Robertson and Gibbon there had been dissenters, and signs of new attitudes in historical thinking.¹ But these signs of change—primitivism, pietism, medievalism, nationalism—cannot be said to represent a decisive break with the Rationalist tradition, which was able to accommodate the new modes, as the Roman Empire accommodated the barbarian tribes, without fundamentally altering the laws of its intellectual existence. Enthusiasm for the Middle Ages, for instance, could exist in Scott alongside the belief in the essential sameness of human nature in all ages. A considerable amount of scene-shifting had already taken place on the Rationalist stage to accommodate the idea of progress, and the conception of the vital contribution of the Medieval Church to civilization. But in spite of these movements, the grounds of the historical thinking of Voltaire, Turgot and

¹ See T. P. Peardon, *The Transition in English Historical Writing, 1760-1830* (1933).

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Condorcet, of Hume, Gibbon, Hallam, James Mill and Scott, remained unshaken.

Because Rationalist philosophy and history were so closely allied, there had to be a new philosophy, a new *Weltanschauung*, before there could be a new history. In Germany the new historical outlook was established by the end of the 18th century, when, significantly enough, Vico began to be appreciated and Vichian ideas to circulate; but in England it was not until the decade 1820-30, or thereabouts, that the attempted construction by Coleridge of a new system, opposed to everything which the Rationalists held most vital, brought about of necessity a real revolution in historical thinking. The history of both Rationalists and Romantics, of the 18th century and the revolt against it, was fundamentally practical, and therefore fundamentally different, because inseparable from contrasting views of man and nature.

It was because their history was essentially practical, therefore, and because they challenged the Rationalist tradition at all the vital points, that the disciples and followers of Coleridge, the men who looked to Germany and to Vico for inspiration, the 'Germano-Coleridgeans', Thomas Arnold and his friends, played the vital role in England in the development of an attitude to history opposed to that of the Rationalists: one which was in many ways more truly historical, especially in its substitution for the uniformity of human nature of what may be called the Vichian or Romantic philosophy of mind.

The Liberal Anglicans, as this group of people [1] may be called, have hitherto been neglected [2] because the history of history in England has tended to deal only with the 'great historians', the Carlyles, Grotes and Macaulays, and also because it has not taken sufficient account of the practical character of the historical thinking of the age, which is the real clue to interpretation. It has studied the Liberal Anglicans in compartments of 'classical' and 'ecclesiastical' history, and neglected their idea of history as a whole. It has tended to confine itself to formal 'Histories' and Lectures, which, studied in isolation, may give a misleading impression. The Liberal Anglicans, as will be seen, used the term 'ecclesiastical history' for academic purposes, though they firmly believed (and it was a

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belief involving practical consequences of fundamental importance for their whole outlook on Church and State) that there was no such thing in the academic sense of the word: that secular and ecclesiastical history were one and indivisible. Thomas Arnold, too, in his lectures at Oxford, deliberately modified his conception of history to fit the prevailing academic divisions of 'Ancient' and 'Modern', though all the other evidence shows that these divisions had no real meaning for him. The history of history must break through the artificial crust of historical narrative and the cake of academic custom to the living thought beneath.

In the first half of the 19th century, then, one sees the development in England of an attitude to the past more truly historical than that of the Rationalists—at least one sees this development carried so much further, so much more systematically and consciously, as to constitute an intellectual revolution. It is the object of this study to examine the Liberal Anglican share in the unfolding of the new historical outlook, to try to find out how far the Liberal Anglicans may be said to have brought about a revolution in historical thinking in England, to examine the relation between their ideas and their practice, and to estimate how far these ideas may be said to be truly historical from the critical point of view of the modern observer. It is so easy to misinterpret the written word that I have tried to let Thomas Arnold and his friends speak for themselves as much as possible.

My thanks are due to the editor of *The Quarterly Review* for answering my queries as to the authorship of articles in the early numbers, and to Mr A. J. Hunt for showing me MSS of Arnold and Stanley in the possession of Rugby School.

I am grateful to Professor Butterfield for his interest and encouragement.

Also, I would like to thank the Cambridge University Press for helping to prepare the MS for publication; in particular, for carrying out a surgical operation of some delicacy in severing the notes from the references. Essential references in footnotes have been cut to the minimum, and notes (marked in the text by square

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brackets), which support and, it is hoped, enrich the argument have been relegated to the end of the volume.

The work which is now published is substantially the same as a Prize Essay which was awarded a Prince Consort Prize in 1950.

DUNCAN FORBES

CAMBRIDGE
November 1950