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Edited by D. W. Harding, F. R. Leavis, L. C. Knights and W. H. Mellers

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Edited by

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THE INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY¹

THE two books named below are the work of one who is eminent in his profession and it is interesting to consider the change in point of view which comparison reveals. The first part of this essay consists of a synopsis of the respective arguments and the second of a critical commentary.

I. SYNOPSES.

(a) *The Whig Interpretation of History.*

This work was a strong essay in debunking. It set itself to examine the attitude to their subject of a 'school' of historians, to enumerate the defects of their method and to make logical conclusions as to what the historian should do. Mr. Butterfield, as he then was, started by defining what he called the 'whig' approach as 'the tendency . . . to write on the side of the Protestants and the Whigs . . . and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present'. He was to be concerned with 'the relations between historical research and what is known as 'general history' . . . and also concerning the limits of history as a study, and particularly the attempt of the whig writers to gain from it a finality that it cannot give'. In the Introduction he dealt cynically with the 'top-hat and the pontifical manner' which was apt to condemn because it misunderstood and with the artificial division by the whig historian of men of the past into the friends and enemies of progress. He deplored the slowness with which the results of modern research were incorporated into the broad outline of general history and dealt trenchantly with the problem of abridgement and the whiggish temptations to which it is almost bound to give rise.

He commenced his demonstration of the inefficacy of the whig method of approach by a consideration of the 'underlying assumption'. That of the whig was the elucidation of close resemblances between the past and the present, whereas it ought to be that of the differences, presumably since it is on distinction and not resemblance that definition is based. The danger of the whig theory was an over-simplification of the process of history, such as that which is implicit in the statement that 'Martin Luther was the father of modern freedom'. This was shown to be the incorrect answer to a question which it was improper to ask. The historian ought to say,

¹*The Whig Interpretation of History*: H. Butterfield (Bell, 1931).
The Englishman and his History: Professor H. Butterfield (Cambridge University Press, 1944).

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not 'to whom do we owe our freedom?' but 'by what processes did freedom arrive?'. If the right question were asked, the past would be studied for its own sake and from such study would emerge the conclusion that the whole of the past produced the whole of the present, with the rider that the unravelling of the problem of 'responsibility' was an impossible task. The over-riding necessity was for research and yet more research and it had to be borne in mind that such research must tend to be lost in any abridgement. As it was, the abridgers par excellence, the Whigs, had a convenient 'rule-of-thumb' which gave them 'an excuse for leaving things out' but left them with 'a gigantic optical illusion', with a series of abstracts from contexts which had the unfortunate results of denying understanding where it was most needed and of stopping inquiry.

Dealing with the 'Historical Process', Mr. Butterfield again referred to the Reformation and to the part played therein by Luther as a means of illustrating the over-dramatisation which results from the whig fallacy. What ultimately emerged as modern freedom was due, not to the fact that the good Protestants fought for it against the bad Catholics but as the result of the clash of two parties, each contending for absolute dominion over the minds of the other, and the result as we know it would not have been palatable to either. In further amplification of this point, the author spoke of the whig historian as being 'apt to imagine the British Constitution as coming down to us by virtue of the work of long generations of whigs and in spite of the obstructions of a long line of tyrants and Tories', whereas 'in reality it is the result of the continual interplay and perpetual collision between the two'. The metaphor by which the more correct view of the process is illustrated was that of the network in contradistinction to that of the line and it was asserted that history 'is not the study of origins but the analysis of all the mediations by which the past was turned into our present'. In it the only absolute is that of change and the only subject for the historian to study is that of transition: whiggery is self-stultifying in that 'it sends us back to where we began and ratifies our pre-conceptions'.

Behind the whig fallacy lies the desire to arrive at 'judgments of value', at general propositions, whereas the true function of the historian is to 'watch change and complication for their own sake'. It is concerned with the concrete and 'is a form of descriptive writing like travel books'. There is 'no essence that can be got by evaporating human and personal factors'. 'The whole process of historical study'—and this is the crux of the argument of the book—'is a movement towards historical research'. The thesis is illustrated by a consideration of the evolution of toleration which is seen, through the actions of Queen Elizabeth and of Catherine de' Medici 'to have begun as a political necessity', not desired for its own sake as a point of principle, 'and to have become a state ideal'. It was 'a heritage of disaster', of the slow discovery of the impossibility of mutual extermination, which 'provoked a creative act'.

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Lest it should appear that the objectivity of the historian and his activity are uncreative, Mr. Butterfield points out that the art of the historian is that of the mediator between present and past and that for this task he requires creative imagination, insight and sympathy. His impartiality is not indifference and his true fervour is love of the past for the sake of the past. The whig falls into the annoying and foolish error of being wise after the event, of leaving out what is inconvenient on a selective principle which can only produce propaganda (with its unpleasant modern connotation). Not that the historian may not abridge: to do so is precisely his task but he must not change the meaning in the process. Nor is he forbidden to have his personal opinions and preferences—but his bias should be avowed and therefore discountable.

Finally, the historian is not entitled to make moral judgments. He may neither exonerate nor condemn and being primarily a descriptive writer, does not move in the world of moral judgments, 'the most useless and unproductive of all forms of reflection'. History is 'all things to all men . . . an old reprobate . . . a harlot . . . who best serves those who suspect her most'.

(b) *The Englishman and His History*: 1944.

Professor Butterfield again devotes his introduction to the *raison-d'être* of his book. In 1940, he says, we resumed contact with our traditions and were again fortunate in drawing strength from the continuity of our history, a continuity that has been reconciled with change. The whig interpretation which was 'never more vivid than in the great speeches of 1940', has played a role in English politics and progress, 'in the acquisition of our liberties'. The Whigs—though not the whig historians—'evolved an attitude to the historical process, a way of co-operating with the forces of history, an alliance with providence'. 'When we speak of England's contribution to the art of politics and the machinery of government, we do not always remember how much they are the gift of the whigs'.

Dealing more particularly with the whig interpretation he says that it was 'not the invention of a wilful historian but part of the landscape' and that 'they must take heed who court controversy with the remaining diluted remnants' of it. 'The theme of English political history is the story of our liberty', and 'the misguided austerity of youth', abandoning the whig approach, 'opens the door to seven devils worse than the first'. We are, in fact, 'to celebrate' the whig interpretation 'with robust but regulated pride'. It was this interpretation which enabled us to 'make peace with the middle ages' by misconstruing them, a very different action from that of the French who disowned their past in 1789, and, having done so, had to appeal to abstract rights to fill up the resulting vacuum. We had our period of absolutism under the Tudors, during which time our notion of historic rights was lost, but this was a good thing because the centring of all loyalty on the monarch ended the feudal epoch and gave rise to the political significance

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of the middle class and the realization of 'the idea of the state'. During that period the writing of history, released from the vested incompetence of the monkish chroniclers, set itself to the glorification of the Lancastrians and Tudors and the celebration of the Reformation. It glorified King John and made no mention of Magna Carta until the end of the sixteenth century, except in such way as to betray complete ignorance of the contents of the document. It was not until 1572 that historical research was deliberately undertaken and then it was more a 'hunt for precedents with deliberate perversion and misunderstanding' than a disinterested search after truth or a study of the past for the sake of the past. The suspension of the Society of Antiquaries in 1604 at the behest of James I makes it apparent that the lawyers were concerned to find anti-monarchical precedents and by 1620 an anti-monarchical clique, of which Coke, Selden, Eliot, Pym and Wentworth were the leaders, had been formed.

The clique was intended to establish several points of first-rate current interest and importance, the first of which was the question of the antiquity of the House of Commons. The attack of Charles I on the authority and privileges of the House and his opposition to attempts to expand them, led to attempts to prove that it dated from time immemorial and that to attack it was to innovate. A second question was that of the common-law, which became related with the first through the person of Sir Edward Coke who also found himself in opposition to the encroachments of the Royal prerogative. In his search for suitable precedents, Coke was quite unscrupulous and in nothing more so than in his resuscitation and re-interpretation of Magna Carta. This affirmation of feudal law he deliberately misconstrued into an affirmation of common- and therefore anti-monarchical-law in the case of the Five Knights, the outcome of which was the Petition of Right. Thus did the whig interpretation do service in the winning by Parliament of the seventeenth century constitutional struggle, by overlooking the Tudors and harking back to the letter, if not the spirit, of the Middle Ages.

Ever since, the whig interpretation has been subjected to the revision of the research worker, but 'in every Englishman there is hidden something of the whig that seems to tug at the heart-strings. The Restoration of 1660 recovered the continuity of English History after the gash of the civil war and the Revolution of 1688 was the triumph of the whigs in that 'they made their conception of Magna Carta come true'. Their desire to return to the perfection of a mythical past had to be changed in order to incorporate the idea of Progress, but with this change the whig interpretation has survived to fill its function in the days of 1940, when it was discovered 'to what a degree the British Empire had become an organization for the purpose of liberty'.

The whig tradition has asserted itself in the English gift for compromise, which is 'an acquired habit', 'the result of ripe experience', 'the fruit of deliberate reflection on the past'. Hence the *laissez-faire* policy followed in Canada in the nineteenth century,

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the moderation of the Exclusion Bill controversy, the emergence of the 'trimmers' and the unviolent course of the Revolution of 1688. Hence the deliberate policy of hastening slowly, the distrust of sweeping theories, the ability to co-operate with Providence. Hence the reward in the non-generation of irreconcilable hatreds within the state and the favourable comparison with the achievements of the continental states with their antithesis between Tradition and Reason or their Marxist fatalism on the subject of revolution. The prime political result of the French Revolution was 'the organization of the state for the sole purpose of waging war and the dictatorship based on plebiscite'. Mazzini's idealism paved the way for the Fascist victory in Italy. On the other hand the English whigs reconciled the past with the present and thereby obviated resort to violence and the sacrifice of present generations for remote and hypothetical utopias.

They were similarly virtuous in not breaking with the Christian traditions as, for instance, did the French in the Age of Reason when 'the method of the scientific revolution was applied to the non-material sciences'. Secularization on the continent meant the transference of faith to the political field, which led to over-optimism as to the possibilities of political action and cut at the root of the principle of compromise. Christianity has prevented Englishmen from making gods out of worldly things, from considering men as means to an end rather than as an end in themselves. They have remained individualists because individualism is rooted in the tradition and sentiment of England and the economic expression of it, capitalism, with all its disadvantages, 'saved us from something worse. Thus have the whigs served England and for it must they be praised. And what we praise we should imitate.

II. ANALYSIS.

From the above abridgements—abridgements which have not changed the meaning—it is obvious that Professor Butterfield has changed his mind about the interpretation of history. He has not merely written a new book and in it presented a new point of view: he has deliberately and scornfully rejected his earlier thesis, going so far as to say 'they must tread warily who court controversy with the remaining diluted remnants of the whig interpretation of history'. He stigmatizes such efforts as products of 'the misguided austerity of youth', condemns them as 'opening the door to seven devils worse than the first' and then turns to celebrate what he formerly condemned as unhistorical and of dubious honesty 'with robust but regulated pride'. No change could have been more complete and it deserves close study.

The Whig Interpretation of History was the work of an idealist who was concerned with a disinterested search after truth. Having read carefully the works of earlier generations of historians, he set himself to discover what preconceptions and prejudices underlay their pronouncements and by what types of error they were attended. It is not unlikely that he approached the subject with a

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consciousness of the 'superior' objectivity of the scientist, who approaches his problems with a completely unbiassed mind and is led to his impersonal conclusions only after a process of weighing and measuring. This attempt to introduce into the humanities the detachment of the laboratory was admirable in its corrective intent. The idea that it is possible for anyone with a knowledge of the past, scanty or even profound, to pontificate on historical events and to find in such 'study' a justification for whatever prejudice happens to be held is obviously dangerous. History and politics have a habit of merging and the writing of history around a political conception carries with it all the danger of propaganda in its modern derogatory sense. The fact that the Bible has lent itself to progressive reinterpretation has not been an unmixed blessing for the Christian religion and the work of the Marxists and Fascists on the similar Book of History has caused bloodshed. In combating tendencies of this sort, Mr. Butterfield performed a worthy service: he was the student *par excellence* and if his academicism might seem to be sterile, at least it was not dangerous.

The danger of the imputation of sterility as the result of cultivating his new inhibitions led him to stress virtues in the subject other than those of final judgments on the past and 'lessons of the past' to be applied to the future. If we may not see in the past a slow but steady convergence towards the perfection of the present through the victorious struggles of the whites against the blacks, if we may not use current conceptions as a yardstick for measuring the principles and actions of the past, at least we shall have to use our imagination in a creative fashion and we shall, further, appreciate the very difficulties in the process of evolutionary progress. We shall become more humble in the estimate of our achievement and still learn the valuable lesson that utopias are not just around the corner. Mr. Butterfield was unafraid to face the logical but seemingly discouraging conclusion that the art of the historian accordingly dwindles to that of pure narration and that it must ever be preoccupied with more and more concrete detail. 'All historical study is a progress towards historical research' was his uncompromising verdict. In truth, all simplification of historical process is false and Mr. Butterfield's metaphor of the network is *ipso facto* superior to that of the line. The chief example taken, that of Luther as the Father of Modern Freedom, was unexceptionable. Toleration emerged as the result of a clash between contending claims for omniscience and was a result desired in the first place by neither party. Mr. Butterfield saw history as an inchoate patternless affair, an endless improvisation.

His admiration for the scientist was not confined to the technique of the laboratory: it paid court also to the type of explanation, abstract and unemotional, which the scientist produces. The historical process was something self-existent, above the impulses and aspirations of men and frequently at cross-purposes with them, the resultant, as it were, of a vast and complicated polygon of forces. In this complex, the importance of the individual was minimized,

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so much, perhaps, that history tended to become bowdlerised, as though it were indeed impossible to evaporate the human element and leave some historical quintessence behind. This was a fallacy the author himself condemned as whiggish in another context. For the Luthers, the Calvins, the Napoleons of this world he substituted 'conjunctions', 'meditations' and 'juxtapositions', as though to get away from humanity were to approach nearer to truth. The consequent difficulty of accounting for the process of events that were not controlled by men he met by the postulation of a 'providence', vague and undefined except that it was not apparently theistic in character. It would not be relevant here to discuss the rival merits of the biographical as opposed to more abstract philosophies of history: sufficient to note that the 'explanation', which according to Basil Willey in *The Seventeenth Century Background* is 'a statement which satisfies the demands of a particular time or place', was sufficiently unsatisfying to merit further treatment in a later work.

Several remarks indicate that the author was dissatisfied with his own conclusions. After being uncompromising on the subject of abridgement which he regarded as essentially falsifying he admitted that it was indeed the task of the historian and that it might be possible to perform the task without changing the meaning in the process. The results of historical research might be incorporated in the general text-books and ultimately cause a revision of the general theme of written history. Even the bias of the historian might be mentioned, provided only that it was explicit and avowed. But the self-denying ordinance was reasonably and, it is suggested, properly complete. The last words, that history 'is all things to all men . . . an old reprobate . . . a harlot' 'who best serves those who suspect her most' were admirably chosen.

The greater part of the second book is concerned with a piece of descriptive writing on the subject of the evolution of the whig attitude to politics and history and in so far as this is adequately done, no adverse comment is justifiable. The story of the mediations by which the Tudor attitude to history became that of a school which even to-day has a following, fulfils precisely the function of the historian as defined in the earlier book and there is not the ground for complaint that in the process of the abridgement the meaning has been changed. At the same time it is clear as to where the author's sympathies lie and those sympathies have over-ridden impartiality in several places . . . It is one thing to demonstrate in what ways Sir Edward Coke was unscrupulous in his 'discovery' of anti-monarchical precedents: it is another to praise his actions, in spite of their dishonesty by the standards of this or of any other century, because the results remain palatable to a country whose political system is a constitutional monarchy. It is one thing to point out the contrasting attitudes to tradition of England and France as evidenced by their respective revolutions in 1688 and 1789 and another to ascribe the whole of their subsequent developments, the one praiseworthy, the other not, to this difference in attitude. To

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select a theme of history, as for instance the 'theme of English political history' as 'the story of our liberty', to find evidence in support of it even if it involves explaining away the Tudor despotism as an indispensable if involuntary contribution towards it, is to commit those very whig errors of viewing the past with the eyes of the present, and of using a tendentious principle of selection in the process of abridgement, against which the author so powerfully inveighed in 1931.

It is one thing to plead that each generation must rewrite history in its own idiom—as Jowett holds that each generation must re-translate its Plato. It is another to produce a new version of the history at each rewriting, particularly if it is framed with reference to the contemporary scene. Had England fallen to Germany in 1940 our history books would have received drastic revision and King John might once again have come into favour. More likely would have been the representation of our parliamentary history as a regrettable limitation of the power of the state, making for inefficiency, corruption and decay. The new version would have been resented, as it would equally be if a conversion to communism produced a wholesale revaluation of the past in terms of the Party Line. What the Whigs seek to do is similar in degree if not in kind, whereas the aim of the historian should be to produce such a version as will stand as long as new facts do not come to be known. Such work could only come from men conscious, as far as possible, of their prejudices and determined to exclude them. The alternative can only be anachronistic, no whit more sensible than an expression of regret that Harold the Saxon did not use a Bren gun at the Battle of Hastings. It is in the exercise of such an abstinence that the virtue of history as a discipline exists. The fact that it is impossible of achievement should constitute no bar to the making of the effort.

Over-simplification is not the worst fault of *The Englishman and his History*. Even if it were justifiable to falsify by sentimentalization the course of events in the past, it is worse than unhistorical to plead for a continuance of the 'methods' of the 'whigs' in the future. Those methods, a determination to hasten slowly, to postpone change until such time as it is generally palatable are those of an existing political party. When they are preached as being those which the verdict of history favours, the historian has degenerated into the political propagandist: the conflict of the Whites with Blacks has changed into that of the Blues with the Reds. Professor Butterfield only thinly disguises his hostility to the doctrine of another political party. Capitalism with its admitted evils is the working in the economic sphere of that principle of individualism so cherished by the Englishman—but 'it probably saved us from something very much worse'.

'The top hat and the pontifical manner' is further evident in the comparisons made between our achievements and those of France. The question is asked whether, with all their revolutionary fervour and worship of reason the continental states have advanced

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as far as we ourselves have. When it is recalled that the inspiration of the book was the story of 1940 and that the contrast between our position and that, in particular, of France, was nationally gratifying, the lapse into self-congratulation is seen to be regrettable. There is no mention of geographically favourable factors. Nor is there any admission of the magnitude of the achievement of Soviet Russia in the short space of twenty-five years, an achievement in which respect for tradition was non-existent. And to couple individualism, particularly in the economic sense, with conscious adherence to the Christian tradition leaves a great deal unsaid.

For just as Sir Edward Coke selected from the legal history of the past such precedents as advanced the claims of the House of Commons, just as the political hotheads of 1789 selected from the works of the *philosophes* such doctrines as justified their lust after power, so is it feasible that only such parts of the Christian ethic as did not explicitly condemn child-labour in factories or the passage of laws to keep up the price of bread, were 'adopted' by the politicians, whig or otherwise, of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The assumption that men are dominated by ideas rather than that ideas are dominated and utilized by men for the furtherance of their own interests is at least questionable. Professor Butterfield has not advanced his interpretation of the verdict of history as one of the many possible. He has, on the contrary, written it himself without avowal of bias and with a refusal to mention such facts as are inconvenient to his theory. The transition from the eighteenth-century squirearchy to the industrial feudalism of the nineteenth was by no means smooth, accompanied as it was by unparalleled social dislocation, nor was the transference of political power from the landed aristocracy to the middle-class accomplished by anything less than the threat of civil war. To give way at the point of the pistol may be worldly wise but is hardly virtuous and in any case it is arguable that civil war was averted more by the Methodist Revival, with its doctrine of acceptance of the earthly lot, than by any willingness to compromise by either Whigs or Tories. The Manchester Massacre, the Chartist Movement, the anti-trade-union legislation, the General Strike are all events which must be taken into account before nationally gratifying generalizations are framed. The catastrophic nature of the French Revolution can be as much over-stressed as the continuity of the revolution of 1688: *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* is by no means a British monopoly. To make a conscious virtue of the indifference which allowed Canada to develop her constitutional independence in the nineteenth century is to claim an unwarranted highmindedness on the part of contemporary statesmen. 'These colonies are a mill-stone round our necks' and if there was some reflection on the moral of the revolt of the American Colonies, there was also exploitation of the fact that in a free-trade world in which England had a mercantile and industrial lead, colonies were largely superfluous. As for the realization in 1940 that the British Empire was an organization for the pursuit of liberty, as a famous