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Herbert Butterfield

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MAN ON HIS PAST

THE WILES LECTURES  
GIVEN AT THE QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST 1954

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THE STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF  
HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP

BY

HERBERT BUTTERFIELD

*Emeritus Professor of Modern History  
in the University of Cambridge*

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AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*To*

JANET D. BOYD

*Founder of the*

*Wiles Trust*

*Lectures*

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Herbert Butterfield

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## FOREWORD

In 1953 the Queen's University of Belfast was given a benefaction to be known as the Wiles Trust. Its purpose is to promote the study of the history of civilisation and to encourage the extension of historical thinking into the realm of general ideas.

The purpose of the Trust is to be fulfilled by inviting an historian each year to deliver in Belfast a series of lectures in which he relates his researches to the history of civilisation or reflects upon the wider implications of more detailed historical studies. The first lectures of the series were delivered in November 1954 by H. Butterfield, Professor of Modern History in the University of Cambridge.

E. A. ASHBY

*The Vice-Chancellor of  
The Queen's University,  
Belfast*

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Herbert Butterfield

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page xi</i>
<b>I The History of Historiography</b>	
1. Its rise and development	1
2. Its subject-matter and its scope	14
3. Its utility for the student of history	22
4. Its more general significance	26
<b>II The Rise of the German Historical School</b>	
1. Beginnings	32
2. The University of Göttingen	39
3. The problem of Universal History	44
4. The development of criticism	51
<b>III Lord Acton and the Nineteenth-Century Historical Movement</b>	
1. Lord Acton and the history of historiography	62
2. Criticism and the opening of the archives	75
3. Acton and Ranke	86
4. History at the beginning of the twentieth century	96
<b>IV Ranke and the Conception of 'General History'</b>	
1. The underlying ideas	100
2. The range of General History	108
3. 'The primacy of foreign policy'	116
4. The Renaissance and the division into periods	128
5. The idea of Providence	136
<b>V The Reconstruction of an Historical Episode: The history of the enquiry into the origins of the Seven Years War</b>	
1. The Pre-Copernican stage	143
2. The opening of the archives	151
3. The fallacies of historians	158
4. The Russian papers	162
5. The vicissitudes of an historical theme	169

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09567-9 - Man on his Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship

Herbert Butterfield

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

VI	Lord Acton and the Massacre of St Bartholomew	
	1. The Black Legend and its first overthrow	<i>page</i> 171
	2. Acton and the case for premeditation	181
	3. The crucial controversies	186
	4. Loose ends	195
	<i>Appendices</i>	203
I	La Popelinière's <i>Histoire des Histoires</i>	205
II	Acton and Italian scholarship	207
III	Acton and Döllinger	209
IV	Acton's earliest account of the historical movement	210
V	Acton and the Middle Ages	212
VI	Acton and Johann von Müller	215
VII	Acton on Ranke	
	1. Roman Diary, 26 June 1857	219
	2. Another early view	219
	3. Draft written before 1864	220
	4. Review of 1864	224
	5. <i>The Chronicle</i> , 20 July 1867	225
	<i>Index</i>	233

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09567-9 - Man on his Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship

Herbert Butterfield

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE

The Wiles Trust, while calling for work that shall be based upon serious historical enquiry, asks that the results of such enquiry shall be extended into regions of wider survey and more general reflection. It happens, however, that these are regions into which I have already made more excursions than I ever intended to make—partly in lectures delivered under other Foundations, and partly in courses which were provoked by specific needs in my own University. I had only one thing left which seemed capable of being turned to the purposes of the new Foundation, while allowing a change in the angle of approach or an opportunity for a fresh kind of commentary: and that was the interest which I had long had in the history of historiography, and the idea which for some time I had been entertaining of an attempt to write about the utility of this subject, to say something of its scope and method, and to discuss its place in historical scholarship.

It may serve a useful purpose if I make it clear in the first place that in the present lectures I am not pretending or proposing to ‘set up’ as an historian of historiography. I should be disqualified, I think, for the task which I am particularly trying to perform if I were not interested (and, indeed, mainly interested) in other aspects of historical scholarship. The point must be stressed that it is the general historian who, almost by definition, has the prerogative—because he is under the inescapable necessity—of relating the parts of historical study to the whole; just as it is he who, having regard to the larger lines of the story, inevitably decides in the long run what is the significant episode, the strategic factor, the pivotal event. We may say that we will lock ourselves in some local topic, or burrow in a special field, or isolate a single aspect of history; but the mere act of ‘digging ourselves in’ is not the thing which qualifies us to establish even our own subject in its external relations and its wider significance. Because the role of the



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Herbert Butterfield

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## *Preface*

general historian is so important, and because the decisions that we make in our capacity as general historians are liable to be the most far-reaching of all—because, also, we cannot even escape having a general history which in a certain sense must preside over the works of multiple specialists and co-ordinate them with one another—it would be a serious matter either to neglect the training or to overlook the function of the general historian. Men, like Acton, who valued this function, and who did not merely ‘compile’ general history but used the occasion to carry historical thinking to a higher power, are the ones who seem to have favoured and promoted also the history of historiography.

My attention was drawn to the subject when I was invited to lecture in certain German universities in 1938, and was told that readers of my *Whig Interpretation of History* were asking about the history of the Whig interpretation—a point into which it had never occurred to me to enquire. The result of my attempt to meet the demand appeared in the first half of my book on *The Englishman and his History*; but the work published in the interval (by Professor Douglas in particular) as well as the work published since, and work still to be published, induces me to omit from the present lectures the very things which drew my attention to the history of historiography in the first place. I omit the seventeenth century with regret because it illustrates so well the intimacy of the connection between historical interpretation and constitutional controversy. Also this chapter of the story reminds us of important developments which took place in historical scholarship long before the rise of the modern German school of history.

The death which the outmoded historian has to suffer is more complete and pitiful than ordinary death. A man who has written a single lyric may outlast the centuries, living on in perpetual youth; but the author of a hundredweight of heavy historical tomes has them piled upon his grave, to hold him securely down. A mere literary dressing would seem to be insufficient to defend such an author from the ravages of time.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09567-9 - Man on his Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship

Herbert Butterfield

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## *Preface*

The historian who survives seems to be the one who in some way or other has managed to break through into the realm of enduring ideas or gives hints of a deeper tide in the affairs of men. If those whom the general reader has chosen for survival are considered by the professional scholar to have been in some sense unworthy of so great an honour, it does not appear that either the verdict of the profession or the history of historiography is going to alter that august decree. Like Acton, we can only take refuge in the thesis that ‘one great man may be worth several immaculate historians’.

It is not my purpose in the present lectures to resurrect those historians who have gone out of date—historians who may have their reward in heaven, but who on earth must stand fairly high in the hierarchy of the unread and unloved. I could bear to see a history of historiography somewhat like that which the original promoters of the subject seemed to envisage—one which could be narrated almost without the use of proper nouns. It is not at all my object, now, to insist that we should make an attempt to bring our useless predecessors back to life; I wish rather to see whether some advantage cannot be achieved—some fertile interaction produced, perhaps—by a more disrespectful treatment of their remains. Their books are to be handled rather in the way that the economic historian might handle the stale records of a defunct business house: so that we may learn whether there is not a history to be wrung out of them totally unlike anything that the writers of them ever had in mind.

The primary purpose of the following lectures, then, is to describe and illustrate the rise, the scope, the methods and the objectives of the history of historiography, treating this not as an account of a branch of literature but as, so to speak, a subsection in the history of science. The illustrative topics have been chosen in the hope that they will combine to give a general impression of the modern historical movement from the middle of the eighteenth century to the time of Lord Acton; and they have been taken at points at which it seemed

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Herbert Butterfield

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## *Preface*

possible perhaps to throw new light on the general course of development in that period. Their main intention, however, is to provide examples of the varied ways in which the history of historiography may be approached by those who wish to carry its study into regions of fresh discovery. Since Niebuhr and Ranke, for example, have long been taken as representing the great turning-point in the development of modern historical study, it seemed useful to show the importance of the type of enquiry which addresses itself to the period immediately preceding a great transition—useful in this case to delve into the prehistory of what we might call our ‘Scientific Revolution’. And, as one of the antecedent movements appeared to have suffered neglect, but seemed at the same time to carry a story which was worth telling, this introductory phase in the rise of the German historical school has been chosen to form the subject of the second lecture. In regard to the main course of the nineteenth-century historical movement, Lord Acton has some significance for Englishmen, since this movement was the chief subject of his work as an historian of historiography; but also he could discuss it as a contemporary observer; he had developed along with it; and he stood as its most self-conscious representative in this country. His views and analyses have been illustrated largely from manuscript sources in the Cambridge University Library; and some of these are printed in appendices.

In an attempt to illustrate the variety of the approaches to which the history of historiography is susceptible, it seemed appropriate to draw attention to the rise of some of the ideas which lie behind our treatment of what we call general history, particularly modern European history. This is a kind of history which easily tends to assume a conventional shape, as writers fall into routine; and when at last somebody raises uncomfortable issues in this field, we sometimes think that the problems are novel and we fail to note that men have faced them before—faced them so directly that they could not escape being fully conscious of them. Sometimes we neglect

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Herbert Butterfield

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## *Preface*

to discover the considerations upon which our predecessors made their decisions on the larger points of policy when they were setting the course for the future—when they were giving general history the kind of texture that is familiar to us, and placing the history of Europe in a framework which, since their time, may have remained too rigidly fixed. The world in general, when it discusses the basic ideas which are here in question, seems to find it useful to examine them as they are embodied in the work and views of Ranke; and possibly it is true that Ranke had the principal share in the development of the nineteenth-century tradition. There would be grounds for saying, however, that some of the main ideas and decisions go back behind Ranke: and this may be true even to a greater degree than is suggested below.

In order to provide samples of the way in which the history of historiography may apply itself to specific themes, I have added by kind permission of the Editor of the *Cambridge Historical Journal*, an article on 'Lord Acton and the Massacre of St Bartholomew' which appeared in that Journal in 1952; also, by kind permission of the Court of Glasgow University, my David Murray Lecture of 1951 on *The Reconstruction of an Historical Episode: The History of the Enquiry into the Origins of the Seven Years War*.

If it is primarily an examination of the history of historiography as a branch of learning, the following work is also intended to give glimpses of the modern transformation of historical scholarship and to throw new light on the famous German school. All its chapters save one are at the same time directly relevant to the labours of any student who desires to make a critical study of Lord Acton. Over and above this, I have attempted to use all the opportunities which the subject affords to discuss an issue which it is possible that we gravely neglect. I have tried to make the Wiles Lectures an essay on the whole problem of 'general history'—a problem always so important to Acton, and to Ranke, as well as to some of their predecessors.

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978-0-521-09567-9 - Man on his Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship

Herbert Butterfield

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## *Preface*

I have never felt comfortable when research students have worked on vague and indefinite subjects; and I seem to be the last person in the world to go on believing that a precise piece of straight diplomatic history is a happy training even for the man who intends to move over into 'the history of thought'. In these days, however, when the research-student is so often allowed to wander in marshy fields of intellectual and social history, I am not clear that the history of historiography (though it has its dangers) does not lend itself to what I should call precision-work more adequately than some of the subjects which are often actually chosen for research. The real purpose of these lectures, however, is to suggest that the history of historiography has utility for students of history in general, and for those who are interested in reflecting about the past, and for those who wish to dig to the roots of historical scholarship.

Finally, I must express my deep gratitude to Mrs Boyd, whose generosity and great love of history produced the Wiles Foundation; to Dr Ashby, the Vice-Chancellor of the Queen's University, who unites the arts of management with such enviable human qualities; and to Professor Michael Roberts, whose advice and help were invaluable to me in Belfast. By the terms of the Trust a number of history teachers and research students from other universities were invited to Belfast during the delivery of the lectures and took part in the subsequent discussions. They comprised Professor Burn of Newcastle, Professor Douglas of Bristol, Professor Erdmann of Kiel, Professor Goodwin of Manchester, Professor Moody of Trinity College, Dublin, Professor Sayles of Aberdeen, Professor Williams of University College, Dublin, Miss McKisack and Mr W. H. Walsh of Oxford, Mr I. G. Jones and Mr E. Jones of the University College of Swansea, Miss Ben-Israel and Mr Nurser of Cambridge, and Mr Witcombe of Manchester. The opportunity for such discussions is a distinctive feature of the Wiles Trust Lectures; and to nobody could they possibly be so valuable as to the lecturer himself.

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978-0-521-09567-9 - Man on his Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship

Herbert Butterfield

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## *Preface*

For the attendance and collaboration of these historians and students a special word of thanks is due; and along with them must be mentioned the members of the Department of History, as well as some from the Departments of Philosophy, Classics, etc., in the Queen's University, Belfast, who played an important part in the discussions.

H. B.

CAMBRIDGE

*April 1955*