§1

Lord Houghton and his Circle

By The Marquess of Crewe

Richard Monckton Milnes was born in the year 1809, distinguished by the entry into this troublesome world of the more famous figures of Gladstone, Tennyson, and Lincoln. He received his first name from a custom which had obtained in his family for several generations of using it alternately with Robert for the eldest son. The second name was that of his mother's family, she being the daughter of the fourth Viscount Galway. The family was prosperous, owning landed properties in Yorkshire and elsewhere, some by direct descent, others through fortunate marriages; and they also enjoyed wealth made in more than one business. So that when Richard Milnes was born, his father, Robert Milnes, might have seemed one of the spoilt children of fortune. He had left Cambridge with a reputation for extraordinary ability, as is clear from the allusions to him in the letters of his younger contemporary, Lord Byron, and from other sources; and, having succeeded his father just as he came of age, he entered Parliament a year later. In 1807 he created a sensation of a moment by his speech in defence of the Portland administration, in its struggles with the disastrous events of that spring in the theatre of war. Two years later, Spencer Perceval offered him a seat in the Cabinet, either as Chancellor of the Exchequer or as Secretary at War. Neither of these offices was then of quite the first rank, but the compliment to a man of twenty-five was no slight one. His wife noted in

her journal that he immediately said: 'Oh, no, I will not accept either; with my temperament, I should be dead in a year'. This prompt refusal remained a puzzle to everybody. Robert Milnes was a close follower of Canning, and in general sympathy with the Government. He was a scholar, and a man of very wide reading, besides enjoying cheerful society and being a brilliant horseman and shot, so that neither diffidence nor health could have been the real obstacle, and it can only be surmised that he was deterred by the restrictions of office, and by the dread of having to give up country life for the greater part of the year. When he died, just fifty years later, Lord Palmerston wrote to remind his son that it was Robert Milnes's refusal of office which had first opened the political gateway to himself in the post of Secretary at War.

Accordingly, Richard Milnes grew up as the son of a country gentleman, not of a Minister, though his father remained in Parliament for a number of years. An illness prevented his being educated at Harrow, and he spent his time with a tutor, mainly in the country, but with a little travel to Scotland and elsewhere, until he went to Cambridge in 1827. It is never easy to estimate the importance of intellectual groups as they flourish at different periods, and the Cambridge set of that day grew up into the mid-Victorians, whose aims and achievements it is now the fashion to belittle; but, to us of the generation who succeeded them, it certainly seems that a University at which Whewell and Thirlwall were College tutors, and where Charles Buller, John Sterling, R. C. Trench, Julius Hare, Cavendish (the seventh Duke of Devonshire), and Stafford O'Brien were undergraduates, shortly followed by the three Tennyson brothers, Thackeray, Ralph Bernal Osborne, G. S. Venables, the Lushington brothers, James Spedding, Arthur Hallam,

and W. H. Thompson, presents such a constellation of names as it would be difficult to equal. Most of these were at Trinity, and it would be possible to mention a good many others who made their mark in one direction or another. I have heard my father say that Arthur Hallam stood easily first of them all. With one or two exceptions, all those of whom he, in later life, delighted to speak as his 'playfellows' are to be found in this list. He thoroughly enjoyed Cambridge, and he worked hard, though on too wide a field to admit of distinction in a tripos, even if his life-long aversion from mathematics had not tended to bar that particular door. But he won some prizes, took part in the theatricals which were then becoming popular, spoke at the Union (though expressing doubts whether this might not be in reality damaging to the correct parliamentary manner), and entertained his friends largely. He headed, with Arthur Hallam and that most brilliant of failures, Thomas Sunderland, the famous expedition to the Oxford Union, in which Cambridge argued the claims of Shelley against Oxford's championship of Byron. In his letter to his mother, describing the Oxford hosts, of whom Manning was one, he said: 'The man that *took* me most was the youngest Gladstone of Liverpool, I am sure a very superior person'. The last phrase was used, one may be certain, without the ironical suggestion that later attached to it at Oxford.

Richard Milnes was no athlete, and in those days organised games and sports only attracted real devotees; but his nerve was good, and he distinguished himself by the then uncommon feat of a balloon ascent, from which he landed miles off at Castle Ashby. His *exeat* was couched in the form 'Ascendat R. Milnes'.

It is clear from the correspondence of that period that he had expected to pass straight from the University into Parliament. But for the time being these hopes were

dashed to the ground by a crisis in the family affairs. His father, though at one time he spent lavishly, was too shrewd to get into difficulties, but his uncle, Rodes Milnes, was of another type. Better endowed than most younger sons, and enjoying a post which was little more than a sinecure, he was an inveterate gambler, and a supporter of the famous racing-stable of John Scott. After a long course of varying successes and failures, the latter, as usually happens, began to predominate, and brought about a financial crash. The elder Mrs Milnes, who had been a considerable heiress, was still alive, and she and Robert Milnes came to the rescue. He, for his part, to sustain the honour of the family, paid large sums for which he was in no way responsible. Everything was shut up for a time, and the family went to live abroad before 1830, so that the expectation which Richard Milnes had entertained of standing for Pontefract in that year could not be gratified, though possibly less for financial reasons than from his father's doubts at the moment of his aptitude for political life.

For some years, therefore, he spent a great part of his time abroad. His family lived chiefly at Milan and Venice. But he also was in London from time to time, and visited Ireland and Scotland. In 1832 he made a five months' tour in Greece, which in those days meant roughing it considerably, and the eventual outcome was his first volume of poetry, the *Memorials of a Tour in Greece*, published in 1834.

In 1835 his family resumed life in England, their affairs being tolerably re-established, though on a somewhat reduced scale. And two years later Richard Milnes entered the House of Commons for Pontefract. He sat as a Conservative, though in some ways but loosely attached to the party. Through the earlier years of the century his father had been in favour of Emancipation, and of a

moderate measure of Reform giving representation to the larger towns. But his real devotion was to the landed interest, and conceiving this to be imperilled by the measure of 1832, he described himself as belonging to the Tory party; and his son, who had always disliked Parliamentary Reform, did the same. The conservatism of each was of a quite different type. The father, though of an age when his powers might have been at their fullest maturity, was in fact a belated survival of the eighteenth century. He had sat in the House of Commons with Pitt and with Fox, and he had seen the statesmen but a decade older than himself, such as Canning, Castlereagh, and Liverpool, rise to eminence and pass away one by one. He and his son were united by real affection, and by admiration for each other's gifts, but two more incompatible people could scarcely have been found, and though there was never any breach between them, there was very little genuine understanding.

The son, as it happened, through the circumstances of his life, had never had to undergo any course of discipline. He had not been at a public school, University life was in the main untrammelled, and during the years spent abroad, he had been very much his own master. And criticism, however pointed, does not take the place of discipline. It says much for the inherent sweetness of Richard Milnes's nature that he did not resent the cynical attitude sometimes taken by his father, but his entry into London life would have been easier, and he might have avoided some mistakes if he had had to spend, so to speak, more hours on the drill ground and fewer in the orderly room.

This paper is not a biography, and I cannot attempt to sketch, except in the briefest outline, my father's political career up to the 'seventies. He was in the main a follower of Sir Robert Peel, and supported his fiscal policy in 1846.

But here, for the first time in public, he found himself in friendly opposition to his father, who emerged from his retirement in order to head in Yorkshire the Protectionist opposition to Peel. Before this crisis my father had carried on a political flirtation with 'Young England', though he was never actually a member of that remarkable forerunner of the Fourth Party of later days. After the fall of Sir Robert Peel, he did not join the brilliant little band of Peelites, but declared himself a Liberal and left the Carlton Club, though remaining a man of the Centre rather than of the Left. Later he regarded himself as a follower of Lord Palmerston rather than of any other leader, though I remember hearing him say that the statesman with whom he found himself in the fullest sympathy was Lord Aberdeen. Of the two great figures who dominated in Parliament the later years of his life I will say a word in a moment, but it is necessary to mention the two fields in which he principally exercised himself—that of foreign politics, and that of penal reform at home. On the first ground he was extremely well equipped by his knowledge of foreign countries, and by the ease with which he penetrated into political circles abroad. He had close personal friends in France, especially Tocqueville, Guizot, and Montalembert; his principal tie with Germany was his close friendship with the family of Baron von Bunsen; curiously enough, with all his knowledge of Italy, he had fewer friends and correspondents in the Italian political world. He wrote frequently, in the monthly *Reviews* and elsewhere, on foreign affairs, and in 1849 he published, in the form of an open letter to Lord Lansdowne, a remarkable pamphlet on *The Events of* 1848. This created some sensation, which was not diminished by the appearance, in the *Morning Chronicle*, of an article not merely assailing the opinions expressed in the pamphlet, but filled with coarse

personal abuse of the writer. This was the work of George Smythe, one of the heroes of 'Young England', and the original of Coningsby. He had been Peel's Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs in 1845, and was the person my father most disliked, on various grounds. He therefore—rather surprisingly in view of the date—challenged George Smythe to a duel. The affair was patched up, though the parties never spoke again; and my father always said that his second and great friend, the brilliant writer Eliot Warburton, could not quite conceal his disappointment at the tame ending of the business—as might have been expected from a loyal son of Co. Galway. Two years later George Smythe had to fight a duel over an election squabble, the last, I believe, that was fought in England. And, almost at the same time, Eliot Warburton met a heroic death on the deck of the burning ship *Amazon*.

Robert Milnes died in 1858. He had, some years before, refused a peerage offered him through Lord Palmerston, and the honour was conferred on his son in 1863. The latter took kindly to the atmosphere of the House of Lords, and intervened in the debates from time to time. He spoke out stoutly on the Federal side in the American Civil War, partly from holding a real conviction on the rights of the dispute, and partly from being more and more closely attracted to those elements in English public life which were conspicuous in sympathy for the Northern cause. But both before and after he went to the House of Lords, his interest in foreign affairs was at least equalled by his keen desire to help in reforming the treatment of criminals at home. The great social reforms associated with the name of Lord Shaftesbury had his full sympathy, though he was never specially prominent in advocating them. But he was the first to force through Parliament a measure establishing reformatories for youthful

offenders, and he became President of the original institution at Redhill. I can testify from my own recollection that, in the midst of his thousand occupations, the question of the treatment of young criminals was the one nearest to his heart. He was also active in the movement for abolishing public executions. In Thackeray's account of his expedition to watch the crowd at the execution of Courvoisier in 1840, X., the friend who drove him to the scene, was my father.

He was never attached to the Court in any capacity, but received much consideration from the Prince Consort. And his early knowledge of the German character enabled him to discern the fine and sympathetic qualities which underlay the rigid crust of education and caste, below which contemporary British society was quite unable to penetrate. It was, perhaps, more surprising that my father should have been something of a favourite with the Duke of Wellington. The great man, as we know, once wrote that he had 'been much exposed to authors', and he regarded them with a terror never inspired by the batteries of the enemy. But he appreciated the good temper, the varied knowledge, and the many-sided humour of the younger man, who should here receive as much credit, though of an entirely different kind, as he does for securing the approbation of Thomas Carlyle. He held in the highest esteem the abilities of his contemporary, the second Duke of Wellington, saying, 'He would have been one of the greatest men in England if he had not been so completely overshadowed by his father'.

The twenty-six years of Richard Milnes's membership of the House of Commons, and the twenty-two during which he sat in the House of Lords, were crowded with occasions of interest, though it would not be true to regard him as an important figure in either House. It

was certainly a disappointment to him that in the 'forties he was never offered office. He considered, surely not without reason, that he was well equipped for the Under-Secretaryship at the Foreign Office in particular. He had at that time a reputation for eccentricity which was a little puzzling to those who only knew him in later life, though it is true that the passage of years sometimes makes mellow personal idiosyncrasies which are startling in a younger man. His great friend, Charles Buller, once said to him: 'I often think how puzzled your Maker must be to account for your conduct'; and political leaders may have thought it dangerous to entrust a responsible post to him with the uneasy feeling of never quite knowing what he would do next. His sub-conscious knowledge of this perhaps reacted unfortunately in one direction. As his friend Venables observed in his affectionate obituary notice, 'He failed as a Parliamentary orator through the adoption of a formal and almost pompous manner which was wholly foreign to his genius and disposition. One of the most humorous of companions, he reserved for the House of Commons a curiously artificial gravity'. In 1855 he was offered a Lordship of the Treasury, but felt that it was too late to make a beginning.

Richard Milnes was closely intimate throughout his life with the two great political rivals who were his contemporaries. He first knew Disraeli well in the cheerful Bohemian atmosphere of Gore House, and was sitting beside him at the moment of the famous maiden speech that ended with the phrase, 'The time will come when you will hear me'—'Yes, old fellow, it will', said his friend. And the intimacy continued over years, with possibly a slight tinge of jealousy on each side—though Disraeli paid many visits to Fryston and Bawtry, the two Milnes houses in Yorkshire, and developed a special cult for his friend's father, whom he apparently regarded as the ideal

country squire. Later on a breach occurred which has never been completely explained. Milnes criticised most of the novels in quarterly *Reviews*, not disparagingly, though not always with unmixed admiration. In the Corn Law controversy they took different sides, but never came specially into collision. Disraeli's attachment to George Smythe might be taken to account for a quarrel, but Smythe and Disraeli had themselves parted company when the former joined Peel's Government. In *Tancred* Disraeli had drawn his amusing portrait of Mr Vavasour, which was certainly not ill-natured, though a shade patronising; in 1852, when Disraeli perpetrated his famous *gaffe* of borrowing from an old address of M. Thiers for his speech on the Duke of Wellington, my father put matters right with *The Times*, and Disraeli wrote thanking him—'I really think you have the best disposition in the world'. It was a surprise, therefore, to find in Lord Beaconsfield's *Life* that in the 'sixties, among various memoranda describing his acquaintance, he wrote one about Richard Milnes which can only be described as venomous. I am sure that my father never realised the extent of his former friend's distaste, and so far as it troubled him at all, accounted for it by the critical tone of his own review of *Lothair*. When they met, as I once or twice remember their doing, their relations were apparently quite friendly, though in no way cordial.

With Mr Gladstone it was quite another story. Here there was real personal attachment, though I do not think that my father as a rule shared Gladstone's political enthusiasms, or sympathised with the vigour with which conviction made him drive home any argument in support of his case at a given moment. 'Gladstone's method of impartiality', he once said, 'is being furiously earnest on both sides of a question.' But his admiration for that wonderful genius and that lofty