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Leopold von Ranke

Excerpt

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SECOND SECTION.

CRITICISM OF THE HISTORIANS.

I.

CLARENDON.

IN historiography as well as in other things each age has its own characteristics. The seventeenth century is distinguished by the fact, that some of the leading statesmen have themselves taken up the pen and given a detailed account of their own conduct in its bearings on the history of their time and of their country. So in France Sully and Cardinal Richelieu; in a somewhat lighter style Cardinal De Retz. Never were memoirs more thorough and more instructive than during this epoch. In the description of personages the ladies enter into competition with the men, as M^{me} de Motteville, for example, with La Rochefoucauld. In Italy endeavours were made to enliven the original material with general views, or to open the way for these by means of detailed narrative, as by Davila, and as in the rival histories of Sarpi and Pallavicini. For Germany, Khevenhiller's compilation, which, though shapeless, is partly based on original documents, will always be worth consulting; in contrast to which stands Chemnitz, who works from the original materials of Oxenstierna. Still earlier Van Reyd in like manner had incorporated with his history the personal information, which naturally came to him in his confidential position near the Stadtholder of Friesland. And how much of this kind of literature has remained unprinted; in Vienna the life of an influential minister, in Rome the detailed biographies of such important Popes as Urban VIII and Alexander VI. The historical writers of the republic of Venice, such as Nani, embraced from their point of view a great portion of the history of the world.

Among these famous contemporaries Lord Clarendon with his *History of the Rebellion* takes a front place.

The last biographer of Clarendon, his successor upon the Wool-

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Leopold von Ranke

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

CLARENDON.

sack, Lord Campbell, pronounces this work to be the best which exists upon contemporary history, with the single exceptions of Cæsar's Commentaries and the Memoirs of De Retz. The utter difference of subject is sufficient to preclude a comparison of Clarendon with Cæsar; with De Retz he may well be compared, and I think he surpasses him in dignity, in moral earnestness, and even in trustworthiness, though not in insight or in gracefulness of style.

The original written by the hand of the author is still in existence, preserved in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. It consists of two folio volumes, of which the one contains the History of the Rebellion, the other Clarendon's autobiography. They are in the same handwriting, which appears to have changed only in the later parts; the pages are written from top to bottom without margin, almost without a correction; here and there the ink has faded. They are not exactly inviting to read.

A copy was made while the Chancellor was still living by his confidential secretary, Shaw, not without the addition of interpolations (which I shall notice presently), with the consent of the author, from whom they really proceeded. This copy the Chancellor's son, Henry Lord Clarendon, who in 1685 was nominated Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland, gave on his departure thither to Archbishop Sancroft; he designates it, 'the history of the rebellion and civil warr in England, begun in 1641,—contrived in 92 quires, each quire most universally 6 sheets, containing 2200 pages in folio.' Archbishop Sancroft was empowered to strike out all the passages not suitable for publication, supposing that the book ever was published: in the political and ecclesiastical commotions, into which he was drawn just at this time, he can scarcely have found leisure for such a work. For printing it, which was done at the beginning of the eighteenth century, a copy made under the supervision of Sprat, Bishop of Worcester, served as a basis. Certain passages, which seemed to be useless or offensive, were omitted, and many hard expressions were softened; but it was not considered allowable to make any essential alterations. In the year 1826 it appeared to be time to publish the work more exactly in accordance with the author's original draft, though always with reference to Shaw's revision; for the edition of 1849 a new collation was made. The really important thing given by this collation is the proof of the interpolations made by the secretary in his copy.

In order to understand the matter, and above all in order to form a judgment respecting the grouping of the work, one must make oneself acquainted with the manner and fashion of its composition.

The History of the Rebellion was composed in two very different periods of Lord Clarendon's life, periods separated from one another

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

CLARENDON.

5

by a quarter of a century,—the first books in the years 1646 and 1647, after the author's first flight from England; the later books in 1670 and 1671, after he had been compelled to leave England a second time.

The beginning was written in the Scilly islands; the following books to the eighth inclusively are dated Jersey in the original; they are a work of the first exile.

During the time of his second exile Clarendon at first did not think of continuing the History. He set to work on an autobiography, of which the first book is dated Montpellier, July 1668, the fourth November 1669, the seventh August 1670.

Clarendon had then brought the autobiography down to the Restoration; and in it, without taking much notice of the former work, he relates again much that had appeared in the first composition of the history. While the second son, Lawrence Hyde (afterwards Earl of Rochester), was on a visit to his father, they agreed to unite the two works: this the confidential secretary offered to do, and this was the occasion of his editing the original of the copy from which the book was subsequently printed. One or two books, for instance the ninth, Clarendon had at that time already put together from materials collected in Jersey; it is dated Moulins, April 12, 1671; the remainder is added from the biography.

Thus the History of the Rebellion has two component parts, which not merely belong to different periods, but have been composed from different points of view; the first with the intention of writing a history, the second with the intention of writing a biography.

To the latter has then been subjoined a kind of apology for Clarendon's own administration, which carries on the history of the Restoration to the banishment of the Chancellor, and is intended for his family, to prove to them that there was nothing in their father's conduct of which they need be ashamed.

Let us consider each part separately.

1. *The first eight Books of the History of the Rebellion.*

Edward Hyde, who first obtained the title under which he has become celebrated in 1661, belonged to a very ancient Cheshire family, not however to the elder branch, which had its seat there, but to a younger one, which had settled in Wiltshire. He was born in that county at Dinton, February 1609. His father and mother had confined themselves entirely to life in the country; the father, formerly a member of Parliament, never again visited London during the last

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Leopold von Ranke

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *CLARENDON: HISTORY OF THE REBELLION.*

thirty years of his life, the mother was never there in the whole course of her life. Yet the father's brother lived in London, in the considerable position of treasurer to the Middle Temple; it was mainly under him, after a short stay at Oxford, that Edward Hyde prosecuted his legal studies. In this life he was not so entirely confined as most others. He did not dine in Hall, he occupied himself much with general literature: his coming into the possession of a considerable fortune at an early age enabled him, even after he had married, to live as an independent gentleman and to cultivate society. Among his friends we find the poets, Ben Jonson, Waller, Carey, some theologians and divines of note, Chillingworth, Sheldon, Earle, Hales, and very many of the nobility who afterwards became famous, Coventry, Holland, and Essex. With Hamilton he stood through his wife in the relation of a connexion, though a distant one; with Archbishop Laud he had official and confidential intercourse. In close proximity to the court, and advanced by the influence of powerful friends, Hyde led a prosperous and contented life, of which we get a reflection in his favourable description of those times.

But now came on the parliamentary contests, which broke it all to pieces. Edward Hyde was a member both of the Little and also of the Long Parliament. He belonged originally to the reformers, being far from sharing the increasing tendency towards an absolute power; he contended against ship-money; his name is not amongst those who opposed the Bill of Attainder against Strafford. But when the reforms took a direction menacing to the existing Constitution, he came forward against them. He opposed the Bill for the expulsion of the Bishops, and rejected the claims of Parliament to exercise a decisive influence on the filling up of the highest posts. In the debate on the Grand Remonstrance he was among the chief opponents of the reform party, which at last, although by only a small majority, gained the victory.

Charles I thus felt himself induced to gain over Hyde, just as he did other members of the minority; he, however, at first rendered only literary service, so to speak, in the composition of the King's declarations. As he at the same time remained in Parliament, he found himself with regard to the majority in a difficult and at times in a strange position. For instance, he was a member of the deputation which Parliament sent to the King on the flight of the Queen to France. In this official position he received the far too sharp answer of the King, which had been composed by those about Charles at the time; but then he had an interview in the profoundest secrecy with the King, and advised him to send another answer, in the elaboration of which he himself took part. It was agreed that Hyde should forthwith

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Leopold von Ranke

Excerpt

[More information](#)*BOOKS I.–VIII.*

7

compose the answer to the further Declarations which were to be expected from Parliament, and transmit it to the King. Charles I copied it, and laid it, after he had burnt the original, before his Privy Council. Thus the King's answer to the demands of Parliament with regard to the military power is really the work of Hyde. One might say that it was through Hyde and the King himself that the minority contended against the resolutions of the majority.

This relation from its very nature could not be maintained long: when the great secession took place in May 1642, Edward Hyde also¹ betook himself to the King at York.

His opinion had hitherto been, and still was at this time, that the matter must be arranged without resort to force. He still relied upon those, who had been the most zealous champions of public liberty; he deemed that their loyalty was equally dear to them; and that the upholding of the King's rights was to their own interest². If then through the abolition of judicial and administrative abuses enough had been done on the one side, they must now give heed to securing the rights of the King.

Here, however, another unpleasant side of the question presented itself, one which could not fail to accompany a position of this kind. Sometimes the King conceded even more than Hyde approved; as at first in the affair of the Bishops; more often, under the influence of the Queen and of Colepepper, he took far stronger measures than Hyde advised. While Hyde was still at work composing a conciliatory declaration, the royal standard was already planted at Nottingham.

But seeing that contrary to his wish recourse had now been had to arms, he endeavoured at least to maintain a form of government in accordance with the constitution. It was by his advice that the Parliament was summoned to Oxford; the proclamation was composed by him. One of the principal objects of this was to attempt once more a peaceful compromise by means of negotiations with the Parliament which was sitting at Westminster. Hyde himself became a member of the Privy Council, and appeared in the new Parliament as Chancellor of the Exchequer. But the Parliament of the majority rejected every attempt at reconciliation, and after slight fluctuations of success maintained the upper hand in the field also. As the war grew more dangerous, the Prince of Wales was despatched to the West to act independently, and Hyde and Colepepper were sent with him. Even there Hyde did not quite give up his inclinations towards peace. But how utterly different was the course which

¹ Lister, *Life of Lord Clarendon* ii. 1. 54.

² Compare *State-papers* ii. 186.

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978-1-108-022149 - A History of England: Principally in the Seventeenth Century, Volume 6

Leopold von Ranke

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *CLARENDON: HISTORY OF THE REBELLION.*

events took! The Prince was defeated in the year 1645; both he and those about him were compelled to leave England.

All hope was not yet lost; what was immediately lost was room for his own personal action.

Gifted by nature with an inexhaustible impulse to work, Edward Hyde conceived the idea of writing the History of the Rebellion, before which he had been compelled to fly. Let us follow him in the work of composition, that we may comprehend the spirit in which he could write and has written.

On the 4th of March 1646, the fugitives reached St. Mary, one of the Scilly Isles; they suffered from the want of even the first necessities of life, and might any moment have been carried off by the Scots and the troops of the Parliament; it was under these circumstances that Edward Hyde began to write his history. The beginning of it is dated Scilly, March 18, 1646.

Supposing there were no other reasons for his undertaking (this is pretty much how he begins¹), yet there would be this, viz. to vindicate before posterity the conduct and the memory of those, who have set themselves against this general overthrow. He sees the finger of God in bringing about the general infatuation, for the human agents have not been disposed towards treason; yet all things have their natural causes, means and ways.

It especially astonishes him, that the evil-minded of various opinions have kept themselves closely united, while those whose opinions and interests are the same fall asunder into factions, which are more fatal than the treacheries of the others; and that the people under the pretext of protecting religion, liberty, and the Parliament, are pleased with things which destroy the elements of religion, the foundations of liberty, and the very being of Parliament. In the work to which he addresses himself he will take into account the weakness of the one side and the wickedness of the other, both things and persons; but he thinks that he as well as others must thereby become aware of what they still have to do. He is dismayed at the general misfortune, but he does not give up hopes of outliving it.

Hyde had no doubt before this spoken with King Charles of his intention and had promised to justify him. That, however, was not his final intention; as he takes the matter in hand, he has to set forth the faults of both parties. Of those which were committed on the royalist side he is indeed convinced most of all, and has the most vivid impression of them. If I rightly comprehend the task

¹ The original words (not reinserted even in the later editions) are—'for no other reasons yet lest posterity may be deceived.'

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Leopold von Ranke

Excerpt

[More information](#)*BOOKS I.–VIII.*

9

which he set himself, he made it consist in an investigation of the circumstances and of the conduct, through which the ruin, which he saw before him, had become possible.

And he is above all things convinced, that the chief evil lay in the incompetency of the ministers, to whom the business was entrusted, and in their disputes. In the course of time zeal and courage had changed into negligence and cowardice; the very men, who professed to have the public weal most at heart, and who wished to uphold the majesty of the King, had sacrificed his safety to their mutual animosity and jealousy. The last events in particular had served to strengthen him in this conviction.

In April 1646, the Prince and his companions were obliged to leave the Scilly Islands; they found a better place of refuge under the shelter of fort S. Elizabeth in Jersey; here Edward Hyde at once went on with his history. On page 93 of the original we find the remark; *finis libri secundi* 13. June 1646. Jersey.

These two books bring one down to the Long Parliament. They are written under the influence of ideas, which were the result of recent experiences.

The author does not consider it necessary to seek far for the causes of the revolution, like others, who go back into the later years of Queen Elizabeth, or attribute great blame to the interference of foreign powers. His position would not have allowed him to make such investigations, even if he had wished it, which he did not; he limits his view to the troubles during the reign of King Charles, whom he had served.

One has here no professional historian, who searches diligently for remote causes, and perhaps (as has been our intention) endeavours to point out the opposing elements in the history of the world developed in the course of the strife: we have here the voice of a contemporary, who knows the actors by sight and estimates their qualities; a minister, who out of his experience has formed an idea how matters ought to have been handled, and what errors have been committed.

Thus from the first he deduces all the calamities from the ministry of Buckingham. He judges him as others estimate him, as he was estimated at the time and afterwards, but in so doing undoubtedly does him injustice. We know now, that the idea of the journey to Spain did not originate so exclusively with Buckingham as Clarendon states; the actual circumstances were either never known or had been already forgotten. Still less is Buckingham so entirely to blame for the breach with Spain. Clarendon had no idea of the German complications, which were mainly instrumental in deciding the matter. He considers the journey to Spain to have been brought

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Leopold von Ranke

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *CLARENDON: HISTORY OF THE REBELLION.*

about by Buckingham's jealousy of Bristol, and from its ill-success deduces all the complications, which led to the dissolutions of Parliament; and these he strongly condemns. In these first years Clarendon justifies the Parliament entirely; the full recognition of the necessity of a parliamentary constitution is the basis of the whole book and gives it a literary value. So again Weston appears in it as a man, who was influenced by purely personal motives. It is remarkable that Clarendon has no knowledge of the position in which Weston stood towards the Queen, who wished to overthrow him and put one of her own favourites in his place; he merely thinks that Weston had behaved improperly towards her. Clarendon's characters have distinctness of outline and strong colouring; whether they are perfectly true to life, may however fairly be doubted. We have pictures of that time from the French ambassador, for instance; and he lived in the midst of the troubles, and had the most exact information; and yet his pictures are very different from Clarendon's. In certain particulars the character of Lord Carlisle has been regarded as a model of description. But while he is commended for not having been accessible to money, the French asseverate on the other hand, that they got him to do a great deal by means of bribes. Clarendon praises him, and therefore could not have considered him as a follower of Weston's; the French expressly describe him as such.

In the same spirit Clarendon regards the intention of introducing the liturgy into Scotland as the cause of all the dissensions between the King and that land. Greatly as he otherwise venerates Laud, and defends him as a man who had none but the best intentions towards Church and State, yet in this attempt, which originated with him, and in his wish to win great offices for the Bishops, Clarendon sees the source of all the mischief. He would have it, that an 'unseasonable accumulation of honours' drew upon them the jealousy of the nation. Unseasonable ministerial blunders are here and there made, and are the occasion of disorders; all that lies further in the background is purposely omitted. For the thoroughly insular conception of this period, which is still the prevailing one, Lord Clarendon has undoubtedly laid the foundation.

According to him the continuance as well as the beginning of the Scottish troubles was the result of the mistakes that were made. He maintains with positiveness, that in the year 1639 the Scottish army was only 3000 men strong; had Lord Holland attacked them courageously, he would undoubtedly have defeated them. But we know that the Scottish army numbered 20,000 men, and was far superior to the royal forces in infantry if not in cavalry.

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Leopold von Ranke

Excerpt

[More information](#)*BOOKS I.-VIII.*

11

In the first (the Little) Parliament he ascribes the failure of the King's plans to two personal circumstances;—(1) the death of Coventry, keeper of the Seal, who would no doubt have been able to give matters a better direction;—in later times, however, people will have it that Coventry, thanks to all the unconstitutional acts, which were laid to his charge, would have excited the greatest opposition against himself, like his successor Finch; and at the time Fuller declared his opportune death to have been one of the pieces of good fortune that had befallen him;—(2) the want of tact and the ill-will exhibited by Sir Henry Vane; just when he, Mr. Hyde, had made a proposal to grant subsidies to the King, without going into more exact particulars, a proposal, which in all probability would have passed, Sir Henry Vane got up and declared, that the King would not be content unless the subsidies-money was granted in the proportion and manner in which he had asked for them, and he then induced the King to dissolve the Parliament to the great delight of all the enemies of the crown. Clarendon hints that Vane was already secretly one of the latter; at any rate his son was in their confidence.

Now it is worth noting that this whole story of the Little Parliament is taken from the biography in the way noted above. The history of the Rebellion originally had a different account.

Various inaccuracies have been found in it as it now stands; *e.g.* the message of the King was delivered about the 1st of May, and the debate took place the day after. The original account was in this respect more correct. There it says (iv. p. 275); 'This message was delivered the 2 of May;' and p. 277; 'This debate broke up Saturday and Monday, the House was adjourned till Tuesday morning.' Such were the facts, and such also is the statement of the journals. The fact that the biography gives a different account merely proves, that it was composed without the earlier one being consulted on the point and made use of; probably without any external assistance, merely from memory.

There are two different stories, the one more historical, the other more biographical; the former is the shorter of the two, so that what it does tell is introduced with a kind of apology, and the biographical fact given above is only slightly indicated; on the main point they do not exactly contradict one another, in their differences they can stand side by side. By transferring the biographical article to the history a gap is made in the biography, and the history loses more than it gains.

For it is manifest, that in the history the debate which took place on these two days is written more clearly and fully, especially

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Leopold von Ranke

Excerpt

[More information](#)12 *CLARENDON: HISTORY OF THE REBELLION.*

with regard to the objection urged against ship-money; while the Parliament would not recognise the right to collect it by seeming to bargain for its abolition, the judges had declared that the right could not be abolished by Parliament. The question of right, which was the point at issue, comes more prominently to the front in the first account than in the second. In this they agree, that the dissolution was unnecessary and was owing to the unfavourable reports, which Sir Henry Vane had made to the King; do they, however, deserve full trust?

But the reports written at the moment, show that, happen what might, the antagonism between the two views was not to be got rid of. In a small but instructive parliamentary journal, in the Record Office, it says under the 4th of May, after mentioning the speech of Vane respecting the supplies demanded,—‘upon which message the House resolved into a committee and sat from 7 o’clock in the morning till 6 in the night,’—longer than Clarendon states—‘but the sense of the House was that not only ship-money should be abolished, but all military and other taxes should be provided against, before the subsidies were granted.’

The granting of the subsidies, therefore, was to be joined with the full and exclusive right of imposing taxes, a claim which the government could not be willing to admit, after the judges had decided the question in their favour. Seeing that these stipulations were to precede the vote on the subsidies, this would at the best delay the commencement of the Scottish campaign, which could not fail to be disastrous. The dissolution followed, because it was thought possible to carry on the war, even without the subsidies of the Lower House.

The way in which the matter is handled is thus far of importance as regards Clarendon, inasmuch as he then beyond doubt took the stand-point of the Parliament on the question of right. His own proposal went no further than an adjournment of the debate on the real question; but a provisional grant of the subsidies would have had no effect, unless that question was settled.

The course of events had shelved this question, when he wrote; he himself forgot it, owing to the perpetual contests of the ministers, from which he himself had suffered.

It is not our intention to rectify Clarendon; but merely to indicate his view, the character of which appears very clearly, just where more exact descriptions and documents of undoubted authority render it untenable.

He makes too much of the opposition between Vane and Strafford. He appears to think, that even in the councils, in the presence of