

LECTURES

ON

MODERN HISTORY

BY

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PREFATORY NOTE

THE Lectures on Modern History were delivered by Lord Acton in his ordinary course as Professor in the academical years 1899-1900 and 1900-01. The Inaugural Lecture on the Study of History, here reprinted, was delivered on June 11, 1895. The document printed in Appendix I. is of great interest, as exhibiting the ideals of Lord Acton as a student and the aims of the undertaking which he planned and still bears his name.

It is hoped shortly to issue in another volume the Lectures on the French Revolution, and thus to complete the record of his work as Professor. The Introductory Essay deals exclusively with his Cambridge work. A more general account of his career will precede the volumes of essays and reviews. The editors wish to thank Professor Henry Jackson for his kind advice with regard to the Introduction.

The second impression differs from the first in that a few small errors in the text have been corrected. The editors desire to state that the Lectures are printed from the manuscript exactly in the form in which they were delivered.

J. N. F.

R. V. L.

INTRODUCTION

LORD ACTON AS PROFESSOR

IT was announced in February 1895 that John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, first Baron Acton, had been appointed to the Chair of Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge in succession to the late Sir John Seeley, who had held the office for upwards of a quarter of a century. Of the achievements of Acton's six years' tenure of the post, the present volume, together with that forthcoming on the French Revolution, will form the chief, though not the only monument. To those who found in the teaching of the late Professor inspiration as well as knowledge, the Lectures now published will serve at once to heighten and to relieve the sense, still so fresh, of personal loss. To the many friends and scholars who had known him in other spheres or for a longer space, they will be a fitting memorial of Acton's greatness in the realm of his unchallenged pre-eminence. Of all the previous occupants of the chair none is to be named with Acton for a career unique in interest, variety, and pathos.

Pathos indeed there was. The note was struck in the first phrases of the Inaugural Lecture. It was perhaps not unfitting that the severest rebuke to Anglican intolerance in the past should come from a man whose indignation knew no measure for the spirit of persecution within his own communion. Throughout those years at

Cambridge, from the pregnant address "Fellow Students!" which prefaced his Inaugural, Acton bore the manner of one who was after many tempests "in the haven where he would be." No one who revered so deeply the scholar's calling could fail to be proud of this final if belated recognition of his rightful place as a scholar among scholars. But there were other things of which he was proud. His delight in finding himself a Cambridge man, his feeling for the College which adopted him and made him an Honorary Fellow, his interest in the young, even his pleasure in his rooms in Neville's Court, were the symbol of what he had lacked in early days, and of the fact, elsewhere noted by himself, that he never "had any contemporaries." The result was seen in his willingness to take part in labours sometimes deemed beneath professorial dignity, and in that freshness of sympathy with which he would enter into the mind of the youngest pupils—provided only they recognised that History was a goddess, not a plaything. Perhaps also it was shown in his keen desire to know everything about people, for Acton's interest in human beings was no less piercing than his love of books.

In this place, it is bare justice that the impression made by Acton upon Cambridge should be decisively recorded. This is the more needful, because there has been in some quarters a tendency to belittle the activity of the late Professor, a tendency which indicates the same limited intellectual horizon as the denial that he was a historian. As a matter of fact, when we remember that Acton came to Cambridge at the age of sixty-one; that he bore within him the scars of an arduous and unsuccessful conflict; that he was not, and, with his conception of history, could not be a recluse; that he was familiar neither with teaching nor examining, much less with administration; that his effective tenure of his office

was only six years, we ought to be amazed alike at the quantity of his achievement and the quality of his activity.

There are three fields which form the province of a University Professor—teaching, the organisation of his department, and research. Under present conditions a professor of history who does nothing but research leaves unfulfilled half the duties of his office. As Mill said of the House of Commons, his business is not so much to do things as to get things done. He must take his place as head of a school and strive to guide the thought and work of younger students, besides inspiring a larger public by means of lectures. The latter are, indeed, now an imperative duty, and no future occupant of the chair is likely to imitate the enthusiasm of Gray, Regius Professor in the mid-eighteenth century, who was thought to have shown unwonted conscientiousness in spending four years gathering material for an Inaugural, although he died without delivering or even writing it. On the other hand, the Professor should not limit his efforts to preparing undergraduates for a coming tripos. Acton fulfilled his task to perfection. His Lectures were not either in delivery or substance adapted to the assiduous note-taker; they might suggest, they would never diminish, the need of reading. They were not so much a mine of instruction as a revelation of the speaker's personality. Despite all his impartiality, his ideals were plainly evident, both in the matter and in the form of what he said; and not merely his ideals, but the intensity with which they possessed him. One of his hearers has recorded these impressions:—

There was a magnetic quality in the tones of his voice, and a light in his eye, that compelled obedience from the mind. Never before had a young man come into the presence of such intensity of conviction as was shown by every word Lord Acton spoke. It took possession of the whole being, and seemed to enfold it in its own

burning flame. And the fires below on which it fed were, at least for those present, immeasurable. More than all else, it was perhaps this conviction that gave to Lord Acton's Lectures their amazing force and vivacity. He pronounced each sentence as if he were feeling it, poising it lightly, and uttering it with measured deliberation. His feeling passed to the audience, which sat enthralled. It was in truth an emotional performance of the highest order, his lecture; a wonderful work of art, such as in all likelihood will never again be witnessed.¹

From the first his Lectures were crowded. It must be admitted that in the audience there were some who were not serious students. But it may be questioned whether any one who heard even a single lecture could go away quite unimpressed. No one could fail to see how the speaker's mind was possessed with the greatness of human affairs, with the moral (or immoral) aspects of political and ecclesiastical dexterity; above all, with the final supremacy of the soul over circumstance, as the real ground for asserting the sacredness of truth and the inalienable glory of Liberty. It was this sense of the fundamentally spiritual nature of his work which formed the distinction, the difficulty, and the triumph of Acton. His high seriousness gave him the influence which, despite all detraction, he unmistakably wielded. For Machiavelli is more than the bane of politicians. His principles are the eternal snare of those who investigate their actions; while a flippant cynicism is the common homage paid by youth to the duty of reflection. Now no hearer, however intelligent, no student, however anti-sentimental, could fail to find in Acton's austere judgments, in the dignity of his language, in the tones of his voice, a warning against any treatment of history that was mean or utilitarian, and any view of human nature that demands of it less than "may become a man."

But it was in the direction of the school that Acton

¹ See an article by John Pollock on "Lord Acton at Cambridge," in the *Independent Review* for April 1904.

showed himself most markedly successful. Everything in his previous life appeared to point the other way. It might have been expected that he would withdraw from this part of his duties and become purely a man of the study, with neither desire nor capacity to influence his colleagues or to stir up interest in history among undergraduates. The very reverse proved the case. Probably no Professor was ever more accessible. He was willing to give advice to any one, and nobody who consulted him went empty away. If any student went to him for information he would be told more than he supposed his question to involve; and would probably find on his arrival home that Acton's servant had preceded him with a pile of books in half a dozen languages, and a note stating that more would follow. It was all one to him, whether his energies were spent in understanding an undergraduate's difficulty or laying down the lines of a Fellowship Dissertation, or advising a lecturer, or suggesting authorities to a contributor. He was never too busy to write a list of books; never too much bored to answer a question, and—perhaps it may be added—never too serious to pay a compliment with an edge.

In this connection one further point must be noted—the foundation of the Trinity Historical Society. Soon after Acton settled at Cambridge, suggestions were made to him that he might find in a company meeting unofficially for the reading and discussion of papers on historical subjects, a means of coming into touch with many who otherwise could hardly hope to know him. A conversation class in connection with his lectures on the French Revolution in the academical year 1895-96 was the first attempt of the kind, but was, however, not altogether a success, and Acton gladly welcomed the suggestion of the junior of the editors of these lectures that a College Society on the lines of other Societies then

existing in Trinity for the discussion of theological, political, and literary subjects should be formed. The Trinity Historical Society was accordingly founded in the Michaelmas Term of 1896, and Acton became its first President. The Society met in the Professor's rooms, and was composed of Trinity men, but senior and junior men from other Colleges were welcomed. From the very first the meetings were a success and justified the interest which Acton continuously displayed. Not unnaturally some of the younger members were a little awed by their President's weight of learning. But their shyness soon wore off. Through these meetings many were enabled to enter more deeply into his mind, and to find that Acton was not merely a great scholar, but a man full of sympathy for the humblest learner. His criticisms of those who seemed to mistake rhetoric for knowledge were sometimes drastic and exercised a salutary influence. Nor did the effect stop here. In other Colleges, and on a smaller scale, the example set by Acton has been followed. The Trinity Historical Society still continues to flourish, and will ever be associated with his memory. It testifies both to the Professor's keen sympathy with youth, and to his desire to use every possible means to promote the growth of what may be called "historical mindedness."

So far as the purely administrative side of his office was concerned, it may be said that Acton fulfilled his functions as Tripos Examiner, was always ready with advice or criticism when lists of authorities were being drawn up, but that he took little part in academic controversies, although he felt very strongly against the action of the University of Fisher and the Lady Margaret in refusing to allow Edmund House the *status* which the Anglican Church had secured for Selwyn. He acquiesced in the scheme of 1895-96 for dividing the Historical Tripos into two parts, and spoke in its favour in the Arts

school. But his own part in the change was not a very active one. On the other hand, the moment that there was any opportunity for advancing the discovery of truth his mind was on the alert. An acute observer, he was always interested in watching the development of character. He felt keenly the contempt with which some of those who "stood by the ancient ways" regarded history. For to Acton history was the master of political wisdom, not a pursuit but a passion, not a mere instrument but a holy calling, not Clio so much as Rhadamanthus, the avenger of innocent blood. That men who were themselves scholars, and therefore presumably lovers of truth, should regard what was to him the noblest of studies with indifference or hostility, he felt almost as a personal wrong. And certainly no one in Cambridge ever did more to remove the reproach from what the ignorant think of as the easiest of studies. His defect was, rather, that he overestimated the responsibility of his task, and that, with him as with Hort, the very sense of the value of knowledge diminished his additions to its stores.

Another valuable result of his professoriate was the orientation of the study. Acton, by his birth, his career, and his studies, and, above all, his detachment, was driven to regard history from a standpoint neither English nor German, but universal. As he told the contributors to the *Modern History*, "The recent past contains the key to the present time. All forms of thought that influence it come before us in their turn; we have to describe the ruling currents, to interpret the sovereign forces that still govern and divide the world. By *Universal History* I understand that which is distinct from the combined history of all countries, which is not a rope of sand but a continuous development, not a burden on the memory but an illumination of the soul. It moves in a succession

to which the nations are subsidiary. Their story will be told, not for their own sake, but in reference and subordination to a higher series, according to the time and the degree in which they contribute to the common fortunes of mankind."

The influence of this attitude was at once wholesome and profound. It is true that Seeley had expressly guarded himself against all views of history that were narrow and insular. But Acton was the incarnation of universal history. As a writer in the *Athenæum* put it:—

No glorified encyclopædia, no aggregate of unrelated facts confronted the inquirer who interrogated Lord Acton, but a soul in whom spoke, as it seemed, the wisdom of the ages, and from whose depths there issued the very oracles of history, shining with the light that comes of absolutely single love of truth, penetrating even the gloom of the future by an illuminative knowledge of the past. To be with Acton was like being with the cultivated mind of Europe incarnate in its finest characteristics. In the deep tones of his voice there seemed to sound the accents of history. In those unflinching phrases we heard the impersonal estimate of posterity weighing in unerring balance the thoughts and deeds of the actors of the present or past, with a knowledge that knew no gap. We do not of course mean that Acton knew everything, but that he thoroughly understood the operation of forces—religious, political, social, economic—which create from what without them would be the sandheap of individual caprice and personal interest, the enduring bonds of secular and religious society.¹

Now it may safely be said that the main purpose of historical study, apart from any value it has as a mental gymnastic, is to produce this frame of mind. It is because he had it in a supereminent degree that Acton would remain a great historian, even though he had never written a line. And it was because he had it that he helped forward so materially the cause of truly historical thinking in Cambridge. His wide acquaintance among foreign scholars and his knowledge of Continental

¹ Cf. *Athenæum*, April 16th, 1904, Review of *Letters of Lord Acton to Mary Gladstone*.

Universities were but subsidiary though very valuable aids to the end. Acton as a teacher, as a lecturer, as a friend, inspired us all with the sense that history was something greater than before we had realised, that the student was engaged upon a task fundamentally sacred, and that while politics are unintelligible without it, yet, rightly understood, it is the surest evidence of religion in general, and "a schoolmaster to bring men to Christ." Such a view of history may be right or wrong, but it is assuredly that created by intercourse with Acton, breathing in every utterance he spoke and every essay he ever wrote.

His influence upon research is best exhibited in the plan of the Cambridge Modern History. That plan at once expresses the ideals of Acton as a historian, and affords the evidence that his conception of History was that of the development of civilised freedom and growth of European culture. In the original plan every chapter was to be written by the most competent available expert, wherever he hailed from ; nothing written at second hand was to appear. This was at last feasible, since "the long conspiracy against the knowledge of truth was at an end, and competing scholars all over the civilised world are taking advantage of the change." It might therefore be hoped that Cambridge would produce "the best history of modern times that the published or unpublished sources of information admit." But if each chapter was to be written by the man most thoroughly equipped with first-hand knowledge of its subject, it was idle to expect anything but a minute subdivision of labour. No man could be the first living authority save on a small period. At the same time Acton was here, as elsewhere, the foe of pedantry. That notion of history which reduces it to a form of orthography had no charms for him ; he had not, like Freeman, a horror of calling Charles the Great by his

xviii LECTURES ON MODERN HISTORY

popular name. As he pointed out, "Our principle should be to supply help to students, not material to historians. . . . It is intended that the narrative shall be such as will serve all readers, that it shall be without notes, and without quotations in 'foreign languages.'" With Acton's known views on impartiality, it was a matter of course that he should add, "We shall avoid the needless utterance of opinion and the service of a cause."

The book as planned was worthy of its first editor. Many universities and two continents were ransacked for contributors. Five chapters—none, alas! written—Acton had allotted to himself, and in the titles of the others (not always retained since) his personal characteristics received pregnant expression. In the practical work of editing, it must be admitted that he was less successful. His very fastidiousness prevented him from realising that there is a time when proof correcting must cease, and that even histories cannot be perfect. He was without the driving force needed to keep in line a heterogeneous body of specialists. The result was that his health broke down under the task, and although nearly two volumes were in type at the time of his surrender, the work when it actually appeared did so under different auspices, and expressed ideals not altogether the same.

What we have said does not fully set forth the nature and extent of Acton's influence at Cambridge. But it may serve to show that in the three forms of professorial activity—teaching, organisation, and research—his six years at Cambridge made a mark upon the school of history which will not soon be effaced. What we have here set down is a mere record of facts. But it was an act of piety to lay them before the reader, in order that he may understand something of the strange spell which the late

Professor exercised, and perhaps also discern the causes which made the life in Cambridge a beautiful and fitting close to a career illumined throughout its course by the love of truth. It is true that the work of these years tasked his energies, and at the last exhausted them. Yet we, who knew him, felt that he would hardly have had it otherwise. The glory of the sunset may take a sober colouring ; none the less is it glory.

J. N. F.

R. V. L.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	ix
INAUGURAL LECTURE ON THE STUDY OF HISTORY	i

LECTURES ON MODERN HISTORY

I. BEGINNING OF THE MODERN STATE	31
II. THE NEW WORLD	52
III. THE RENAISSANCE	71
IV. LUTHER	90
V. THE COUNTER-REFORMATION	108
VI. CALVIN AND HENRY VIII.	126
VII. PHILIP II., MARY STUART, AND ELIZABETH	144
VIII. THE HUGUENOTS AND THE LEAGUE	155
IX. HENRY THE FOURTH AND RICHELIEU	168
X. THE THIRTY YEARS' WAR	181
XI. THE PURITAN REVOLUTION	195
XII. THE RISE OF THE WHIGS	206
XIII. THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION	219
XIV. LEWIS XIV.	233
XV. THE WAR OF THE SPANISH SUCCESSION	249
XVI. THE HANOVERIAN SETTLEMENT	264
XVII. PETER THE GREAT AND THE RISE OF PRUSSIA	277
XVIII. FREDERIC THE GREAT	290
XIX. THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION	305
APPENDIX I.—LETTER TO CONTRIBUTORS TO THE CAM- BRIDGE MODERN HISTORY	315
APPENDIX II.—NOTES TO INAUGURAL LECTURE	319
INDEX	343

INAUGURAL LECTURE ON THE STUDY OF HISTORY*

FELLOW STUDENTS—I look back to-day to a time before the middle of the century, when I was reading at Edinburgh and fervently wishing to come to this University. At three colleges I applied for admission, and, as things then were, I was refused by all. Here, from the first, I vainly fixed my hopes, and here, in a happier hour, after five-and-forty years, they are at last fulfilled.

I desire, first, to speak to you of that which I may reasonably call the Unity of Modern History, as an easy approach to questions necessary to be met on the threshold by any one occupying this place, which my predecessor has made so formidable to me by the reflected lustre of his name.

You have often heard it said that Modern History is a subject to which neither beginning nor end can be assigned. No beginning, because the dense web of the fortunes of man is woven without a void; because, in society as in nature, the structure is continuous, and we can trace things back uninterruptedly, until we dimly descry the Declaration of Independence in the forests of Germany. No end, because, on the same principle, history made and history making are scientifically inseparable and separately unmeaning.

"Politics," said Sir John Seeley, "are vulgar when they are not liberalised by history, and history fades into mere literature when it loses sight of its relation to

* Delivered at Cambridge, June 1895.

practical politics." Everybody perceives the sense in which this is true. For the science of politics is the one science that is deposited by the stream of history, like grains of gold in the sand of a river; and the knowledge of the past, the record of truths revealed by experience, is eminently practical, as an instrument of action and a power that goes to the making of the future.¹ In France, such is the weight attached to the study of our own time, that there is an appointed course of contemporary history, with appropriate text-books.² That is a chair which, in the progressive division of labour by which both science and government prosper,³ may some day be founded in this country. Meantime, we do well to acknowledge the points at which the two epochs diverge. For the contemporary differs from the modern in this, that many of its facts cannot by us be definitely ascertained. The living do not give up their secrets with the candour of the dead; one key is always excepted, and a generation passes before we can ensure accuracy. Common report and outward seeming are bad copies of the reality, as the initiated know it. Even of a thing so memorable as the war of 1870, the true cause is still obscure; much that we believed has been scattered to the winds in the last six months, and further revelations by important witnesses are about to appear. The use of history turns far more on certainty than on abundance of acquired information.

Beyond the question of certainty is the question of detachment. The process by which principles are discovered and appropriated is other than that by which, in practice, they are applied; and our most sacred and disinterested convictions ought to take shape in the tranquil regions of the air, above the tumult and the tempest of active life.⁴ For a man is justly despised who has one opinion in history and another in politics, one for abroad and another at home, one for opposition and another for office. History compels us to fasten on abiding issues, and rescues us from the temporary and transient. Politics and history are interwoven, but are not commensurate. Ours is a domain that reaches farther than affairs of state,

and is not subject to the jurisdiction of governments. It is our function to keep in view and to command the movement of ideas, which are not the effect but the cause of public events ;⁵ and even to allow some priority to ecclesiastical history over civil, since, by reason of the graver issues concerned, and the vital consequences of error, it opened the way in research, and was the first to be treated by close reasoners and scholars of the higher rank.⁶

In the same manner, there is wisdom and depth in the philosophy which always considers the origin and the germ, and glories in history as one consistent epic.⁷ Yet every student ought to know that mastery is acquired by resolved limitation. And confusion ensues from the theory of Montesquieu and of his school, who, adapting the same term to things unlike, insist that freedom is the primitive condition of the race from which we are sprung.⁸ If we are to account mind not matter, ideas not force, the spiritual property that gives dignity and grace and intellectual value to history, and its action on the ascending life of man, then we shall not be prone to explain the universal by the national, and civilisation by custom.⁹ A speech of Antigone, a single sentence of Socrates, a few lines that were inscribed on an Indian rock before the Second Punic War, the footsteps of a silent yet prophetic people who dwelt by the Dead Sea, and perished in the fall of Jerusalem, come nearer to our lives than the ancestral wisdom of barbarians who fed their swine on the Hercynian acorns.

For our present purpose, then, I describe as Modern History that which begins four hundred years ago, which is marked off by an evident and intelligible line from the time immediately preceding, and displays in its course specific and distinctive characteristics of its own.¹⁰ The modern age did not proceed from the medieval by normal succession, with outward tokens of legitimate descent. Unheralded, it founded a new order of things, under a law of innovation, sapping the ancient reign of continuity. In those days Columbus subverted the notions of the