Historical Essays

By LORD MACAULAY

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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INTRODUCTION

In his "Studies of the Early Victorians" Frederick Harrison suggests an antithesis, in imitation of Macaulay's own style, between the critical and the popular appreciation of Macaulay's writings,—"how books that were household words with every cowboy in Nevada and every baboo in Bengal were condemned by men of culture as the work of a philistine;" how poems that had thrilled schoolboys from Nova Scotia to New South Wales had been analyzed by critics to see whether they were poetry at all; how a history the editions of which were numbered in hundreds had been attacked for some of the most serious offenses against the standards of historical writing. Such a statement not inaccurately defines Macaulay's peculiar standing in the world of letters; and in the diverse judgments there is at least a kind of consistency, for it is the same qualities in his work that are condemned and esteemed.

Both popularity and censure attest this in particular, that Macaulay stands for opinions and ways of thinking that are traditionally English, and especially characteristic of the England of his own generation. He is Latin or Gallic, it may be, in his eloquence and energy, his sense of form in writing, his constant animation; but in his intense practicality, his moral earnestness, his impatience of abstract ideas, his fixed opinions based (as usual with practical minds) on sentiment or instinct rather than pure logic, he is what most people of the Anglo-Saxon tradition readily admit themselves to be. And, almost as no other writer in any age, he was the spokesman of his period. His was no voice crying in the wilderness, no soul that dwelt apart. With luminous clearness, with immense directness and sincerity, with unfailing vividness, he expressed the thoughts and feelings of the average Englishman of his time.

This harmony partly explains, not only his popularity, but the happiness and success of Macaulay's career. The record of his life, as it is admirably and lovingly presented to us by his nephew Sir George Trevelyan, is one of fine industry, of devotion to letters, of courage and integrity; but unlike the lives of most writers, it is not a record of spiritual wrestlings, material difficulties unconquered, slow recognition, or unrealized ideals.

Influences later predominant in Victorian England, especially its strict moral standards and zeal for reform, were about Macaulay in his childhood. His father, Zachary Macaulay, descendant of a line of Scotch Anglican clergymen, was a London merchant, but devoted his whole energies to the cause of anti-slavery and to the editing of the "Christian Observer," an organ of the evangelical movement within the English Church. To his mother, of Bristol Quaker antecedents and a former pupil of the writer Hannah More, the son Macaulay was deeply devoted; and for his two sisters Margaret and Hannah he had a warmth of love and close intellectual sympathy which throughout his life seems to have left no room for other ties. "There are not ten people in the world," he wrote in 1833, "whose deaths would spoil my dinner, but there are one or two whose deaths would break my heart." In the Macaulay household, established in the London suburb of Clapham, there was an affectionate home life, much reading of good literature, stimulating discussion, association with people of note in politics and reform, and rigid insistence at all times on the forms and discipline of a somewhat narrow religion. There were daily prayers, and on Sunday two sermons read at home in addition to the regular service, and no walks save to church.

From some parts of this Puritanical training Macaulay seems to have broken away. Its moral ideas were firmly implanted, but in later years he never showed much interest in questions of theological doctrine; and Glad-

stone in writing of him even expresses a doubt whether he ever "wrought the Christian dogma completely into the texture of his mind." At Cambridge, where he entered Trinity College at eighteen, he found stimulating companionship, and was converted to liberal views in politics. But the effort involved in these changes is perhaps indicated by the fact that he went no further. Through life he stood for the sound Whig doctrines of the stirring period leading up to the great Reform Bill of 1832—for religious toleration, moderate democracy, the providential virtues of the British political system and the English middle class. His lifetime sentiments were in his speech accepting an Edinburgh nomination to parliament, "I look with pride on all that the Whigs have done for the cause of human freedom and of human happiness."

In these early years his truly extraordinary intellectual powers were abundantly indicated. He was a voracious reader, with a gift of getting through a book with tremendous rapidity, a page almost at a glance. And through life he had a phenomenal memory. Scarcely anything entered his mind but was retained—"half of 'Paradise Lost,' and that the best half," page after page of "Clarissa Harlowe," a list of college prize men for a hundred years, all the Archbishops of Canterbury! At eight he had penned a compendium of universal history, two cantos of a heroic poem, and any number of hymns. Indeed his precocity and his peculiar mental equipment might have been almost a fearsome thing, had they not been tempered by parental repression, and sound and saving qualities of his own. He was fond of social life, and an ardent talker; Sydney Smith used to speak of his "brilliant flashes of silence." He delighted in argument but was never ill tempered; was devoted to family and friends, and sensitive to the point of tears to every emotional appeal; withal, as the whole testimony of his life indicates, of a temperament remarkably healthy and well-balanced.

It is as a talker that one gets the best picture of Macaulay: "Sitting bolt upright," as his nephew describes him, "his hands resting on the arms of his chair or folded on the handle of his walking stick; knitting his great eyebrows if the subject was one that had to be thought out as he went along, or brightening from the forehead down when a burst of humor was coming; his massive features and honest glance suited well with the manly sentences he set forth in his pleasant sonorous voice and in his racy, intelligible language. "To get his meaning, people had never the need to think twice, and they certainly had seldom the time." We are told also of a rainy day in a country house, when he and a friend talked steadily from breakfast to dinner, with a brief interval for lunch, while the whole company formed a silent circle around. The swing of spoken discourse and the tone of oral argument are very conspicuous in Macaulay's prose.

After graduation, and four subsequent years in the very congenial environment of Cambridge, he was in 1826 admitted to the bar. But he was not interested in the law as a profession, and felt then, as indeed always, in almost equal measure the appeals of literature and politics. It was by literature that he won his first reputation, as well as his lasting fame.

In 1825, Jeffrey, editor of the "Edinburgh Review," was looking for "a clever young man" to take the place of old writers "too busy or too stupid." Macaulay, who had already written promising verse and prose for "Knight's Quarterly," was suggested. His first contribution was the essay on "Milton," and with the fidelity to associations once formed that was very characteristic of the author, he published all his later essays in the same magazine. From the first they took the reading public as by storm. They were a hit squarely "between wind and water,"—neither vapid nor turgid, neither empty nor dull. On the promise thus shown, Lord Lansdowne in

1831 provided him with a seat in Parliament. Portions of his first speech in the House were declared by Sir Robert Peel "as beautiful as anything I have ever heard or read." His conversational powers brought a stream of social invitations. A handsome, bold-looking, elderly woman, with an air of Queen Elizabeth, demanded an introduction. It was Lady Holland; and in the political and literary society of Holland House, as well as in the councils of the Whig leaders, the already celebrated essayist and orator was soon at home.

In public office Macaulay's ideals and practice must have seemed a little Quixotic to politicians of his day, as they would seem to those of ours. He never truckled to his constituents, and was resolved not to sacrifice his principles either to personal interest or party conformity. His eloquence powerfully aided the passage of the Reform Bill in 1832. Very acceptable to him, however, in view of the uncertain income of a man of principle in active politics, and increased responsibilities resulting from the decline of his father's business, was his appointment as member of the Supreme Council in India, with a salary of £10,000 a year.

Though he was accompanied by his sister Hannah, and lived in keeping with the dignity of his position, Macaulay during his four years in India (1834–1838) saved more than half his income, and returned with a fortune that assured him complete independence. Aside from his public duties, which included most valuable service in the reorganization of Indian education and the formulation of a modern code of criminal law, he found time for an immense amount of reading, the volume and range of which is suggested by the books he went through on the outward voyage—the "Iliad" and "Odyssey," Vergil, Horace, Cæsar's "Commentaries," Bacon's "De Augmentis," Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto, Tasso, "Don Quixote," Gibbon's "Rome," Mill's "India," all the seventy volumes of Voltaire, Sismondi's "History of France," and

the seven thick folios of the "Biographia Britannia." From his experience he gained also a practical knowledge of large problems of political administration which gave sureness and weight to his work as a historian.

After his return Macaulay represented the city of Edinburgh in Parliament from 1842 to 1846, and again from 1852 to 1856. He was Secretary of War in the Whig Ministry of 1839–1841, and upon his retirement from the House of Commons he was made a peer with the title of Baron Macaulay of Rothley, from the estate of his uncle after whom he was named and at whose home he was born. During his later years in public life his literary prestige and reputation for eloquence were such that when he rose to speak it was as a trumpet-call to fill benches and galleries. With no unusual gifts of voice or gesture in his speeches he commanded by power of language and mastery of theme. "He plunged at once into the heart of the matter," writes a contemporary, "and continued his loud, resounding pace, from beginning to end, without halt or pause."

But from the ardors of nights in Parliament and social engagements in London, Macaulay turned with increasing predilection to his "History of England," the great work of his later years. "I am sick," he wrote, "of Lords with no brains in their heads and ladies with paint on their cheeks, and politics, and politicians, and that reeking furnace of a House." To the "History" he devoted his energy in research and the great stores of his reading and memory. Originally conceived to cover the period from the Revolution of 1688 to his own time, its scope narrowed with his declining physical powers and with the increased fulness which his love of detail and generous concept of the function of history involved, until it finally covered only the period from 1685 to 1702. The sale of the first two volumes in 1848 was quite unprecedented in literary annals; 25,000 copies of the third and fourth volumes in 1855 were ordered before publication; and thereafter both

the "History" and the "Essays" enjoyed a steady and enormous popularity, until, as his biographer remarks, the demand for them came to be looked upon as a fair index of national prosperity, like the demand for coal.

In his villa at Kensington, to which he had retired in 1856 from city apartments, Macaulay received the world's applause with dignified gratification. The check for £20,000 that came to him for ten weeks' sale of the "History" set a new record in royalties, but meant little to the author save as a further means of indulging his free and even reckless generosity. Warned by an attack of heart trouble in 1852, he had been forced to moderate the reading, writing, walking, and talking which had been the work and play of his lifetime; but he could still entertain a few chosen friends and delighted in the company of his nephews and nieces. He died suddenly and quietly, December 28, 1859.

It was upon the "History of England" that he based his chief hope of future fame. This he wrote with his eye on the great classical masters, and also, as he said, "with the year 2000 and even the year 3000 often in my mind." But judging by the present, it is by the essays that he will be more generally known. The very bulk of the "History" is forbidding, and as the years and centuries pass the political events of the decade around 1688 become less momentous. Further, the virtues of Macaulay—the saving salt of his style—are in the essays; his narrative gifts have fullest play in such subjects as Frederic the Great and Hastings and Clive; better than the "History," the essays afford opportunity for those bird's-eye views, those sweeping surveys of whole epochs, in which he excels.

From the standpoint of literature, at least, his discovery of the full possibilities of the historical essay, his development of it almost into a new type, is his most striking achievement. "To take a bright period or personage of history," in the words of one of his biographers, Cotter Morison, "to frame it in firm outline, to conceive

it at once in article-size, and then to fill in the limited canvas with sparkling anecdote, telling bits of color, and facts, all fused together by a real genius for narrative, was the sort of genre-painting which Macaulay applied to history . . . and to this day the 'Essays' remain the best of their class not only in England but in Europe."

And yet their author thought lightly of them, and even hesitated to collect them! His comparative weakness in the special field of literary criticism he readily admitted: "I have written several things on historical and political and moral questions of which, on the fullest consideration, I am not ashamed, and by which I should be willing to be estimated; but I have never written a page of criticism on poetry, or the fine arts, which I would not willingly burn if I had the power." Among his essays, he valued the later ones more highly than the earlier; "the third volume seems to me worth two of the second, and the second worth ten of the first." With this latter opinion there may be dissent, for though both style and judgments are more restrained in the later work, it is not by restraint that Macaulay makes his appeal. In the present collection, the reader has an opportunity to pass his own opinion on the point, for the essays here included range from his earliest to his latest. The "Machiavelli," "History," and "Hampden" were written before his stay in India; the "Clive," "Hastings," and "Frederic the Great" appeared soon after his return; and the "Pitt," which has been called "perhaps the most perfect thing he has left," represents the more sober manner adopted in the five biographies given to the "Encyclopedia Britannica" just before his death.

Addressing magazine readers, Macaulay of full intention adapted the style of his essays to popular taste. Referring to the matter in his letters, he speaks of "a striking and animated manner of writing," a style "sometimes even viciously florid," "a bold, dashing, scene-painting manner which always succeeds in magazine writing." Indeed,

though his followers could imitate his vices more readily than his virtues, there is some truth in the assertion that he fathered journalistic prose. Always he keeps within his reader's grasp. His sentences are usually short, and if long are symmetrical and neatly arranged. His very tricks of style—repetitions instead of pronouns, overstatements for emphasis, antithesis for heightened contrast, flat downrightness of assertion—are devices of simplification. His abomination is the ambiguous or obscure. "Our writers forget," he remarks, "the all-important art of making meaning pellucid. . . . Think of A. D. 2850. Where will your Emersons be then?"

His general aim of entertainment combined with instruction is furthered by his wealth of allusions. His pages throng with "figures from history, ancient and modern, sacred and secular; characters from plays and novels from Plautus down to Walter Scott and Jane Austen; images and similes from poets of every age and every nation," so that, to continue from the same critic, John Morley, "his essays are as good as a library, and make an incomparable manual and vade-mecum for a busy uneducated man, who has curiosity and enlightenment enough to wish to know a little about the great lives and great thoughts, the shining words and many-colored complexities of action, that have marked the journey of man through the ages."

The faults of Macaulay are the defects of his qualities, and have already been implied. In all his writings it is necessary to guard against the distortion involved in exaggerated contrasts and over-statement, for he was not fond of qualifications, and was often willing to be inaccurate rather than dull. Boswell, to take a familiar example, was not "a great fool," nor was James I the most despicable of English kings, though Macaulay has done much to fix these opinions in people's minds. Again, in his treatment of English history, one must guard against his political prejudices, which were those of a loyal Whig-

Liberal, and which color his work in precisely the fashion he himself admirably describes in his essay on "History" (see p. 40) in speaking of the Tory views of Mitford. A more fundamental limitation is touched upon by Emerson in a passage in his "English Traits." "The brilliant Macaulay," he writes, "explicitly teaches that *good* means good to eat, good to wear, material commodity." And it is true that in the essay on "Bacon," to which Emerson refers, Macaulay denies any real benefit to mankind from abstract speculation from Plato down. It was his fixed opinion that whereas there is progress in the political and natural sciences, poetry declines as civilization advances, and philosophy stands still.

But to dwell on these shortcomings is not to judge Macaulay for what he is. His prejudices and limitations of outlook can matter little, to the great majority of his readers, beside his power to make the dead past rise again before our eyes, to kindle in us some of his own enthusiasm for courage and virtue in all ages, and to throw a romantic glow over the record of memorable deeds and heroic men. Nor does the world move so rapidly that a writer who has thus won the hearts and minds of his own generation will lose his appeal for many generations to come.

ALLAN WESTCOTT.

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HISTORICAL ESSAYS

HISTORY (May, 1828)

The Romance of History. England. By HENRY NEELE. London, 1828

To write history respectably—that is, to abbreviate despatches, and make extracts from speeches, to intersperse in due proportion epithets of praise and abhorrence, to draw up antithetical characters of great men, setting forth how many contradictory virtues and vices they united, and abounding in *withs* and *withouts*—all this is very easy. But to be a really great historian is perhaps the rarest of intellectual distinctions. Many scientific works are, in their kind, absolutely perfect. There are poems which we should be inclined to designate as faultless, or as disfigured only by blemishes which pass unnoticed in the general blaze of excellence. There are speeches, some speeches of Demosthenes particularly, in which it would be impossible to alter a word without altering it for the worse. But we are acquainted with no history which approaches to our notion of what a history ought to be—with no history which does not widely depart, either on the right hand or on the left, from the exact line.

The cause may easily be assigned. This province of literature is a debatable land. It lies on the confines of two distinct territories. It is under the jurisdiction of two hostile powers; and, like other districts similarly situated, it is ill-defined, ill cultivated, and ill regulated. Instead of being equally shared between its two rulers, the Reason and the Imagination, it falls alternately under the sole and absolute dominion of each. It is sometimes fiction. It is sometimes theory.

History, it has been said, is philosophy teaching by examples. Unhappily, what the philosophy gains in soundness and depth the examples generally lose in vividness. A perfect historian must possess an imagination sufficiently powerful to make his narrative affecting and picturesque. Yet he must control it so absolutely as to content himself with the materials which he finds, and to refrain from supplying deficiencies by additions of his own. He must be a profound and ingenious reasoner. Yet he must possess sufficient self-command to abstain from casting his facts in the mould of his hypothesis. Those who can justly estimate these almost insuperable difficulties will not think it strange that every writer should have failed, either in the narrative or in the speculative department of history.

It may be laid down as a general rule, though subject to considerable qualifications and exceptions, that history begins in novel and ends in essay. Of the romantic historians Herodotus is the earliest and the best. His animation, his simple-hearted tenderness, his wonderful talent for description and dialogue, and the pure sweet flow of his language, place him at the head of narrators. He reminds us of a delightful child. There is a grace beyond the reach of affectation in his awkwardness, a malice in his innocence, an intelligence in his nonsense, an insinuating eloquence in his lisp. We know of no writer who makes such interest for himself and his book in the heart of the reader. At the distance of three-and-twenty centuries, we feel for him the same sort of pitying fondness which Fontaine and Gay are said to have inspired in society. He has written an incomparable book. He has written something better perhaps than the best history; but he has not written a good history; he is, from the first to the last chapter, an inventor. We do not here refer merely to those gross fictions with which he has been reproached by the critics of later times. We speak of that colouring

which is equally diffused over his whole narrative, and which perpetually leaves the most sagacious reader in doubt what to reject and what to receive. The most authentic parts of his work bear the same relation to his wildest legends which Henry the Fifth bears to the Tempest. There was an expedition undertaken by Xerxes against Greece; and there was an invasion of France. There was a battle at Platæa; and there was a battle at Agincourt. Cambridge and Exeter, the Constable and the Dauphin, were persons as real as Demaratus and Pausanias. The harangue of the Archbishop on the Salic Law and the Book of Numbers differs much less from the orations which have in all ages proceeded from the right reverend bench than the speeches of Mardonius and Artabanus from those which were delivered at the council-board of Susa. Shakspeare gives us enumerations of armies, and returns of killed and wounded, which are not, we suspect, much less accurate than those of Herodotus. There are passages in Herodotus nearly as long as acts of Shakspeare, in which everything is told dramatically, and in which the narrative serves only the purpose of stage-directions. It is possible, no doubt, that the substance of some real conversations may have been reported to the historian. But events, which, if they ever happened, happened in ages and nations so remote that the particulars could never have been known to him, are related with the greatest minuteness of detail. We have all that Candaules said to Gyges, and all that passed between Astyages and Harpagus. We are, therefore, unable to judge whether, in the account which he gives of transactions respecting which he might possibly have been well informed, we can trust to anything beyond the naked outline; whether, for example, the answer of Gelon to the ambassadors of the Grecian confederacy, or the expressions which passed between Aristides and Themistocles at their famous interview, have been correctly

transmitted to us. The great events, are, no doubt, faithfully related. So, probably, are many of the slighter circumstances; but which of them it is impossible to ascertain. The fictions are so much like the facts, and the facts so much like the fictions, that, with respect to many most interesting particulars, our belief is neither given nor withheld, but remains in an uneasy and interminable state of abeyance. We know that there is truth; but we cannot exactly decide where it lies.

The faults of Herodotus are the faults of a simple and imaginative mind. Children and servants are remarkably Herodotean in their style of narration. They tell everything dramatically. Their *says hes* and *says shes* are proverbial. Every person who has had to settle their disputes knows that, even when they have no intention to deceive, their reports of conversation always require to be carefully sifted. If an educated man were giving an account of the late change of administration, he would say—"Lord Goderich resigned; and the King, in consequence, sent for the Duke of Wellington." A porter tells the story as if he had been hid behind the curtains of the royal bed at Windsor: "So Lord Goderich says, 'I cannot manage this business; I must go out.' So the King says,—says he, 'Well, then, I must send for the Duke of Wellington—that's all.' " This is in the very manner of the father of history.

Herodotus wrote as it was natural that he should write. He wrote for a nation susceptible, curious, lively, insatiably desirous of novelty and excitement; for a nation in which the fine arts had attained their highest excellence, but in which philosophy was still in its infancy. His countrymen had but recently begun to cultivate prose composition. Public transactions had generally been recorded in verse. The first historians might, therefore, indulge without fear of censure in the license allowed to their predecessors the bards. Books were few. The events of former times were learned from tradition and

from popular ballads; the manners of foreign countries from the reports of travellers. It is well known that the mystery which overhangs what is distant, either in space or time, frequently prevents us from censuring as unnatural what we perceive to be impossible. We stare at a dragoon who has killed three French cuirassiers, as a prodigy; yet we read, without the least disgust, how Godfrey slew his thousands, and Rinaldo his ten thousands. Within the last hundred years, stories about China and Bantam, which ought not to have imposed on an old nurse, were gravely laid down as foundations of political theories by eminent philosophers. What the time of the Crusades is to us, the generation of Crœsus and Solon was to the Greeks of the time of Herodotus. Babylon was to them what Pekin was to the French academicians of the last century.

For such a people was the book of Herodotus composed; and, if we may trust to a report, not sanctioned indeed by writers of high authority, but in itself not improbable, it was composed, not to be read, but to be heard. It was not to the slow circulation of a few copies, which the rich only could possess, that the aspiring author looked for his reward. The great Olympian festival,—the solemnity which collected multitudes, proud of the Grecian name, from the wildest mountains of Doris, and the remotest colonies of Italy and Libya,—was to witness his triumph. The interest of the narrative, and the beauty of the style, were aided by the imposing effect of recitation,—by the splendour of the spectacle,—by the powerful influence of sympathy. A critic who could have asked for authorities in the midst of such a scene must have been of a cold and sceptical nature; and few such critics were there. As was the historian, such were the auditors,—inquisitive, credulous, easily moved by religious awe or patriotic enthusiasm. They were the very men to hear with delight of strange beasts, and birds, and trees,—of dwarfs, and giants, and cannibals,—of gods, whose very names it