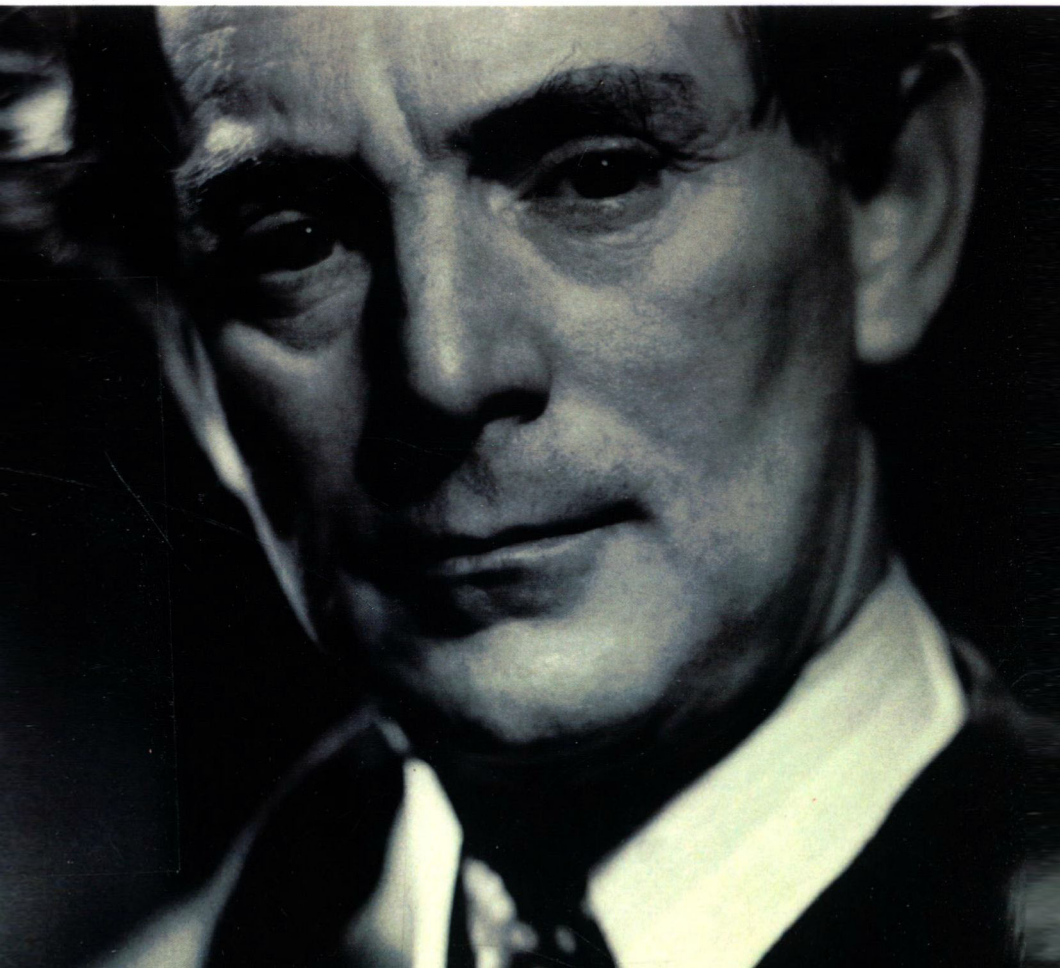


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HERBERT BUTTERFIELD

HISTORY, PROVIDENCE, AND SKEPTICAL POLITICS

Kenneth B. McIntyre



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You have reckoned that history ought to judge the past
and to instruct the contemporary world as to the future.
The present attempt does not yield to that high office. It
will merely tell how it really was.

—Ranke

Use every man after his desert, and who shall 'scape
whipping?

—Shakespeare

Introduction

IN AN AGE OF SPECIALIZATION and secularization, Herbert Butterfield's diverse accomplishments are as extraordinary for their resistance to these predominant cultural movements as for their insight and prescience. Butterfield achieved success as both a public intellectual and as an academic historian in a variety of fields ranging from historiography and international relations to the history of England in the eighteenth century and the history of the scientific revolution. He also maintained a sincere fidelity to the Augustinian Christianity of his upbringing.¹ He was a committed and respected scholar whose influence over the development of modern historiography, the history of science, and the English School of international relations is widely acknowledged. His understanding of his faith informed the development of his ideas about the nature and limits of political activity at the domestic and international levels.

While not a conventionally systematic thinker, Butterfield was a prolific and erudite writer with a penetrating intelligence and a

shrewd grasp of many of the central intellectual and moral issues of his day. His essays are remarkable for their highly epigrammatic style and effortless accessibility, qualities which contributed to his reputation inside and outside of academia. He was also a notable contrarian, always questioning the conventional wisdom of the day.² Butterfield's work is remarkable for its depth of insight and for its diversity and breadth.

He is best remembered for his early historiographical essay *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931), which made his name amongst academic historians and popularized the notion that the historical past is somehow distinctive or different from a merely practical account of the past. This notion that historical explanation entails a sympathetic understanding of the past in its particularity or independence from present concerns was also being given a philosophical elaboration by thinkers like R. G. Collingwood and Michael Oakeshott, but Butterfield translated the somewhat arcane language of the philosophers into a medium that has had a decisive influence on European and American historians ever since.

His essays on the origins of modern historical explanation and on the origins of modern science basically created the modern disciplines of the history of historiography and the history of science. These investigations into the emergence of the historical and scientific consciousness profoundly influenced such contemporary thinkers as J. G. A. Pocock and Thomas Kuhn. Butterfield was one of the first contemporary thinkers to place the scientific revolution at the heart of Western modernity, and was also one of the first historians to recognize the radical novelty of modern historical experience. Isaiah Berlin traced this new way of conceiving the

past in terms of its divergence from and irrelevance to the practical concerns of the present to Giambattista Vico, noting that “the task of the historian [now] was not merely to establish facts and give causal explanations for them, but to examine what a situation meant to those involved in it, what their outlook was, by what rules they were guided, what ‘absolute presuppositions’ (as Collingwood called them) were entailed in what they (but not other societies, other cultures) said and did.”³ The revolution in historical consciousness brought about a new awareness of the foreignness of the past.

In addition to his work as an academic historian, Butterfield made significant contributions to the field of international relations and his various essays on politics and the development of liberty in the modern world constitute a somewhat disparate but substantial understanding of political life. In these areas, it becomes obvious that Butterfield’s commitment to his Christian faith was not a merely factitious aspect of his life, but instead the central feature of his conception of political and moral life. Butterfield’s Augustinian emphasis on the ubiquity of sin and the importance of the individual personality led him to develop a religious version of the skeptical liberalism of his native England, and his vision of politics informed his historically sensitive conception of the international order. This skeptical liberalism provided the basis for a critique of ideological politics both domestically and internationally, and a condemnation of the dangers of hubristic or self-righteous crusading in international affairs. Indeed, Butterfield’s skeptical liberalism offers a compelling alternative to a contemporary political world defined primarily by its Manichean distinctions and its quasi-religious conflicts.⁴

Herbert Butterfield was born on October 7, 1900, in Yorkshire, England.⁵ He was the son of devout working-class Methodists. His father, who had once aspired to be a Methodist minister, left school early upon the death of Butterfield's grandfather and worked at a local wool factory, eventually becoming chief clerk in the firm. From a young age, Butterfield entertained thoughts of becoming a minister himself, and in fact eventually became a lay minister in the Methodist church, preaching in his native Yorkshire and at Cambridge. He attended the local grammar school at Keighley before matriculating at Cambridge University as a scholarship student.

At Cambridge, he was a student at Peterhouse College, which was notable for its strength in history. Sir Adolphus Ward, one of the editors of the first *Cambridge Modern History*, was the Master of Peterhouse at the time, and Harold Temperley, a noted diplomatic historian who became Butterfield's intellectual mentor, was a fellow there when Butterfield matriculated. Butterfield graduated with a double first in history and won several academic prizes along the way. He was subsequently elected a Fellow of Peterhouse, and would remain affiliated with the college in some way for the rest of his life.

His first work of academic history, *The Peace Tactics of Napoleon*, 1806–8, was published in 1928. It manifested the influence of Temperley and is a model of what Butterfield would subsequently call technical history. In that same year, he married Edith Joyce Crawshaw, with whom he would have three sons. Crawshaw was the daughter of a Methodist minister, and the sister of one of Butterfield's friends. Her interests were more artistic than historical, though she did assist in proofreading his work and preparing it for publication. In 1931, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, the book

that would become most closely associated with his name, was published to mixed reviews. Although Butterfield was still a very young man, he had written a defense of the autonomy of history which would become a central text in the historiography of the twentieth century.

At the end of the decade and in the dark years preceding World War II, he wrote a short biography of Napoleon which was published in 1939 and a brief examination of the political and historical ideas of Machiavelli entitled *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (1940). Both of these works contain a subtle message concerning the dangers of modern revolutionary politics. This message was more explicitly affirmed in *The Englishman and His History* (1944), in which Butterfield, while maintaining his critical stance toward Whig historians, offered a celebration of the Whig political tradition of ordered liberty. In 1944, Butterfield was named professor of modern history at Cambridge.

In October 1949, in a burst of prolificness, Butterfield came out with three books: *George III, Lord North, and the People, 1779–80*; *The Origins of Modern Science, 1300–1800*; and *Christianity and History*. The first was Butterfield's second and last major work of technical history and focused on a series of crises which challenged the traditional character of British politics in the eighteenth century and provided a glimpse of the kind of mass politics more closely associated with the French Revolution and the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The second was based upon lectures which Butterfield originally offered at Cambridge under the auspices of its Committee on the History of Science. The book made the significant claim, which has been widely accepted,

that the scientific revolution, not the Renaissance or Reformation, should be considered the true beginning of the modern world. The book also made a substantial contribution to the creation of the history of science as a field of study. The third book, *Christianity and History*, was based upon lectures which Butterfield originally offered at Cambridge and which were broadcast by the BBC. Their tremendous popularity made Butterfield a public figure. In them, Butterfield elaborated a distinction between technical or academic history and prophetic history which would become central to his political work, while defending a specifically Christian conception of the human past and of the singular importance of human personality.

In 1951, a collection of Butterfield's essays entitled *History and Human Relations* was published and *The Whig Interpretation of History* was reissued. These works cemented Butterfield's reputation as the preeminent historiographer of his day, while further burnishing his credentials as a Christian voice in public affairs. In 1953, *Christianity, Diplomacy, and War*, Butterfield's first extended foray into international relations, was published. Butterfield offered a defense of Augustinian skepticism in international relations while making a critique of ideology and the self-righteous style of politics that ideology entails. The book attracted the attention and approbation of Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau, and eventually led to the creation of the British Committee on the Theory of International Relations (BCTIR), which Butterfield chaired.

Butterfield was elected the master of Peterhouse College in 1955. In the same year, *Man on His Past*, his influential Wiles Lectures on the history of historiography, was published. In it,

Butterfield made claims concerning the novelty and significance of the emergence of historical consciousness in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which were similar to the ones he made about the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. According to Butterfield, these two revolutions in consciousness are the primary intellectual achievements of the modern age. Like his earlier contribution to the history of science, Butterfield's book played a central role in the development of the history of historiography in the twentieth century.

In 1958, with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation and with the help of Martin Wight, Butterfield founded the BCTIR. The committee was the *fons et origo* of the English School of International Relations, which has emphasized the importance of the notion of international order while offering compelling critiques of the one-sidedness of traditional Hobbesian realism and revolutionary Kantian idealism in international relations. While chairman of the BCTIR, Butterfield wrote *International Conflict in the Twentieth Century* and coedited *Diplomatic Investigations* with Martin Wight. During this period, he also served as vice chancellor of Cambridge University, the highest administrative office in the university, from 1959 to 1961.

Butterfield was named Regius Professor of History at Cambridge in 1963 and delivered the Gifford Lectures at Glasgow University in 1965 and 1966. The lectures would be posthumously published in 1981 as *The Origins of History*. In the lectures and the book, Butterfield examined the great variety of ways in which civilizations have conceived the past, while focusing on the specific interest in the past which developed in Western civilization as a

result of the peculiar concatenation of Greek philosophy, Christian theology, and modern science. Butterfield was knighted in July 1968, and retired from the academy later that same year. He died on July 20, 1979, in Sawston, Cambridgeshire, where he had moved after his retirement.

Despite his working-class background, Butterfield lived the life of an English don and reveled in the peculiar eccentricities associated with such a life. Maurice Cowling notes that “he was modest and tolerant, was free of arrogance, and disliked the entrenched prescriptions of the progressive intellect. He felt a deep and irrational regard for rakes whom he much preferred to the ‘virtuous and stiff-necked.’”⁶ He had a marked streak of contrarianism, and in spite of being a lifelong teetotaler otherwise, he took up drinking during a fellowship year at Princeton in order to protest against the foolishness of prohibition.⁷ He was also a constant smoker and was known to be somewhat careless of his appearance, at least until he began to hold administrative positions of some significance at Peterhouse and Cambridge. He was short of stature and had a slight build, but he was not an unattractive person. Cowling suggests that Butterfield “combin[ed] a Shelleyesque beauty of feature with a great deal of hair and a certain tense volatility with a modestly attractive decisiveness of manner.”⁸ He was proud of his background, but he was often self-conscious about the Yorkshire accent which he retained throughout his life.

Butterfield was not only an extraordinarily prolific and successful historian and political thinker, but also an influential administrator during a time of tremendous upheaval at British universities. While his administrative talents were widely applauded, he was

also noted as a man with a cynical streak who enjoyed academic politics in an almost unseemly way. Noel Annan, who describes Butterfield as “the most original historian of his generation,” also observes that “nothing pleased Butterfield more than plotting: he enjoyed academic intrigue.”⁹ Butterfield’s life, like so many lives in the modern age, was marked by a complexity that belies the facile reductionism of conventional biography. He combined an impish contrarianism and an almost puritanical devotion to academic history with a sincere and wholly admirable devotion to his family and to his faith.

In this book, I offer an introduction to the work of Herbert Butterfield. Although the work is primarily expository, I will also offer a critical appraisal of the significance of Butterfield’s work. The first chapter is devoted to an analysis of Butterfield’s conception of the logic of historical explanation and his defense of the autonomy of history. The second chapter focuses on Butterfield’s pioneering work in the history of historiography and the history of science, and concludes with an examination of Butterfield’s debate with Lewis Namier concerning the nature of historical understanding. The third chapter deals with Butterfield’s skeptical liberalism and his understanding of international order. I conclude with a brief assessment of the significance of Butterfield’s work and its relevance to contemporary questions, both academic and practical.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE AUTONOMY OF HISTORY

HERBERT BUTTERFIELD CAME TO PUBLIC prominence as the writer of a short book on historiography entitled *The Whig Interpretation of History*. Like *Christianity and History* and *History and Human Relations*, his other works on historiography, *The Whig Interpretation of History* consists of an unsystematic and sometimes uneven series of essays about some of the difficulties associated with historical research and explanation. Despite its somewhat haphazard character, the book exhibits a subtle and intuitive grasp of the fundamental issues in the field, and manifests the insightful and epigrammatic style characteristic of Butterfield's writings on every subject. All of his historiographical work is animated by a consistent defense of the autonomous character of historical investigation and explanation. Though his later works also explore the nature of an explicitly Christian interpretation of the past, Butterfield consistently maintains the clear distinction that he made initially in *The Whig Interpretation of History* between the kind of explanation proper to what he terms on different occasions technical, academic, or scientific history, and the practical or prophetic impulse which