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GEORGE MACAULAY TREVELYAN, O.M., C.B.E.

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1876-1962

DR. TREVELYAN was a Fellow of the Academy for thirty-seven years, and on one occasion when a vacancy was impending he was asked on behalf of the Council whether he would accept the office of President. He answered with genuine regret that he was too fully occupied to take up this further burden, and this answer was not altogether unexpected. He did indeed sometimes say that he had selfishly left it to others to carry on the committee-work of the learned and other bodies that he belonged to; but this was an example of that modesty which sooner or later impressed every one who knew him. His modesty was one aspect of his absolute lack of self-consciousness, and this expression meant that he was grateful for the services which other people did to scholarship and to public causes, perhaps to the detriment of their own opportunities for study. But he himself was a believer in institutions, not only historic institutions like his college and his university, but new associations formed for purposes of action, and he served several of them conscientiously and devotedly for many years. When he sat at a meeting, whether in the chair or not, he spoke little but always with judgement and at times with compelling force.

It was natural, then, for the Academy to hope against hope that he might preside over it. He did not, at least in his later years, take much part in its business; but he wrote several notable lectures and articles for its *Proceedings*, and in its elections he stood up for a definite principle. His belief in institutions went along with an unqualified belief in freedom of thought, but he also believed in the social virtues which enable the members of institutions to work together to the best effect. He thought that meritorious services to scholarship might be outweighed by bad manners. When he thought it his duty he could hit hard enough either in literary controversy or in practical affairs; but he was strict about the rules of fighting fairly and he expected academic bodies to uphold these rules.

The books of reference give the external facts of his long life, with the chronology of his principal writings, and the list of his honours. His eminence among scholars was symbolized by the Order of Merit and by his becoming, as Chancellor of the University of Durham, the first truly academic man to hold

such an office in modern times. It would be superfluous here to recapitulate these facts, the more so because his own autobiographical essay surveys his work in the setting of his personal life with such distinction and skill that any attempt to understand him must begin from it. In these pages nothing more can be offered than some comments on his historical studies.

His own final verdict, again too modest in spite of a touch of proper pride, was this:

I have been not an original but a traditional kind of historian. The best that can be said of me is that I tried to keep up to date a family tradition as to the relation of history to literature, in a period when the current was running strongly in the other direction towards history exclusively 'scientific', a period therefore when my old-fashioned ideas and practice have had, perhaps, a certain value as a counterpoise.¹

Even without this direct encouragement it would be easy to overestimate his dependence on the tradition. More than once it has been written that his prose style was modelled on Macaulay's. In his earlier works there are passages which read very much like Macaulay. One of them is the trenchant paragraph on the misgovernment of the papal states in *Garibaldi's Defence of the Roman Republic*, but this is preceded by several chapters of flowing, romantic English which have no Macaulay in them at all. Trevelyan judged Macaulay's style independently. He wrote that Macaulay's public letters to the Anti Corn-Law League were 'in his forcible, stabbing style, driven home with illustration and antithesis'.² The contrast between their two minds is easily seen where they both chance to write from the same authorities, for instance in their descriptions of Lord Wharton's electioneering.³ One characteristic difference is that Trevelyan quotes verbatim words which Macaulay forces into his own sentences. As time went on Trevelyan came to write more and more simply but his prose never lost its unforced vitality. He never wrote better than in his *Blenheim*, where he leads the reader on by insensible transitions from plain, factual language to the daring climax where he apostrophizes Eugene.

He worked as hard at acquiring knowledge as he did at managing words. To say nothing of his habit of thinking intensely,

¹ *An Autobiography and other Essays* (1949), p. 1. The portrait by Mr. Nelson, which is reproduced as the frontispiece to this volume, is the best representation of Trevelyan.

² *Life of John Bright* (1913), p. 121.

³ Macaulay, *History of England* (1914), v. 2402 ff.; Trevelyan, *England under Queen Anne, Blenheim* (1930), pp. 195 ff.

he kept long working hours. He was methodical, and there was supposed to be a great card-index, seldom or never visible, in which he stowed his references away. Yet few people understood how wide and deep his historical knowledge was. He was an unostentatious writer, in the sense that he never showed off how much he knew. He kept his matter in control, perhaps partly because he had a classical education in more senses than one, but also because he schooled himself to keep to his point and to avoid digression even when it would have been most excusable. There is an example of this in his little historical sketch of Trinity College. Here he mentions in the proper place that Humphrey Babington of Rothley Temple in Leicestershire was deprived of his fellowship by the Puritans and reinstated after the Restoration, afterwards becoming a benefactor of the college. He leaves it to his readers to remember that his great-uncle Thomas Babington Macaulay was born at Rothley Temple.

In his first Cambridge period he wrote two books. *England in the Age of Wycliffe* (1899) was his fellowship dissertation and he came later to recognize the faults of immaturity in it, but it had a good circulation and it continued to find readers for more than forty years, because, as he said, it attracted a Protestant public. Like most of his English contemporaries Trevelyan regarded Wycliffe as the morning star of the Reformation and so as occupying a definite place in the history of freedom. The second book, *England under the Stuarts* (1904), was a textbook, one of a publisher's series of seven volumes. It dealt with the culminating struggle for English constitutional liberties, not innovating on the opinions of Carlyle, Gardiner, and Firth, but telling the story so well that it is still the book which opens the eyes of many beginners to the interplay of passions and ideas in past events.

Each of these books had a chapter surveying the state of English society. In this workmanlike way of setting the reader on the road beside him Trevelyan followed the example of Macaulay's third chapter in his *History of England*. In several of his later books he began with surveys of this kind, and by so doing he formed a conception of social life as growing out of economic conditions to much the same extent that political events grew out of social conditions. Thus for him social history was a link between economic and political history, but co-ordinate with them. In content it was, roughly speaking, the study of the daily life of the people of every kind, and so it had its own way of enabling us 'to be conscious of our forefathers as they really were'. The most successful of all his books was

the *Social History of England*,¹ which consists of twelve panoramas of England at successive times, with one of Scotland, extending from his former starting-point in the age of Wycliffe and Chaucer to the late Victorian days. It will not rank as one of his best books, and its immense popularity was aided by temporary, extraneous circumstances; nevertheless it proved that his surveys brought a new delight in knowledge to the reading public.

Even in the earliest of them his purpose was quite different from Macaulay's, and in the most mature it became almost opposite. Macaulay's interest was in the great change which had come over England between 1685 and his own day, Trevelyan's in the former ages each for itself. Macaulay contrasted two stages in a progress. Trevelyan did something original, not derived from any one line of intellectual inheritance. He explained its nature long afterwards, with a prefatory sentence expressing a degree of tolerance at which perhaps he had only gradually arrived:

History is read by different people for various reasons; it has many uses and values. To me its chief but not its only value is poetic. Its poetic value depends on its being a true record of actual happenings in the past. For the mystery of time past continually enthralls me. Here, long before us, dwelt folk as real as we are today, now utterly vanished as we in our turn shall vanish. History can miraculously restore them to our vision and understanding, can tell us a little of what were their hopes and fears, their words and works.²

Before he left Cambridge, besides the two books Trevelyan wrote two essays on his creed, one political and the other about history. The political essay was written before the end of the South African war for a volume in which a group of young liberals tried to turn the eyes of the electorate to the need for social reform at home. Trevelyan's paper was placed last in the volume, and no doubt rightly, for he alone struck a rousing note of idealism. This was his radical period. He gravely pronounced: 'at the present day the Conservative Party is, what it has seldom been, almost wholly a force for evil'.³ He regarded it as one of the impediments to building, in the physical sense, a Britain not only more hygienic, as his collaborators wished it to be, but more beautiful. He wrote 'it happens that ugliness and squalor are cheap to-day', and this sentence has its counterpart in a

¹ Published in America in 1942, but, owing to the war-time shortage of paper, not until 1944 in England.

² 'Stray Thoughts on History' (1948), in *Autobiography*, p. 82.

³ *The Heart of the Empire* (1901), p. 409.

shoulder-heading of *England under the Stuarts*: 'What paid best was beautiful.' His reading and his joy in the countryside had already brought him to his lifelong endeavour to make his fellow countrymen aware of all that 'places of historic interest or natural beauty' might mean to them. That there was a threat to those which already existed was still a secondary consideration; he was appealing for the future, and he did not foresee, any more than anyone else did, that in an altered world he was to spend so much of his resources of every kind in preserving what could be saved.

If his radicalism had a personal stamp, so had his view of history as he set it out in his famous essay 'Clio a Muse'.¹ In this he consciously reaffirmed the thesis which Macaulay had always maintained, for instance in more than one of his essays, that history ought to be a part of literature. It was much more than a reaffirmation. Macaulay protested against dullness, but Trevelyan's fire was directed against the doctrine that 'history is a science, no more and no less'. He did not contribute to the logical investigation of the nature of historical truth. His mind was not critical or analytical; he never pretended to be a philosopher and he was impatient of subtleties. He was announcing the orientation of his whole personality to the study of the past. The work on Wordsworth and Meredith which occupied him soon after this time no doubt deepened and enriched his insight; but this first manifesto was complete, an impassioned plea fortified by examples. As such it admitted of no reply, and no one did reply to it.

For twenty-four years after his fellowship expired Trevelyan held no academic position. Fortunate enough not to need to earn an income, he devoted himself wholly to authorship, and by poetic justice his authorship proved to be much more remunerative than any professorial chair. Many converging reasons guided his next choice of a subject. He knew and loved Italy, especially rural Italy. The English Whigs and the English Radicals had been, in their different ways, friends of Italian freedom. The poets had been with them. Trevelyan's father had transmitted the enthusiasm of his generation for this cause and for Garibaldi, who seemed to have lived 'perhaps the most romantic life that history records'.² Trevelyan therefore wrote a volume

¹ First published as 'The Latest View of History' in the *Independent Review*, i (1903-4), 395-414, the latest view being that of Professor Bury's inaugural lecture. When it was reprinted the ephemeral parts were omitted, but they were perfectly polite, and the original text contains no suppressed indiscretions.

² *Garibaldi's Defence of the Roman Republic* (1907), p. 23.

on Garibaldi's Italian fighting. By the end of six years of intense and untrammelled activity he had written three. Thousands of readers were carried away by the irresistible impetus of his narrative. He did not write for professional military readers, and they must look elsewhere for technical facts and judgements about weapons, formations, and the like, but even these specialists may use the books to advantage. To say nothing about the human factors in guerrilla warfare, no one else has studied the terrain, from Ravenna to Sicily, as Trevelyan did yard by yard in his walks. He also rendered a permanent service to all historians of the *risorgimento* by sifting and testing a great mass of authorities in print, in manuscript, and in the oral testimony of survivors.

As a political interpreter of these adventures he has indeed been left behind, and he himself came, in due time, to see the liberation of Italy in a different perspective. The completion of the third volume almost coincided in time with the Italian invasion of Tripoli in 1911, and this began a disillusionment. In 1915, when Italy declared war on Germany, she seemed to rejoin the ranks of those who fought for freedom. Debarred from combatant service by a defect of eyesight, Trevelyan commanded a British field ambulance unit on the Italian front all through the fighting. His short book *Scenes from Italy's War* (1919) reads almost like a sequel to *Garibaldi and the Thousand*, but with the author as a participant in the action. By 1923, however, when he rounded off the series of his Italian books with the *Manin*, his experience of the changing world had carried him far away from the old unquestioning partisanship. He saw that, without knowing it, he had been unfair to the Church, to the French, to the Austrians, and to others of Garibaldi's enemies. In later years his love of Italy remained. It was sorrowful for him to admit, as he did, that the crimes of fascism could not be explained away, but he abated nothing from his standards of political judgement.

While Italy was still uppermost in his mind he undertook a task which signified for him a training in a more humdrum kind of history, the first of his political biographies. The subject was John Bright. Trevelyan was not altogether a stranger to the industrial and nonconformist Lancashire to which his mother's family, like the Brights, belonged. His father had known Bright well, and at times had been his close ally in politics. For these and other reasons Trevelyan accepted the Bright family's invitation and, making full use of their papers he produced a standard

life on the traditional model. As a portrait it is a good likeness rather than an intimate revelation. Bright was a Quaker, and therefore, on principle, a man of peace, but he was also a formidable political agitator, and Trevelyan was evidently more in his element in dealing with the combative side of his character. Although Bright uttered some memorable rebukes to the warlike, and although he resigned office when the fleet bombarded Alexandria, he was never for peace at any price and he supported the North strongly in the American Civil War. Trevelyan did not go deeply into the problem of these apparent inconsistencies. He always had a marked respect for the Quakers, but, it seems, for a reason which was peripheral to their main beliefs. He had links with them: one of his great-grandparents, Zachary Macaulay's wife, was born a Quaker; but his idea of them was formed from his reading, and they appealed to him because, with a wonderful record of philanthropic works, they were the least dogmatic of Christians. Their faith and *a fortiori* that of the churches did not appeal to him. He had deep emotions to which it would be impossible to deny the name of religious. Even in his early anti-clerical phase he wrote that the noblest Italians had recognized the eternal law of sacrifice, which he defined in a sentence from the New Testament;¹ but his beliefs were formulated by poets, not by theologians.

As a biographer Trevelyan wrote one masterpiece, his short life of his father, and two other valuable books which do not rise to that level. Both of them dealt with a political world whose manners he knew perfectly, and both with members of a family in whose neighbourhood in Northumberland Trevelyans had lived since the time of the American War of Independence. *Lord Grey of the Reform Bill* (1920) took its place as a standard work. One reviewer who was far from sympathizing with the Whig statesmen wrote that in dealing with some incidents the author's zeal for proving their wisdom outran his discretion; but even this critic's general verdict was 'Mr. Trevelyan's treatment is excellent'.² The other book *Grey of Fallodon* (1937) is a personal memoir, a first-hand authority, and perhaps no other book will ever bring so vividly before the reader those qualities which made Edward Grey uniquely impressive to see and hear. Besides the personal portrait, however, it deals with Grey's political life, and gives a straightforward defence of his foreign policy which does not deviate in anything of importance from his own point of

¹ *Garibaldi's Defence of the Roman Republic* (1907), p. 19.

² The Rev. W. Hunt, in *English Historical Review*, xxxv (1920), p. 457.

view. At a time when historians were dissecting the diplomatic correspondence of Grey and his contemporaries sentence by sentence, questioning everything, this was inevitably criticized, but there was room enough for a book which should not bring into account all this voluminous 'literature'. It would be less unfair to say that the book leaves aside some parts of its own subject. It neither directly asks nor answers by implication the question whether Grey's abilities were equal to the demands of his historic position. Trevelyan was not a prying student of human nature. While the prevailing fashion in biographical writing all over Europe was transformed by new tendencies in psychology, he carried on the older tradition which suited his own character. He was a hero-worshipper. Much as he owed to Carlyle, his hero-worship did not exalt the few by disparaging the many. He did not admire indiscriminately; when provoked he had a good vocabulary for contempt ('most muddle-headed fellow I ever came across', or even 'vulgar beast'); but he lived by admiration, and this quality is itself heroic. It was not only that he responded to greatness; he responded to worth wherever he saw it; his genius was for appreciation.

At the age of fifty-one he came back as Regius Professor of Modern History ('as proud as a peacock', he wrote in a letter) to a Cambridge which had changed in many things and not least in those which concerned him immediately. The faculty of which he was the head had increased greatly in numbers; the introduction of research degrees had created a new class of advanced students; historical science was well established, both in the sense that much attention was paid to systematized technique and in the sense that historians were contributing to the academic study of society. Several of the Cambridge residents were historians of international standing. The experience of living and working among them deepened and widened Trevelyan's view of history, not only perhaps by smoothing down what remained of his allergies, but also by leading his interest into new directions. His friendship with Clapham left definite traces in an increased emphasis on economic factors in his writings from this time. As professor he laid down for himself the plan of writing a major work, a history of England during the reign of Queen Anne, a plan which he faithfully carried out. Each of the three volumes has a separate title, but they form one whole, completed about seven years after it was projected. With the public it succeeded perhaps less well than it might have done, because before it was finished Winston Churchill was

covering the same ground in the forceful volumes of his *Marlborough*; but, whether for the general reader or for the historical inquirer, almost everyone would agree that it is Trevelyan's greatest work. In learning and judgement it is the most mature, and it still has his poetry. Since it was written many articles and not a few books have covered various parts of the subject, and one aspect of it has been subjected to the preliminary processes of revision. Thirty years have gone by, but it still keeps its place as the standard work.

It has often been said that Trevelyan regarded this book as a continuation of Macaulay. His own explanation in the *Autobiography* shows that this was no more than a fancy at the back of his consciousness; he had other inducements, arising from his thought and reading, for choosing this period, and he decided to work on a smaller scale than Macaulay's. When it was finished the book seemed to him to fill the gap between Macaulay and Lecky, as indeed it does. He thought very highly of Lecky and he was much put out when he discovered that Lecky's books were all out of print and no publisher was willing to reprint them. Lecky's reputation had suffered from a change of fashion. As early as 1924 Keith Feiling, in his *History of the Tory Party*, had drawn attention to arguments on the side of Tory statesmen from the time of Charles II to that of Queen Anne which Macaulay, Lecky, and Trevelyan himself had overlooked. His book was a work of research, bringing new materials into play, including manuscript materials. It was written, as so many admirable books have been written, by a busy man whose knowledge enabled him to seek and find the answers to crucial questions. Trevelyan took the opportunity of his Romanes Lecture in Oxford, to welcome it warmly. He added some prescient sentences: 'We are only at the beginning of serious research into the party system as an institution in English life. . . . The history of party, if it ever came to be fully written, would be a new method of approach to English history as a whole.'

As it happened another historian was at work who approached this subject from a completely different starting-point and with a different method.¹ Lewis Namier looked at political parties in

¹ It is perhaps worth while to amplify the statement of one historian that Namier 'was completing the research, on which he had been working intermittently since 1912 . . . [on] the first ten years of George III'. Namier's project was formed in or about 1912, but from 1913 his research was virtually suspended, to be completed in a period of concentrated activity from 1925 to 1929. Among the antecedents of his method was the work of Moisei

England and America with the sceptical eye of an East European. He had his own view of human nature. His first two volumes on the years immediately before and after the accession of George III were published in the year before Trevelyan's *Blenheim*. They demolished some of the Whig allegations which, though never unchallenged, had been incorporated in the usually accepted version of English history. This they did with the more effect because Namier had worked through more books and more manuscripts on this subject than anyone had ever read before. They were announced as the precursors of other volumes which were to bring a like transformation of English political history, at least for the age of the American Revolution. Their ample contribution to knowledge strongly encouraged the tendency to believe that 'total cover', the study of everything that might be relevant, would give more certain and more illuminating results than the old method of *prudens quaestio dimidium scientiae*, or the patrician method of leaving the details to subordinates.

The subsequent course of these studies was to show that the task was more, even for thirty years of the eighteenth century, than one man, even an exceptional man, could accomplish. The diplomatic historians, with their comparatively narrow focus, were finding already how difficult it was to work with unprinted materials. Those who worked on contemporary events were kept busy by a succession of immense series of printed dispatches and departmental minutes; but earlier periods had to be studied in limitless manuscript records. Namier's experience was like theirs. Disappointed in some of his projects (such as that for a complete publication of the many volumes of Newcastle Papers in the British Museum), he turned to creating a great official machine for organizing the history of parliament. He was never able to continue the book which had made Lecky undeservedly appear a dilettante.

A year after Trevelyan's *Blenheim* and Namier's third volume a short book appeared with the preface dated from Cambridge, which first made the name of Herbert Butterfield widely and favourably known. Its place in the movement of thought cannot be fixed precisely because it mentions by name no historian then living except Monsieur Romier, but it is in the main a polemic against the presuppositions and methods of some twentieth-

Yakovlevich Ostrogorskii, which was known in England from the time of his publication in the *Annales de l'École Libre des Sciences Politiques* of 1889; but there is no reason to suppose that it had come to Trevelyan's notice.

century English historians, and the title, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, led many readers to think that Trevelyan must be one of these. There are indeed several passages in which it is difficult to guess who else could be glanced at. The positive value of the book lies in its attempt to work out the nature of historical research and of a kind of general history which should not disguise the full complexity of causation or pass too lightly over the eternal problems of identity and difference. Some of the tendencies which the negative arguments attack are brought in by boldly giving a very wide application to the term 'Whig'. One, which as we have seen was Macaulay's but only in his earlier days Trevelyan's, was judging the past by the standards of the present. Another, akin to it, was the division of men and movements of the past into progressive and reactionary, which again was a fault rather of his earlier than of his later books. A third, however, came nearer home, 'the tendency to patch the new research into the old story even when the research in detail has altered the bearings of the whole subject'. Before the little book was written, Trevelyan had anticipated that he might be criticized on some such line as this, and he had given his answer: 'If I have not produced a new and startling theory about the policies and personalities of the Whigs, the High Tories and the Moderate Tories, about the characters of Anne and Marlborough, I can only plead, to those to whom the plea may seem relevant, that any new and startling theory would have been wrong.'¹

These were not the words of a middle-aged man who was no longer open to conviction. Few of his contemporaries were more attentive to criticism, even grateful for it, and this was still as true of him as it was when he radically revised the constitutional history in his *England under the Stuarts* to make way for the more favourable view of the monarchy's case put forward by Sir William Holdsworth in the sixth volume of his *History of English Law* (1924). He did indeed always work by incorporating the new knowledge into the old, a more exacting labour than that of rediscovering facts, or that of throwing out novel ideas. He knew the old books and the old ways as few men have known them; his modesty and his appreciativeness alone would have prevented him from becoming an iconoclast, and there was more besides. He was not one of the fastidious spirits who shrink from the contamination of the obvious. There was no tedium for him in the twice-told tales of Marlborough and Wren and Newton,

¹ *Blenheim*, Preface, p. vii.

of Locke, Bentley, Swift, Addison, Pope, and Bolingbroke. But the fundamental reason for his choice of method was his sense of veracity.

He never deviated from his belief that the same book should make its appeal both to the general reader and to the historical student. Among his many books some were composed for special classes of readers. Such are his two text-books on English history, one on the whole of it and the other on the nineteenth century. Both have been criticized for inequalities and mistakes of detail; but few historians who have written so much have lapsed so seldom from their best level, and fewer still have disseminated their best so widely. His unremitting literary productiveness formed an inseparable unity with his public work, so that he made people of all kinds aware that they might live familiarly with natural beauty and with high human achievements. If Whig historians erred in judging the past by the present, Trevelyan atoned for their sins by confronting the present with splendours from the past.

In life and in letters, he strove to exert an influence, and not in vain. His influence was exerted through so many channels that its extent cannot be charted. Some of the best historians now at work, not all of them in England, may be described in one respect or another as his followers. He stimulated some of the vital movements of thought among historians, such as the new creativeness in local history. In the immense mass of current historical publications in English wherever there is good writing and a sense of public responsibility these are not only the merits which he desired to see, but merits which are owing in great part to him.

G. N. CLARK

Among the notices which have appeared since Trevelyan's death the following have been used in preparing this memoir: *The Times*, July 1962; Sir James Butler, *George Macaulay Trevelyan*, an Address given in Trinity College Chapel on 17 November 1962 (privately printed); G. Kitson Clark, 'G. M. Trevelyan as an Historian', in *Durham University Journal*, December 1962; The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest and Natural Beauty, *Report, 1961-62*.