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MACAULAY: THE ESSAYIST AS HISTORIAN

MACAULAY'S PLACE AS A HISTORIAN is secure, but his reputation as an essayist is not. Despite criticisms of his Whig bias and the strictures of "scientific" historiographers, his *History of England* is an acknowledged masterpiece. Yet even among Victorian critics such as Gladstone and Lord Acton who show the highest regard for the *History*, there is a tendency to deprecate the *Essays*.¹ In part this split verdict coincides with Macaulay's own judgment. Repeatedly in his correspondence he denigrated his early essays. Reluctant to re-publish his *Edinburgh Review* articles, he claimed that their natural life was only six weeks.² Referring to his article on Frederick the Great, Macaulay said:

I conceive that this sort of composition has its own character and its own laws. . . . Where the subject requires it, they [the periodical essays] may rise, if the author can manage it, to the highest altitudes of Thucydides. Then, again, they may without impropriety sink to the levity and colloquial ease of Horace Walpole's letters. . . . You will, however, perceive that I am in no danger of taking similar liberties in my History.³

It is clear that Macaulay did not want his forthcoming *History* compared with the *Essays*: it was to be his *magnum opus*, an achievement of a higher order, and therefore, he exaggerated the gulf between them.

In fact, however, the essayist is the father of the historian. There are, to be sure, differences in tone, in dignity of presentation, and in scope—which may be ascribed to the historian's maturity. But the substance, the point of view, the argument, as well as the theory of historiography underlying the essays, are not radically different from that of the *History*. To begin with, whether Macaulay was engaged in political controversy or reviewing the works of Dryden or Milton, he tended to take a historical point of view. The Whig

interpretation of the Revolution of 1688, for example, was expounded in his early Cambridge prize essay on William III (1822).⁴ His later essays, written after his return from India (1838), show an increasing concern for purely historical subjects. By the time he began composing the *History* (1839), it was clear that whatever else he wrote was either for supplementary research or for extending the scope of his projected *History*. The roles of the essayist and the historian merge into one another. In the words of Trevor-Roper, Macaulay's essays "are not to be distinguished, as a block, from the *History*: they are a series, leading up to and into the *History*. . . . They are a representative selection of his work."⁵

But one can go further. For Macaulay historiography is a literary art. As he said to Napier, the editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, "The particular department of literature which interests me most is history, above all, English history."⁶ Though one should not make too much of a casual remark taken from a letter, it is nevertheless significant that Macaulay assumed that there was no separation between literature and historical writing. This assumption, as we shall see, is at the very basis of his theory of historiography.

I

The fullest statement of Macaulay's theory of historiography is to be found in his review of Henry Neele's *The Romance of History* (1828). In this remarkable essay, written at the age of twenty-eight, Macaulay shows that he has read the major historians critically and has formed his own ideas regarding how they may be improved upon.⁷ He begins by defining the sphere of history and the function of the historian:

This province of literature is a debatable land. . . . 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. . . . 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 he finds, and to refrain from supplying deficiencies by additions of his own.⁸

Macaulay proceeds to criticize Herodotus, whose practice of inserting speeches and inventing dialogues for his personages vitiates the reliability of his narrative (VII, 168f.). Thucydides, on the other hand, receives high praise for his "art of historical narrative" (VII, 179), for he makes discriminant use of the available evidence. The ideal historian should relate no conversation or episode

unauthenticated by sufficient testimony (VII, 216). He must not interweave fact with fiction; in short, he must stick to truth.

But what is historical truth? Surely not the cumulation of facts and data and the chronological presentation thereof. Facts, per se, "are the mere dress of history" (VII, 180), and "a history in which every particular incident may be true may on the whole be false" (VII, 213). The historian must have the imagination, not only to recount the past, but to enliven it, structure it, and interpret it. In the essay on Mackintosh (1835), Macaulay says:

The object of the historian's imitation is not within him; it is furnished from without. It is not a vision of beauty and grandeur discernible only by the eye of his own mind, but a real model which he did not make and which he cannot alter. Yet his is not a mere mechanical imitation. The triumph of his skill is to select such parts as may produce the effect of the whole, to bring out strongly all the characteristic features, and to throw the light and shade in such a manner as may heighten the effect. (VIII, 426)

More will be said about selection and the other techniques of narration. The important thing is Macaulay's conception of the historical imagination as something in between mechanical fancy and the inner eye of the Romantic poets. To him imagination is one of the two controlling principles of historiography (reason being the other); it has a double function of re-creating the past and ordering it into a meaningful framework. In other words, it is both the mirror and the lamp.⁹

An interesting corollary to this concept of the imagination is Macaulay's theory and practice of ballad poetry. In the Preface to *The Lays of Ancient Rome* (1842) he suggests that the lost ballads of Latium contained the foundation of Roman history, that the folk songs were transmuted into funeral panegyric and chronicle, and that they served as links to recorded history (XII, 329f.). The historian could hope to retrieve the past through an imaginative identification with the lost poetry. He should become, as it were, suffused with the bardic spirit. In Macaulay's own *Lays*, the historical imagination becomes a catalyst synthesizing history and poetry.¹⁰

Macaulay develops his theory of historiography by using two analogies taken from the visual arts. Like landscape painting, "History has its foreground and its background: and it is principally in the management of its perspectives that one artist differs from another." (VII, 178) Moreover, like portrait painting, history cannot possibly reproduce the whole truth.

For, to be perfectly and absolutely true, it ought to record *all* the slightest par-

ticulars. . . . The omission of any circumstance, however insignificant, would be a defect. If history were written thus, the Bodleian library would not contain the occurrences of a week. (VII, 177)

Macaulay also thinks that historians should follow the examples of dramatists in the depiction of character. In this respect Tacitus is unrivalled in his portraits of Nero, Claudius, Otho; that of Tiberius is almost Shakespearean:

He [Tacitus] was to mark the gradual effect of advancing age and approaching death on this strange compound of strength and weakness; to exhibit the old sovereign of the world sinking into a dotage . . . yet to the last the keenest of observers, the most artful of dissemblers, and the most terrible of masters. (VII 197)

The art of writing history, says Macaulay, bears considerable affinity with dramaturgy, though he hastens to add that whereas the dramatist "creates", the historian must follow a given external. Their mode of conception may be different, but in execution the historian is very much like the dramatist (VII, 197-8).

Macaulay also exhorts historians to learn the art of appealing to the public from popular biographers. Voltaire's *Charles XII*, Marmontel's *Memoires*, Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, even Southey's *Life of Nelson*, says Macaulay, reach a public that no modern historian can hope to rival (VII, 212). Too frequently the historian ignores the biographical details essential to the art of narrative history.

But most striking is Macaulay's comparison of the historian to the novelist:

By judicious selection, rejection, and arrangement, he gives to truth those attractions which have been usurped by fiction. . . . Men will not merely be described, but will be made intimately known to us. The change of manners will be indicated, not merely by a few general phrases or a few extracts from statistical documents, but by appropriate images presented in every line. (VII, 216)

Acknowledging the debt of modern historians to Walter Scott, Macaulay urges that they "reclaim those materials which the novelist has appropriated" (VII, 217). The ideal historian must portray

ordinary men as they appear in their ordinary business and in their ordinary pleasures. He must mingle in the crowds of the exchange and the coffee-house.

He must obtain admittance to the convivial table and the domestic hearth. (VII, 216)

In other words, Macaulay is advocating no less than a history of the people using the techniques of the novelist, the dramatist, the biographer, and the poet.

The importance of Macaulay's essay on history should not be underestimated; for the fruition of the concepts outlined here not only provides a theoretical framework for the *History* but also explains its immediate popularity.¹¹ In the meantime, however, many of his earlier essays do not fulfill his own prescriptive goals of historiography. Typical examples are his reviews of John Hampden (1831), Lord Burleigh (1832), and Horace Walpole (1833). They are the by-products of a busy public career, which included debates over the Reform Bill and frequent dining-out at Holland House. Politics often interfere with judicious analysis; a polemical manner and a rhetorical style render a certain vivacity but little depth to these historical portraits. The errors in taste and judgement need no demonstration; understandably, Macaulay was reluctant to have these articles re-published when he was working on the *History*.

It was only after his return from India (1838), sobered by his experience as reformer of the legal and the educational system, that Macaulay seriously attempted to realize his goals of historiography. Writing to Napier, he projected a history of England between 1688 and 1832. The work was to be divided into three parts: the first was to deal with the period between the Glorious Revolution and the beginning of the Walpole administration; the second would lead up to the American Revolution; the final part would bring the narrative up to the eve of the Reform Bill.¹² Needless to say, Macaulay did not live even to complete the first third of his project. Nevertheless, he accomplished something of his original purpose in his later historical essays—not so systemically perhaps, but with some effectiveness. For though the formal *History* stops with the death of William III, Macaulay manages to deal with the entire 18th century in his essays. He wrote articles on Sir William Temple, Addison, Clive, Warren Hastings, Madame D'Arblay, Frederick the Great, and the Earl of Chatham. Very late in his career, he consented to do five biographical articles for the *Encyclopædia Britannica*; the subjects ranged from Bunyan and Atterbury to Johnson, Goldsmith, and William Pitt, the Younger.¹³ Carefully researched, vividly narrated, these essays show him in full control of his material. At times informal, at times dignified, they almost always reveal the maturation of a literary historiographer. An examination of three pieces—those on Chatham, Clive, and Warren Hastings—can best illustrate the workings of the essayist as historian.

II

Macaulay wrote two articles on William Pitt, Earl of Chatham. The earlier one (1834) traces his career up to the end of the Seven Years' War when England and Pitt stood at the apex of their fame. Relying heavily on Horace Walpole's *Letters and Memoirs* Macaulay surveys the political scene during the last years of George II's reign. The portrait of Pitt is, on the whole, just and sympathetic, but Macaulay does not attempt to explain the complexity of the man, concentrating instead on Pitt's Parliamentary maneuvers. The rise of the representative of Old Sarum to Secretary of State has an almost dramatic inevitability. Similarly, the reversal of England's fortune once Pitt was allowed to conduct the Seven Years' War is no less dramatic. Even the portrait of Pitt as the cynosure of the nation's patriotic feelings leaves the reader convinced of its historical veracity. But Macaulay fails to do justice to Pitt in one important respect: he seems to have missed Pitt's insight into the nature and object of the War—destruction of French commercial competition by defeating her fleet. In this early essay Macaulay proves that he has already acquired a certain narrative facility, but he was not yet skillful enough of a historian to interweave narration with biographical and diplomatic analyses.

The second article on Chatham (1844), on the other hand, is one of the most perspicuous historical essays Macaulay ever wrote. Almost 100 pages long, it is essentially a history of England between the accession of George III and the beginning of the American Revolution. During that time, Chatham was mostly out of office; however, his absence from public service was keenly felt by those in power and served as a check on the conduct of Cabinet officers. Macaulay keeps him looming in the background, emerging only at dramatic moments, full of pomp and ceremony.

But the real subject of the essay is political history, and Macaulay's knowledge of the entire period shows evidence of careful research. With great concision he begins with an account of the violent turnabout in domestic politics as a result of the king's alliance with the Tories. Unexpectedly Macaulay does not take the Whig point of view; neither does he defend George III's choice of ministers like Bute and Grenville. With moderation and detachment he analyzes each of the main characters, condemning only the patronage system that fosters graft and corruption. What emerges then is not a simple two-party conflict, but a series of shifting alliances, based on family ties, royal predilections, and personal enmities. It is to Macaulay's credit that he succeeds in rendering a vivid picture of the complex relations without oversimplifying or distorting them. Due to limitations of scope, his character analyses are perhaps

lacking in subtlety, but he brings to life all of the major figures of the period. Burke, Fox, North, Churchill and Wilkes—these are only a few of the chief actors of this political drama. Macaulay's narrative is always lucid even if he does not come up with any new interpretation of the history of this period.

His account of young Burke as a Rockingham Whig fighting for a liberal policy toward America is particularly illuminating. It combines narrative concision with acute political analysis.

The Stamp Act was indefensible, not because it was beyond the constitutional competence of Parliament, but because it was unjust and impolitic, sterile of revenue, and fertile of discontents. These sound doctrines were adopted by Lord Rockingham and his colleagues, and were, during a long course of years, inculcated by Burke. . . . (X, 352-53)

Thus Macaulay summarizes Burke's speeches. He also calls particular attention to the fact that Pitt and Burke took the same side on the issue of repealing the Stamp Act and that Burke spoke for the first time in the House of Commons when Pitt spoke for the last time (X, 357). It was as if history had intended that the liberal spirit of Pitt should not die with the man but be carried on by an even more eloquent statesman.

The essay on Chatham is also remarkable for its formal tone and the dignity of its prose, which rival the best passages of the History. Only the execution of Monmouth and the meditation following it (II, 109-11) can be compared with the account of Chatham's death. Macaulay's funeral oration is almost Shakespearean.

Chatham, at the time of his decease, had not, in both Houses of Parliament, ten personal adherents. . . . But death restored him to his old place in the affection of his country. Who could hear unmoved of the fall of that which had been so great, and which had stood for so long?

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The chief mourner was young William Pitt. After the lapse of more than twenty-seven years, in a season as dark and perilous, his own shattered frame and broken heart were laid, with the same pomp, in the same consecrated mould.

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Chatham sleeps near the north door of the Church. . . . Mansfield rests there, and the second William Pitt, and Fox, and Grattan, and Canning, and Wilberforce. . . . The time has come when the rash and indiscriminate judgments which his contemporaries passed on his character may be calmly revised by history. And history . . . will yet pronounce that, among the eminent men whose bones

lie near his, scarcely one has left a more stainless, and none a more splendid name. (X, 382-84)

With measured cadence, Macaulay's prose moves through time and space. The past is evoked and placed alongside the present; partisan strife evaporates; death resolves all. It is in passages such as these that Macaulay realizes his ideal of fusing history and literature.

III

Macaulay's essays on Clive (1840) and Warren Hastings (1841) together make up a history of British India during the 18th century. More than two hundred pages long, they trace the growth of English coastal merchants from soldiers of fortune into rulers of the sub-continent. Coerced by Franco-British rivalry, tempted by native weakness, corrupted by the ravenous appetites of the East India Company for profit, a handful of soldiers and clerks, led by Clive and Hastings, carved out an empire. Their exploits are truly comparable to those of Cortez and Pizarro, whom Macaulay mentions at the beginning of "Clive".

It hardly needs demonstration that these two essays contain superb examples of what John Clive has called Macaulay's "propulsive imagination".¹⁴ Every school boy knows the Black Hole of Calcutta, the heroism of Clive at Arcot, the execution of Nuncomar, the impeachment of Warren Hastings. No historian has been able to impress so vividly upon the public those scenes of Anglo-Indian history. "Clive", especially, is propelled by a vigorous narrative technique. Description alternates with dramatic action; politics in England relieves the monotony of military exploits; the personal bravery of Clive is contrasted with the machinations of Dupleix, his Gallic counterpart. Their fortunes rise and fall as though governed by contrary stars. Bold contrast and juxtaposition give the impression of great speed.

Another device speeding up the narrative is the use of rapid transition. Almost at random we come upon the following passages:

Clive returned to Madras victorious, but in a state of health which rendered it impossible for him to remain there long. He married at this time a young lady of the name of Maskelyne. . . .

Almost immediately after the marriage, Clive embarked with his bride for England. He returned a very different person from the poor slighted boy who had been sent out ten years before to seek his fortune. He was only twenty-seven; yet his country already respected him as one of her first soldiers. There was then a general peace in Europe. (IX, 214-15)

The shift from India to England, from personal matters to conditions in Europe may seem sudden, yet it is not disruptive. Clive's exploits are both the result and the cause of Franco-British hostilities. It seems dramatically logical that his return to England should coincide with peace in Europe: having reversed the fortunes of the French, there is, for the moment, nothing for him to do in India. Macaulay's transition is, thus, an integral part of his narrative technique. It not only moves the story along but also gives us a larger perspective of individual achievement.

"Clive" is also one of the most carefully plotted of Macaulay's essays. Structured on the hero's three trips to India, the essay is built around several key episodes, each of which climaxes a particular period in his life. The Siege of Arcot (IX, 206f.) represents Clive's first act of heroism, by means of which the wheel of fortune is turned against the French. The Black Hole of Calcutta and its aftermath climax the second period: Clive achieves military and political supremacy in Bengal, but at the price of indelible stain on his moral character (IX, 227f.). His third and last sojourn is a period of administrative reforms. As governor-general of Bengal, he cleans up the civil service and consolidates the British rule in India. Although Clive's military genius wins him epic fame, it is his reforms that lay the foundation of an empire.

"Warren Hastings" is also distinguished by swift pace, bold juxtaposition, and rapid shifts of scenery. Here the emphasis is on political and legal disputes, though some of the most memorable passages describe the effects of war and pillage on the Rohillas (IX, 438f.). In the first part of the essay, Hastings carries on the reforms left unfinished by Clive's death. Despite Macaulay's condemnation of specific acts (such as the war against the Rohillas), Hastings emerges as one of the great colonial administrators (IX, 498f.). Macaulay's own experience in drafting the Indian Penal Code puts him in a particularly good position to evaluate the legal reforms initiated by Hastings.

The impeachment of Warren Hastings takes up the second part of the essay and deserves to be considered separately. The scene shifts to the House of Commons, and Burke becomes the central character. Macaulay's account of the seven-year trial combines perspicuous reportage with a sense of dramatic involvement. The charges are clearly stated; the plaintiffs and the defendants are lined up on opposite sides of the court room; and though the reader knows all along that Hastings will be acquitted, the pageantry remains engrossing. Macaulay's success is, perhaps, explicable in terms of his own description of Burke's imagination:

In every part of those huge bales of Indian information which repelled almost all

other readers, his mind . . . found something to instruct or to delight. His reason analysed and digested those vast and shapeless masses; his imagination animated and coloured them. Out of darkness and dullness, and confusion, he formed a multitude of ingenious theories and vivid pictures. He had, in the highest degree, that noble faculty whereby man is able to live in the past and in the future, in the distant and in the unreal. . . . All India was present to the eye of his mind. (IX, 513-14)

It was the same with Macaulay: fresh from India, he transmuted his recently acquired knowledge and experience into one of the most brilliant accounts of legal and political battle.

In our own age, when the very foundation of imperialism is fast crumbling, when we are repelled by the hypocrisy and brutality of what the French used to call *la mission civilisatrice*, we are tempted to dismiss Macaulay's essays as imperialistic propaganda. Yet "Clive" and "Warren Hastings" stand up as history: not merely because Macaulay's narrative method is effective, not even because he succeeds in imparting that sense of epic grandeur to his *conquistadores*; but because he is also able to delineate and elucidate the intricacies of civil law and government. If the growth of constitutional liberty is the theme of Macaulay's *History*, then the establishment of an empire based on law is the dominant motif of "Clive" and "Warren Hastings".

IV

It has been the purpose of this essay to explore the relation between Macaulay the essayist and the historian. To begin with, there is no separation between the two, although the reputation of the latter overshadows that of the former. Even in his earliest writings, Macaulay sees history in literary terms. Historiography is a literary art in the theoretical or philosophical sense because the historian draws upon human experience as does the writer. History is a department of literature because the historian uses the same tools as the poet, the dramatist, the biographer. Above all, he is like the novelist who must choose a point of view, select details for emphasis, analyze characters, and arrange his materials into a meaningful pattern.

In his early essays, Macaulay tended to adopt a polemical manner, relying on paradox, hyperbole, and other rhetorical devices. Although his narrative method may be occasionally effective, it lacks depth as history. After his return from India, Macaulay stayed clear of controversy, avoiding polemical reviews which might distract him from the *History*, choosing to write only on subjects that would complement or supplement his historical research. As a result, the

best of his later essays often rise to the tone and style of the *History*. In "Clive" and "Warren Hastings" he demonstrates vividly the art of narrative history; in "Chatham" he fuses political biography and Parliamentary history to yield a synthesis of an age. If the *History* represents Macaulay's highest achievement, then these essays show the growth and development of a historical consciousness, without which the *History* is inconceivable. Ultimately, it is impossible to reach a full understanding of the historian without appreciating the essayist.

1. W. E. Gladstone, *Gleanings of Past Years (1845-76)* (London, 1879), II, Chap. VI; Lord Acton, *Letters of Lord Acton to Mary Gladstone* (London, 1904), p. 285.
2. *Selections from the Correspondence of Macvey Napier* (London, 1879), p. 393. Hereafter cited as *Letters*.
3. *Letters*, p. 383.
4. This essay was recently published in the *Times Literary Supplement* (1 May 1969), pp. 468-69.
5. H. R. Trevor-Roper, "Introduction", *Macaulay's Essays* (New York, 1965), p. 17.
6. *Letters*, p. 145.
7. C. H. Firth, *A Commentary on Macaulay's 'History of England'* (London, 1938). Chapter II contains an excellent summary of Macaulay's criticisms.
8. *The Works of Lord Macaulay* (Albany Edition; 12 vols.; London, 1898), VII, 167-68. Hereafter cited in the text.
9. Macaulay's view coincides with those of modern historians. See, e.g., R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946), pp. 240f; Herbert Butterfield, *History and Human Relations* (New York, 1952), pp. 232f.
10. For a recent view, see R. Weber, "Singer and Seer: Macaulay on the Historian as Poet", *Papers on Language and Literature*, III (1967), 210-19.
11. Anyone acquainted with the famous third chapter must admit that Macaulay has realized his goals of social history. According to C. H. Firth, the entire *History* "is the practical exemplification of the views set forth in his essay."
12. G. O. Trevelyan, *Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay* (New York, 1878), II, 19-20.
13. In *The Boundaries of Fiction: Carlyle, Macaulay, Newman* (Princeton, 1968), George Levine, agreeing with Arnold, says that "large tracts of Macaulay's sensibility never entered the 19th century" (p. 83). For an analysis of Macaulay's intellectual affinities with the 18th century, see my "Macaulay and Johnson", *Univ. of Toronto Quarterly*, 40 (Fall 1970), 27-40.
14. J. Clive, "Macaulay's Historical Imagination", *A Review of English Literature*, I (1960), no. 4, pp. 25-26.