

May 1956

266

THE MONTH

v. 15

deserved that name, is being torn asunder. In Cyprus and Greece, in the tension between Isreal and the Arab states and between India and Pakistan, there is little comfort; in France, Italy and Greece the trend is unmistakably towards Popular Front régimes and a reversal of alliances; the economic crisis in Britain will be increasingly exploited by Moscow's agents with a view to producing friction between London and Washington over the question of trade with the Iron Curtain powers.

Future indiscretions by Moscow may arrest the present centrifugal tendencies within the West; fear may once more act as a unifying agent; but, as the Kremlin's peace offensive has already demonstrated, a Western unity based only on fear can be easily dispersed by a subtle exploitation of post-Christian man's fear of atomic annihilation. A messianic faith alone can unite the West. It was the Faith that inhibited the totalitarian tendencies of Italian Fascism and the Spanish Falange, as it was the Faithful who offered the most determined resistance to Nazi totalitarianism.

Yet so powerful is the influence of naturalism that any attempt to unite the West under Christian leadership is likely to meet determined and uncompromising resistance. Witness the sabotage of E.D.C. by both the major political parties in this country as well as by the laicists in France; and the readiness of the latter to unite with the Communists and thus jeopardise the security of the nation rather than grant elementary justice in education to the Catholic citizens of the Republic. The unpleasant truth is that so long as the dominant tone of our society is post-Christian, Western unity will continue to be elusive. If the Kremlin can maintain the unity, and thus the striking power, of the régime, then, unless there is a decisive spiritual awakening in the West in the immediate future, there is no reason why Soviet Communism should not be able to achieve its immediate goal of isolating the U.S. and of dominating India and what remains of free Europe long before 1984.

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF HERBERT BUTTERFIELD¹

By

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SOME PEOPLE have compared Professor Butterfield with Lord Acton, as an historian; and, though Butterfield has published several important books while Acton published none in his lifetime, the comparison is just. It is quite possible that, Mr. Butterfield's increasing influence and power of imagination considered, the twenty-first century will acknowledge its debt to him as frankly as our generation owns its debt to Acton. This present little book, founded on Professor Butterfield's recent Wiles Lectures at Belfast, displays his philosophical penetration into the essence of history, and his great scholarship, as well as anything in his previous work, and may exercise a power upon the minds of writers and teachers of history, in the long run, more remarkable than his already pervasive insights and suggestions contained in *George III, Lord North, and the People*, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, *Christianity, Diplomacy, and War*, and his other historical essays.

Recently I lectured on "The Age of Boredom in English Letters." I was not very cheerful; but some people in my audience protested, justly, that I had not said enough about one field of letters in which English scholarship and style, and public appreciation, are flowering, rather than sinking into the sere and yellow leaf: history. Just so. There still is an intelligent public for serious historical studies, if these books are marked by some degree of imagination; our present discontents have stimulated a commendable appetite for real knowledge of the past, from which most worldly wisdom is derived. And our time of troubles has encouraged, in England particularly, a revival of philosophical historical speculation of the highest order. (American historical

¹ *Man on his Past: the Study of the History of Historical Scholarship*, by Herbert Butterfield (Cambridge University Press 22s 6d).

writing, I must add, remains in sorry plight, for the most part, though there are scattered signs of a regeneration here, too, of which Professor Eric Voegelin's forthcoming volumes entitled *Order and Symbol* probably are the most important. One of the few judgments of Professor Butterfield with which I happen to disagree is this: "Yet when I reflect on the cultural leadership which the United States and Russia have come to enjoy since the Second World War—and when I compare this with the situation of twenty years ago—I am staggered to see how such matters are affected by a mere redistribution of power." The "cultural leadership" of America and Russia now manifest is not, I fear, cultural as Mr. T. S. Eliot defines culture.)

Well, in this resurrection of historical wisdom, Mr. Butterfield has had a most important role—more important, I am inclined to think, than Professor Toynbee's role will be judged by the rising generation. The immense bank and capital of Christian wisdom gives to the work of Mr. Butterfield, as to that of Mr. Christopher Dawson and others, a force superior to that of the rationalist historians who for a century dominated modern scholarship; and Mr. Butterfield joins to this legacy gifts of intuition and interpretation rare even in the noble bulk of English historical scholarship. Systems founded upon pure philosophy rarely endure beyond the generation which created them, as Professor Butterfield suggests; but letters and scholarship rooted in the solid ground of religious tradition live on and on. "The historian who survives seems to be the one who in some way or other gives hints of a deeper tide in the affairs of men," Mr. Butterfield writes. "If those whom the general reader has chosen for survival are considered by the professional scholar to have been in some sense unworthy of so great an honour, it does not appear that either the verdict of the profession or the history of historiography is going to alter that decree." Professor Butterfield, I feel sure, will be one of the survivors when, a century from now, "the author of a hundredweight of heavy historical tomes has them piled upon his grave, to hold him securely down." But neither will really competent professional scholars presume to dispute Butterfield's right to survival. So it is with Acton, upon whom Mr. Butterfield is the keenest of commentators.

Man on his Past is a series of essays into the history of historiography, concerned especially with the work and influence of

Acton and Ranke. I hope that it may compel various teachers of history to re-read the books of those two powerful minds—or, perhaps, to read them for the first time. What passes for historiography even at the better American universities (and I cannot speak with any authority of such studies at the English and continental universities, though I know something of the Scottish, which are in a fairly healthy condition in this respect) is chiefly cant and slogan, founded upon a hasty reading of hasty rationalistic commentaries upon great historical works which even the lecturer has not condescended to read. (Professor Allan Nevins's little book on historians, widely used as a text in the United States, is a discouraging example of this superficiality and positive ignorance of scholarship.) I know of a professor at a middlewestern university who takes Professor Toynbee's works for Holy Writ; and yet he did not hesitate to announce to his class in historiography, "Of course I haven't read *A Study of History*. I've read Somervell's abridgement. You have to go to jail to find time to read the original." This refreshing candour, for which there is much to be said, is unfortunately rare, so that the student takes his lecturer's utterances as founded upon the most thorough study—and passes on cant and slogan, in turn, to the lower echelons of the vast dull educational system. Now Professor Butterfield eschews cant as thoroughly as did Samuel Johnson; and he will get a hearing; and the teachers of historiography may begin to perceive that every generation ought to read afresh the principal works of the really important historians. They may learn, too, that history cannot be, after all, an exact science, and that one of its principal virtues is its acknowledgement of the mystery that envelops the greater currents of human affairs.

I cannot undertake here any sufficient summary of Mr. Butterfield's analysis of Acton and of Ranke. The cogency of his criticisms may be suggested, however, by the following passages from *Man on his Past*. The first is the gist of his view of Acton's accomplishment; Acton believed that—

"It is the office of historical science to maintain morality as the sole impartial criterion of men and things" and that "To develop and perfect and arm conscience is the great achievement of history." He recognised that this applied in the field of historical research; and he saw that pupils of Ranke, though intellectually inferior to their master, were quickly able to surpass him in the development of

their method. He insists, however, that all this has reference only to what he calls "the mere grammar of the work." And he adds: "We want brains for the higher objects of history—the difference between knowledge of facts and the energetic understanding of their significance is so serious." For him, historical study has a peculiar relationship not only with morality but also with religion. . . . In all these illustrations there was something important which Acton was seeking to express. Furthermore, for him there existed a kind of historical thinking which was co-ordinate with scientific thought and capable of functioning when one's history is at various levels of generalisation. Over and above this, there were ways, no doubt, in which he gave to technical history a sovereign role which it ought not to be allowed to claim. Some might regard this as the result of theorising about history; but the person who studies the past without examining his assumptions is liable to fall into the same error through what I might call absent-mindedness. . . . It has been suggested that from about 1900 the nineteenth-century rivalry between the historian and the scientific view of things was finally resolved by the victory of the scientist. If Acton's notions of the prospects and the importance of history now seem to go too far, this change in the world since 1900 may help to account for the differences between his view of the matter and ours. It may also help to explain why we have since become more the masters of things, but have not equally progressed in our attempts to deal with human relations.

Now Professor Butterfield is a true disciple of Acton in this that he does not confound the mere knowledge of facts and the energetic understanding of their significance. As Mr. Butterfield himself writes, "In the last resort, sheer insight is the greatest asset of all." But he appreciates the necessity, nevertheless, for a proper mastery of the pertinent facts—which, as he discloses in his article on "Lord Acton and the Massacre of St. Bartholomew" (the concluding chapter in this book), Acton failed to obtain when he endeavoured to plumb the depths of that old controversy. Mr. Butterfield's own careful scholarship, lit up by high imaginative gifts, ought to go far to redress the balance in favour of the historian, as opposed to the scientist; and to help us learn afresh that we the living, in our relations with one another, need always to remember how, in Le Bon's phrase, "the dead alone give us energy."

As for Mr. Butterfield's examination of Ranke, I offer the following observation, courageously superior to the shabby

generalisations about that scholar which lumber through nearly all the popular accounts of nineteenth-century thought:

Some of us may believe that in his capacity as an "official historian" Ranke made decisions that are to be regretted, but it is a mistake to see him as a man eager to reflect the Prussian and nationalistic developments in nineteenth-century Germany. The fact that he abstracted himself from the contemporary scene was the reason why he was so greatly reproached by his fellow-countrymen; and it is the reason why so much of his thinking continues to have relevance for us, even after the nineteenth century has passed. At one moment, in order to assist in safeguarding the world against some of the dangerous tendencies of his time, he tried to frighten King Maximilian of Bavaria with two of the most dreaded bogeys in that generation. In his hostility to the idea of the absolutist state he said that if such an idea ever became realised in Germany, the result would be first of all the establishment of a republic, and then the installation of Communism. By such remarks as this we can measure his animosity against any notion of absolutism.

A generous toleration of this character runs through Mr. Butterfield's whole historiographical essay. As he writes, "It is possible for us to be right in our criticism of their [Ranke's school's] views, and yet be more superficial than they themselves were. It is possible for us to be more slipshod in our subservience to the fashions of the mid-twentieth century than these men were in relation to the different ideas of a hundred years ago." And he proceeds to relate this prudent thesis to present questions of international history and abstract generalisation. Mr. Butterfield himself never falls into this pit.

The reader will not find *Man on his Past* to be a systematic treatise upon historical method; rather, it is a vindication of the role of the general historian, as distinguished from that of the specialist, the chronicler, and the antiquary. His main intention "is to provide examples of the varied ways in which the history of historiography may be approached by those who wish to carry its study into regions of fresh discovery." His own asides are often his best instances of fresh discovery in this broad field.

One of these expeditions of discovery is Mr. Butterfield's description of Edmund Burke as an historian: "It was Edmund Burke who—having recovered contact with the historical achievements of Restoration England—exerted the presiding

influence over the historical movement of the nineteenth century at least in respect of the point that we are now considering [historical-mindedness].” He shares Acton’s conviction that “behind this whole aspect of the historical movement [the reaction against eighteenth-century rationalism] there stands the figure of Edmund Burke”; and, with Acton, he recognises the high importance of Burke’s *Abridgement of English History*, which some scholars have so much underestimated as to doubt even Burke’s authorship of the work. History, Acton wrote, “hails from Burke as Education from Helvetius, or Emancipation from the Quakers.” This is the old Acton writing. Mr. Butterfield himself better understands Burke, and Burke’s general principles, than either the old Acton or the young Acton did, but he endorses Acton in his judgment. In Butterfield’s pages, as in Burke’s and in Acton’s, what Acton called “the missing ingredient of imagination”—missing, that is, from the work of the eighteenth-century *philosophes* and that of the nineteenth-century rationalist historians—is restored to its proper ascendancy.

Another sample of Professor Butterfield’s imaginative prescience is his section on “The Idea of Providence” in his lecture on “Ranke and the Conception of ‘General History’”—a valuable supplement to his observations on the same theme in his earlier books. Ranke, he points out, though he talked much of Providence, removed Providence to the periphery of the story. Acton, after some vacillation, identified Providence with Progress, declaring that unless Progress exists, there can be no God in history. Newman—at least in Acton’s view—saw God working only upon the inner life of man, in biography but not in history. Providence operating upon personalities, but not upon great historical events. Mr. Butterfield himself argues that there is more than one level at which men can do their thinking, and that Providence remains a reality, though often a reality incapable of mundane description and delimitation, that needs to be taken into account after the other levels of historical analysis have been explored. He takes Rome for his example, and concludes,

Thirdly, I may say that the fall of Rome was the judgment of God on a civilisation; perhaps also it was the best thing which the will of men allowed Providence to achieve at that moment; it was even the way to a better world, a harder and longer way because men themselves had closed up the more easy one. And here is

Providence which does not merely act (as Ranke’s Providence seems to act) at marginal points or by remote control, but which touches all the details and the intimacies of life, embracing even the other things that have been mentioned, since the world of free will and the world of law both lie within it. . . . And we, too, need not be the slaves of our analytical methods—we may still praise God, and not merely do honour to scientific laws, at the coming of spring; and we may thank Providence rather than Chance for those “conjunctions” which seem to matter so much both in life and in history.

Well! Here is a real mind at work, enlivened by what Coleridge properly called the imagination, as distinguished from the mere understanding. The scholar who becomes the slave of his own techniques, Mr. Butterfield suggests, cuts himself off from the deeper sources of wisdom; if he denies the possibility of any knowledge outside the compass of his own “scientific” method, he exposes our age to the danger of a general servitude to its own technology. The modern age requires a proper recognition of the several levels of study and analysis more than did any earlier age: the necessity is part of our growing-up. And Professor Butterfield is one of our ablest guardians against the *hybris* of technology and technical history—the better guardian for being perhaps the keenest historian of the part of science in modern civilisation. “The technical student in any branch of science or learning,” he writes, “is arguing in a circle if he thinks that his researches have in fact eliminated from life the things which for technical reasons he had eliminated in advance from his consideration. In reality, the poet, the prophet, the novelist and the playwright command sublimer realms than those of technical history because they reconstitute life in its wholeness. The history of historiography may help us to keep the technical historian in his place.”