



**J.A. FROUDE'S
THE REIGN OF
MARY TUDOR**
INTRODUCED AND SELECTED BY
EAMON DUFFY

J. A. Froude (1828–1894)
The Reign of Mary Tudor
(1860)

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J. A. FROUDE

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INTRODUCTION

Great historical writing, perhaps all historical writing, holds a mirror up to two different worlds: the age it sets out to describe, and the age in which it is written. The historian aims to understand and explain the past. But the questions historians bring to the past often reflect the anxieties and preoccupations of the present. Of no great historical work is this more true than James Anthony Froude's monumental 12-volume study of *The History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada*, published between 1858 and 1870.¹

Froude's intellectual career was stormy even by the contentious standards of Victorian England. Born in 1818, he was the fourth son of a stern West Country parson. His father was an old-fashioned, high and dry churchman, archdeacon of Totnes from 1820 till his death in 1859. His mother died two years after James Anthony's birth. The future historian was raised in a male-dominated household of rigid discipline and little overt affection, disapproved of at home and bullied at school. He was overshadowed by his brilliant, ebullient and egotistical eldest brother Hurrell, whose idea of toughening his timid and sickly sibling was to lower him head-first into a Devon stream and stir the mud with his hair.² Before his premature death from tuberculosis

in 1836, Hurrell was to become one of the founding fathers of the 'Tractarian' Movement, the Oxford-based, clerical ginger group which sought to recover and promote the Catholic aspects of the Anglican tradition. The publication of Hurrell Froude's inflammatory and opinionated literary *Remains* by his friend and admirer John Henry Newman in 1838 was both a turning point in the history of the movement, and a staging post on Newman's own journey into the Roman Catholic Church.

James Anthony arrived in Oxford just months before his brother's death, and fell at once under the spell of Newman's magnetic personality. His first historical work was a life of the Saxon St Neot, which he contributed to a hagiographical series on the English saints edited by the older man. Froude was never to lose his personal reverence for Newman, 'one of the ablest of living men'³, but he soon found himself repelled by Newman's religion, with its emphasis on the importance of dogma and the continuity of Catholic tradition. Unsettled by a *zeitgeist* in which traditional religious certainties seemed increasingly contradicted by advances in science and biblical criticism, Froude abandoned what he saw as the hot-house churchiness of Tractarianism. After much agonizing, he took refuge in a self-consciously low-church Protestantism, fiercely patriotic, deeply anti-clerical, dismissive of doctrine and ceremonial. Froude emphasized instead religion as moral goodness informed by faith in a providentialist God, known in the course of history by the individual conscience.⁴ For him, the triumph of the Reformation did not lie in the replacement of a Catholic creed by a Protestant one, for Froude himself had reservations about all creeds whatever. What Henry VIII and his daughter Elizabeth had achieved, instead, was the shattering of clerical power, and the

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liberation of the lay conscience from ecclesiastical control and nonsensical mumbo-jumbo. In the Tractarian nostalgia for the Catholic past and, even more, in the contemporary revival in England of the Roman Catholic Church, Froude saw a mindless retreat on superstition and intellectual oppression.

Victorian England was militantly Protestant. Yet disparagement of the Reformation was common among early Victorian writers. The great Whig historian, Thomas Babington Macaulay, valued the sixteenth-century break with the Papacy as a step away from obscurantism on the road to modernity. But he saw the Reformation itself as an ignoble episode, initiated by tyranny and driven by the basest of motives:

Elsewhere, worldliness was the tool of zeal. Here, zeal was the tool of worldliness. A King, whose character may best be described by saying that he was despotism itself personified, unprincipled ministers, a rapacious aristocracy, a servile Parliament, such were the instruments by which England was delivered from the yoke of Rome.⁵

For quite different reasons, the Tractarians also distanced themselves from the first Reformers, because they had repudiated the Catholic inheritance which the Oxford Movement now sought to reinstate. In one of the most notorious sentences in Hurrell Froude's *Remains*, James Anthony's brother declared the English Reformation to be 'a limb badly set – it must be broken again to be righted'. Newman too had cast a bleak eye on the founding fathers of Anglicanism: 'Cranmer will not stand examination', he had

written in 1838, 'the English Church will yet be ashamed of conduct like his'.⁶

These jaundiced views of the Reformation and its leaders had been given formidable scholarly underpinning by the work of a learned Catholic historian, the priest John Lingard. His soberly understated ten-volume *History of England*, completed in 1830, had marshalled new material from hitherto unexploited European archives into a deeply unflattering picture of the origin and progress of Henry VIII's break with Rome.⁷ Despite his suspect status as a Catholic priest, Lingard's scholarship was widely respected and, though he seldom mentioned him by name, Froude often had this influential Catholic historian firmly in his sights.

Froude's great *History* was therefore deliberately conceived as a defence of the English Reformation. It was, however, financial necessity that drove Froude to the writing of that history. In 1849 he published a lurid semi-autobiographical novel, *The Nemesis of Faith*, whose clerical hero is plagued by religious doubts, flirts with adultery and suicide, becomes a Roman Catholic and enters a monastery, but ultimately dies in despair. The scandal which erupted around this sensational novel changed the course of Froude's life. His horrified father disowned him, and he was forced to resign his Fellowship at Exeter College Oxford. To hold his Fellowship in the first place, he had been obliged to accept ordination as a deacon in the Church of England, despite his religious doubts. This unwanted clerical status now legally prevented Froude earning a living in any of the other professions. Married, and with a growing family, he settled in idyllic, if impoverished, seclusion at Plas Gwynant, near Snowdon in North Wales, in 1850. He commenced work as a jobbing journalist, writing reviews and essays for many periodicals. Froude also conceived

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the idea of a biography of Elizabeth I and began reading the available printed sources. As he became more absorbed, the scope of the project widened to take in the whole of the English Reformation, understood as 'a revolt against idolatry and superstition...of the laity against the clergy, and of the English nation against the papal supremacy'.⁸

Froude was fortunate in his timing. Until the early nineteenth century, the history of England had been written largely from printed sources: manuscript archives were mostly uncatalogued, difficult to locate and to gain access to, once located. Lingard had recognized the importance of going to the archives if old stereotypes were to be overthrown and had made pioneering use of manuscript material in the Vatican and other European depositories. But the bulk of the state papers for sixteenth-century England were not yet accessible to historians, the great Victorian publication of series of state papers not yet conceived.

By the time Froude came to write, however, that situation was changing. The Public Record Office had been established in Chancery Lane in London in 1838, the first step towards centralizing and opening to researchers the national archives, till then scattered in more than 50 different locations. The Deputy Keeper of the Public Records Sir Francis Palgrave had begun transcribing and calendaring the records for the reign of Henry VIII and made these transcriptions available to Froude. They provided him both with the framework for the early volumes of his history and with a sense of the sheer quantity of the treasure as yet unexplored. He moved to London to be near the sources and became a dedicated archival historian, searching out sixteenth-century papers not merely at the Public Record Office, but in great family collections like the Cecil Papers at Hatfield.⁹

For the Elizabethan volumes of his history, he would spend gruelling months in the heat, dust and uncatalogued chaos of the Spanish archives at Simancas.¹⁰

Froude's reliance on manuscript sources was his proudest boast as an historian. Nine-tenths of his source materials, he insisted, were manuscripts which no-one else had used. Ironically, that very claim became a favourite target of gleefully hostile reviewers. Froude worked rapidly on manuscript materials in five languages, under constant pressure of time, in atrocious conditions, too dark, too cold, too hot, often without the benefit of calendars or finding lists, and with no research assistants. Never a careful proofreader, and with no formal training in palaeography, he sometimes had to guess, as much as read, the meaning of the crabbed and blotted texts he was deciphering and he did not always guess right. In taking notes, sometimes he transcribed verbatim, sometimes he paraphrased. When reproducing his sources in print, he did not always distinguish between transcriptions and summaries. He could be sloppy and careless, and hostile readers pounced on the slips. But, considering the pioneering nature of the work and the circumstances in which it was executed, he made amazingly few major errors. More than a century on, no less an authority than the late Sir Geoffrey Elton endorsed the essential soundness of Froude's use of the English State Papers. And when the official Calendars of the State Papers relating to England in the Spanish archives were being prepared at the end of the nineteenth century, the editors found Froude's notes and transcripts a constant and reliable guide.¹¹

Froude always maintained that he had come to the writing of history with the usual inherited preconceptions and prejudices, but had had them blown away by exposure

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to the sources themselves.¹² In fact, his immense 12-volume narrative was profoundly shaped by his own tormented religious journey and by a distinctive and rather pessimistic world view which he brought to the sources, rather than derived from them. Having shaken free of the influence of Newman, Froude had fallen under the spell of the Scottish writer and thinker Thomas Carlyle. The fascination would last a lifetime and Froude was to become Carlyle's literary executor and, more controversially, his embarrassingly frank biographer.

Carlyle's greatest work was a history of the French Revolution, and his perception of human history was volcanic, not evolutionary. The world was indeed a moral arena in which the purposes of God worked themselves out, but always unpredictably, never gradually. The vital forces of present and future erupted shatteringly through the carapace of moribund social structures and outworn creeds. Carlyle despised optimistic Whiggish theories of the inevitability of progress through constitutional development and he identified modern democracy with the rule of little people. Instead, he believed that the spirit of the age and the great forces of change manifested themselves, for good and ill, not in the rank and file, but in the world-transforming figure of the hero – titanic individuals like Socrates, Julius Caesar, Jesus, Shakespeare, Cromwell, Frederick the Great and Napoleon.¹³

Though he would not have subscribed formally to all these ideas, they had a profound influence on Froude's understanding of the sixteenth century. He shared Carlyle's distrust of the masses, accepted contemporary racial theories which emphasized the innate superiority of some human beings to others (for example, of the English over

the Irish and of the white over the black races). He regarded the advent of Protestantism and the repudiation of papal authority as an immense blessing, a necessary step in the emergence of the modern world and of English values, and a prelude to future Imperial greatness. Yet he understood perfectly well that the majority of the English people in the sixteenth century would have preferred to remain Catholic, and that the Reformation was in fact imposed on the nation by Henry VIII and his daughter Elizabeth:

I regarded the reformation as the grandest achievement in English history, yet it was equally obvious that it could never have been brought about constitutionally according to modern methods. The Reformation had been the work of two powerful sovereigns...backed by the strongest and bravest of their subjects. To the last up to the defeat of the Armada, manhood suffrage in England would at any moment have brought back the Pope.¹⁴

It was the power of a personal monarchy, above all of Henry VIII, therefore, which had enabled and indeed enforced the transition to a new age. Though Froude recognized that there were monstrous aspects of Henry's life and actions, his instinct was to find a 'rational' justification for them and he considered that, for his great service to his people, Henry could be forgiven much. To his Victorian contemporaries, one of the most controversial aspects of Froude's history was this willingness to justify even the most autocratic and cruel actions of Henry, provided they had advanced the cause of Reformation. He defended even the law imposing boiling alive as a punishment for poisoners, and insisted that many of Henry's victims, including his executed wives, were justly

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punished for real crimes. Henry's Treason Act had introduced capital punishment for those unable to acknowledge the Royal Supremacy and was loathed by both by Catholic and by Whig historians as a prime example of tyrannical government attempting mind-control. Froude would have none of it:

There are times...when the safety of the State depends upon unity of purpose.... At such times the *salus populi* overrides all other considerations: and the maxims and laws of calmer periods for awhile consent to be suspended...I assume that the Reformation was in itself right...If this be allowed, those laws will not be found to deserve the reproach of tyranny. We shall see in them but the natural resource of a vigorous Government placed in circumstances of extreme peril.

It was indeed a matter of regret that:

in this grand struggle for freedom, success could only be won by the aid of measures which bordered on oppression.

but when all was said and done, the Catholics themselves were natural persecutors, and so had deserved the worst that was done to them:

here also the even hand of justice was but commending the chalice to the lips of those who had made others drink it to the dregs.¹⁵

In this spirit, Froude defended the executions of More and Fisher and the excruciating death by disembowelling of the