

A Commentary on Macaulay's History of England

Sir Charles Firth



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**A COMMENTARY
ON MACAULAY'S HISTORY
OF ENGLAND**

SIR CHARLES FIRTH



FRANK CASS & CO. LTD.
1964

**First published by Macmillan & Co. Ltd. in 1938
and now reprinted by their kind permission.**

**This edition published by Frank Cass & Co. Ltd.
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN**

**First edition 1938
Second impression 1964**

Transferred to Digital Printing 2005

ISBN 0 7146 1475 0

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INTRODUCTION

PRIOR to the great war Sir Charles Firth used to give from time to time a course of lectures on Macaulay's History of England. When he undertook the preparation of an illustrated edition of that work, published 1913-15 in six volumes by Messrs. Macmillan and Co., he began to revise his lectures in order to compile from them a commentary on the History. Unfortunately the task of revision was interrupted during the war and never resumed except to publish two articles, on Macaulay's Third Chapter¹ and Macaulay's Treatment of Scottish History,² which form chapters vi and viii of this book.

In a footnote to the latter article Sir Charles explained that it was

part of a series of lectures delivered at Oxford on Macaulay's History of England. Their object was not merely to criticise the statements made by Macaulay and the point of view adopted by him, but also to show the extent to which his conclusions had been invalidated or confirmed by later writers who had devoted their attention to particular parts of his subject, or by the new documentary materials published during the last sixty years. It was hoped thereby to encourage students to investigate the history of the period with an open mind, and to try to weave the new evidence into the tissue of the national story. Accordingly the notes indicate some of the recent monographs and publications of documents, though they do not profess to give an exhaustive list of them.

¹ I am indebted to the editor of History for permission to reprint this article substantially as it appeared in History, xvii, October, 1932.

² Scottish Historical Review, xv, July, 1918.

When I came to examine these lectures with a view to their publication I found that, adopting the order of the present book, chapters i-viii and x required little more than a certain amount of condensation and the verification of references and quotations.¹ For chapters ix, on Irish history, and xi, on Macaulay's errors, there were only outlines and many quotations and references. All I have ventured to do with them has been to expand the notes where they were too brief into a consecutive narrative and to link up the quotations. Chapters xii-xiv, on James II, Mary II, and William III, needed revising in accordance with marginal directions.² They already contained a certain amount of my work, for in 1915 the original lectures on the three sovereigns above mentioned were entrusted to me in order that I might try my 'prentice hand on the task of preparing them for the press. I worked constantly under Firth's supervision, so that although in places I am responsible for the form of words used, the arrangement and subject matter are his. I am responsible for most of the translations from French and German documents and have deliberately made the rendering literal.

Generally speaking, no attempt has been made to bring the work completely up to date. The commentary really represents the state of knowledge, about 1914, of the Revolution of 1688. On the other hand, I have not hesitated to change a few statements which the passage of time has invalidated. There seems, for instance, to be no point in retaining in the text a statement that William III's

¹ The editions cited throughout are those used in verifying references and quotations.

² It is clear from some detached notes that Sir Charles contemplated additions to the chapters on James and on William III, in order to include a discussion of James in exile and to show how Macaulay's character of William would have gained had the History been finished to 1702.

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letters to Bentinck remain unpublished, and then correcting it by a footnote to the effect that they have been published by N. Japikse.

The page references to Macaulay's History are to the aforesaid illustrated edition, but for the convenience of readers who may not have the edition, chapter numbers are supplied in parenthesis.

GODFREY DAVIES

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April 1937

CHAPTER I

THE GENESIS OF MACAULAY'S HISTORY

ENGLISH historians used to excel in the art of historical composition. Robertson, and Hume, and Gibbon earned European fame, not only as what were termed then ' philosophical historians ' but on account of the skill with which they arranged and constructed their narratives of the past. The art seems almost lost in England now. Since Macaulay himself there has been only one great narrative historian, Froude, and he is in many ways inferior to Macaulay. Other recent historians, whatever learning and whatever literary merits they possessed, did not possess the art of telling a story : they were able at most to describe a scene or relate an episode, but the long, sustained, harmonious narrative, was above their powers or below their aims. And this art of telling a story is so essential a qualification for writing history, that it is desirable to enquire into the nature of the art and investigate the practice of its great exponents.

Regarded as a mere record of facts Macaulay's History is almost equally worthy of study. Written from sixty to seventy years ago it still holds its place. No English historian has ventured to retell in detail the story of the Revolution and the reigns of James II and William III. A sort of superstitious terror seems to prevent them from treading in the enchanted circle where Macaulay's magic works. His History is still *the* authority on the period. Yet at the same time it has shortcomings which diminish

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its value as an authority. Some of its defects are the inevitable result of time. Since its composition new documents have come to light which invalidate some of his conclusions and disprove some of his statements of fact. No history that is written can escape this fate. It will be a part of my business to point out what these new authorities are, and to show how they affect the present value of his narrative.

There are other defects which are not due to the insensible action of time, but were present in Macaulay's History from the beginning. There are some books and some sources of information, accessible when he wrote, which he omitted to consult, and these too want pointing out. There were some sides of the period, and some episodes in the story, which, for one reason or another, he omitted, so that his story was incomplete, and attention will be called to these. Finally there are some serious errors, caused not by defects of knowledge on the part of the writer, but by defects of character, or intellectual defects. The narrowness of view, the partiality, and the prejudice, which mar large portions of Macaulay's History, seriously diminish its permanent value as an account of a period of English history. These faults are most marked in his treatment of certain persons, and certain classes, and they have led to a number of controversies on which every critic of Macaulay has to pronounce judgement and every student of Macaulay has to form an opinion.

Yet even those contemporary critics who were most biassed against the party for whom Macaulay held a brief, and most hostile to Macaulay personally, admitted at once the greatness of the History as a literary achievement. Lockhart, the editor of the Quarterly, wrote to J. W.

Crocker urging him to write an article upon it—and an unfavourable article too. 'If you could do it pure justice,' he said, 'nothing more is wanted to give the author sufficient pain.' At the same time he added that the History would always 'keep a high place among the specimens of English rhetoric', and confessed, 'I read the book with breathless interest, in spite of occasional indignations.'¹

Professional historians, equally sensible of the defects of Macaulay's method and the errors his book contained, have been more emphatic and more generous in their recognition of his achievement. Take for instance Lord Acton—no one was more revolted by the injustice and the prejudice which marked certain portions of Macaulay's History, and yet no one admired it more. 'He remains to me,' Acton admitted to Mary Gladstone, 'one of the greatest of all writers and masters, although I think him utterly base, contemptible and odious for certain reasons.' Nobody could say after this that Acton was blind to Macaulay's defects, but to him the possession by Macaulay and the exhibition in his History of certain technical merits of surpassing greatness seemed to compensate, and more than compensate, for those defects. In another letter to the same correspondent, Acton said :

When you sit down to read Macaulay, remember that the Essays are really flashy and superficial. He was not above par in literary criticism ; his Indian articles will not hold water ; and his two most famous reviews, on Bacon and Ranke, show his incompetence. The essays are only pleasant reading, and a key to half the prejudices of our age. It is the History (with one or two speeches) that is wonderful. He knew nothing respectably before the

¹ Croker Papers, ed. L. J. Jennings (1885), iii. 194-5. Lockhart to Croker, Jan. 12, 1849.

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seventeenth century, he knew nothing of foreign history, of religion, philosophy, science, or art. His account of debates has been thrown into the shade by Ranke, his account of diplomatic affairs, by Klopp. He is, I am persuaded, grossly, basely unfair. Read him therefore to find out how it comes that the most unsympathetic of critics can think him very nearly the greatest of English writers.¹

After this preamble, we will turn to consider the genesis of Macaulay's History, and to trace in his own letters the story of its conception and its production. The best introduction to Macaulay's History is perhaps the review he wrote, in 1835, of Sir James Mackintosh's history of the reign of James II.² There he states clearly and concisely the general views, about the place of the Revolution in English history, which he afterwards set forth in his five volumes. But it does not appear that he had as yet made up his mind to write upon it. The first indication of that resolution appears in a letter written three years later, and the scheme he originally formed was different from that which he finally carried out. The development of the scheme is clearly shown by the extracts from Macaulay's correspondence and diaries which Sir George Trevelyan has printed in his admirable life of his uncle.

It was in July 1838, whilst he was still in India, that Macaulay formed the plan of writing his History of England.

As soon as I return, I shall seriously commence my History. The first part, (which, I think, will take up five octavo volumes,) will extend from the Revolution to the commencement of Sir Robert Walpole's long administration; a period of three or four and thirty very eventful

¹ Letters of Lord Acton to Mary Gladstone (1904), pp. 326, 285.

² The best edition of Macaulay's Critical and Historical Essays is that by Professor F. C. Montague (3 vols. ; 1903).

years. From the commencement of Walpole's administration to the commencement of the American war, events may be despatched more concisely. From the commencement of the American war it will again become necessary to be copious. These, at least, are my present notions. How far I shall bring the narrative down I have not determined. The death of George the Fourth would be the best halting-place. The History would then be an entire view of all the transactions which took place, between the Revolution which brought the Crown into harmony with the Parliament, and the Revolution which brought the Parliament into harmony with the nation. But there are great and obvious objections to contemporary history. To be sure, if I live to be seventy, the events of George the Fourth's reign will be to me then what the American war and the Coalition are to me now.¹

Six months later, after further considering the matter, Macaulay came to the conclusion that he must prefix to his account of the Revolution not only a summary of the previous history of England, but a detailed narrative of the reign of James II.

I have thought a good deal during the last few days about my History. The great difficulty of a work of this kind is the beginning. How is it to be joined on to the preceding events? Where am I to commence it? I cannot plunge, slap dash, into the middle of events and characters. I cannot, on the other hand, write a history of the whole reign of James the Second as a preface to the history of William the Third; and, if I did, a history of Charles the Second would still be equally necessary, as a preface to that of the reign of James the Second. I sympathise with the poor man who began the war of Troy 'gemino ab ovo'. But, after much consideration, I think that I can manage, by the help of an introductory

¹ Letter to Napier, July 20, 1838. *The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay*, by George Otto Trevelyan (2 vols.; 1876), ii. 13-14.

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chapter or two, to glide imperceptibly into the full current of my narrative. I am more and more in love with the subject. I really think that posterity will not willingly let my book die.¹

In February 1839, Macaulay returned to England, became Secretary at War, and was admitted to Lord Melbourne's cabinet in the following September. The History which he had begun on March 9, 1839, 'with a sketch of the early revolutions of England', had to be suspended. It was therefore with a sense of relief that he welcomed the general election of July 1841, although he lost office and income in consequence of it.

I own that I am quite delighted with our prospects. A strong opposition is the very thing that I wanted. I shall be heartily glad if it lasts till I can finish a History of England, from the Revolution to the accession of the House of Hanover. Then I shall be willing to go in again for a few years.²

At last, towards the close of 1841, he was able to concentrate on the work of his life.

I have at last begun my historical labours; I can hardly say with how much interest and delight. I really do not think that there is in our literature so great a void as that which I am trying to supply. English history, from 1688 to the French Revolution, is even to educated people almost a terra incognita. I will venture to say that it is quite an even chance whether even such a man as Empson, or Senior, can repeat accurately the names of the Prime Ministers of that time in order. The materials for an amusing narrative are immense. I shall not be satisfied unless I produce something which shall for a few days

¹ Ibid. p. 36.

² Letter to Ellis, July 12, 1841. Ibid. p. 93.

supersede the last fashionable novel on the tables of young ladies.¹

It would be unfair to take too literally the words of a casual letter to a friend, but it looks a little as if Macaulay made knowledge of history to consist in remembering a list of names, and the aim of history the production of an entertaining story. One thinks of the remark of Anatole France defining history as 'une espèce de roman à l'usage des esprits avisés et curieux'.

Macaulay's progress was slow. The ability to concentrate himself entirely upon his subject was the first thing he demanded: an interruption by other business was fatal, even if that other business was also historical or literary.

There are people who can carry on twenty works at a time. Southey would write the History of Brazil before breakfast, an ode after breakfast, then the History of the Peninsular War till dinner, and an article for the Quarterly Review in the evening. But I am of a different temper. I never write to please myself until my subject has for the time driven every other out of my head. When I turn from one work to another, a great deal of time is lost in the mere transition.²

Not only business or social distractions prevented him from the necessary concentration of thought, but the political news of the day diverted his attention, and sometimes so absorbed it that he could not fix his mind upon his task.

'Horrible news from India; massacre of Europeans at Delhi, and mutiny. I have no apprehensions for our Indian Empire; but this is a frightful event. Home; but had no heart to work. I will not try at present.' Again

¹ Letter to Napier, Nov. 5, 1841. Ibid. pp. 103-4.

² Letter to Napier, Jan. 18, 1843. Ibid. p. 126.

he says, and yet again : ' I cannot settle to work while the Delhi affair is undecided.' ¹

This being Macaulay's nature, the overthrow of Sir Robert Peel's government in June 1846, which brought him into office again, must have been a serious interruption. He became Paymaster General, and though his official duties were light and he did not often speak in Parliament, the loss of his seat at Edinburgh in July 1847 was an event for which the readers of the History ought to be thankful.

The first two volumes of the History were published in November 1848. They contained the introduction and the reign of James II. Thirteen thousand copies were sold in four months, and Macaulay was startled by his own success.

Of such a run I had never dreamed. But I had thought that the book would have a permanent place in our literature ; and I see no reason to alter that opinion. Yet I feel extremely anxious about the second part. Can it possibly come up to the first ? Does the subject admit of such vivid description and such exciting narrative ? Will not the judgment of the public be unduly severe ? All this disturbs me. Yet the risk must be run ; and whatever art and labour can do shall be done.²

It deserves noting that his success instead of making him content to do as well as he had done was an incentive to doing better. He was more careful, more laborious, more eager to produce something of lasting value, which might be a permanent part of English literature. One result was the formation in 1849 of a systematic plan of work for the reign of William III.

¹ Ibid. p. 434.

² Journal, Jan. 27, 1849. Ibid. p. 248.

I have now made up my mind to change my plan about my History. I will first set myself to know the whole subject ; to get, by reading and travelling, a full acquaintance with William's reign. I reckon that it will take me eighteen months to do this. I must visit Holland, Belgium, Scotland, Ireland, France. The Dutch archives and French archives must be ransacked. I will see whether anything is to be got from other diplomatic collections. I must see Londonderry, the Boyne, Aghrim, Limerick, Kinsale, Namur again, Landen, Steinkirk. I must turn over hundreds, thousands, of pamphlets. Lambeth, the Bodleian and the other Oxford libraries, the Devonshire Papers, the British Museum, must be explored, and notes made : and then I shall go to work. When the materials are ready, and the History mapped out in my mind, I ought easily to write on an average two of my pages daily. In two years from the time I begin writing I shall have more than finished my second part. Then I reckon a year for polishing, retouching, and printing.¹

A few notes from his diary show the progress of his plans, and his method of getting up the literature of the subject.

June 28. After breakfast to the Museum, and sate till three, reading and making extracts. I turned over three volumes of newspapers and tracts ; Flying Posts, Postboys, and Postmen. I found some curious things which will be of direct service ; but the chief advantage of these researches is that the mind is transported back a century and a half, and gets familiar with the ways of thinking, and with the habits, of a past generation.

June 29. To the British Museum, and read and extracted there till five. I find a growing pleasure in this employment. The reign of William the Third, so mysterious to me a few weeks ago, is beginning to take a clear form. I begin to see the men, and to understand all their difficulties and jealousies.²

¹ Journal, Feb. 8, 1849. Ibid. pp. 218-19.

² Journal, 1849. Ibid. p. 260.

When he had completed his reading for the moment, he proceeded to write an account of the particular episode he had been studying. His nephew describes minutely what Macaulay's method of composition was. The first step was to compose a rapid sketch of the episode.

As soon as he had got into his head all the information relating to any particular episode in his History, (such, for instance, as Argyll's expedition to Scotland, or the attainder of Sir John Fenwick, or the calling in of the clipped coinage,) he would sit down and write off the whole story at a headlong pace ; sketching in the outlines under the genial and audacious impulse of a first conception ; and securing in black and white each idea, and epithet, and turn of phrase, as it flowed straight from his busy brain to his rapid fingers. His manuscript, at this stage, to the eyes of any one but himself, appeared to consist of column after column of dashes and flourishes, in which a straight line, with a half-formed letter at each end, and another in the middle, did duty for a word.¹

Then came a second and revised version written out at full length.

As soon as Macaulay had finished his rough draft he began to fill it in at the rate of six sides of foolscap every morning ; written in so large a hand, and with such a multitude of erasures, that the whole six pages were, on an average, compressed into two pages of print.²

Sept. 22. Wrote my regular quantity—six foolscap pages of my scrawl, which will be about two pages in print. I hope to hold on at this pace through the greater part of the year. If I do this, I shall, by next September, have rough-hewn my third volume.³

This portion he called his 'task', and he was never quite easy unless he completed it daily. More he seldom

¹ Ibid. pp. 224-5.

² Ibid. p. 225.

³ Journal, 1849. Ibid. p. 267.

sought to accomplish ; for he had learned by long experience that this was as much as he could do at his best ; and except when at his best, he never would work at all. ' I had no heart to write,' he says in his journal of March 6, 1851. ' I am too self-indulgent in this matter, it may be : and yet I attribute much of the success which I have had to my habit of writing only when I am in the humour, and of stopping as soon as the thoughts and words cease to flow fast. There are therefore few lees in my wine. It is all the cream of the bottle.'¹

I wrote the arrival of the news of the Boyne at Whitehall. I go on slowly, but, I think, pretty well. There are not many weeks in which I do not write enough to fill seven or eight printed pages. The rule of never going on when the vein does not flow readily would not do for all men, or for all kinds of work. But I, who am not tied to time, who do not write for money, and who aim at interesting and pleasing readers whom ordinary histories repel, can hardly do better. How can a man expect that others will be amused by reading what he finds it dull to compose ?²

When the second and revised version was written out, there was still the final ' polishing and retouching to be done '. An ' immense labour ', he rightly calls it. He made it immense because he was never satisfied unless every sentence was perfectly clear.

Worked some hours and got on tolerably. No doubt what I am writing will require much correction ; but in the main, I think, it will do. How little the all-important art of making meaning pellucid is studied now ! Hardly any popular writer, except myself, thinks of it. Many seem to aim at being obscure. Indeed, they may be right enough in one sense ; for many readers give credit for profundity to whatever is obscure, and call all that is perspicuous shallow. But coraggio ! and think of A.D. 2850.³

¹ Ibid. pp. 225-6. ² Journal, Mar. 11, 1850. Ibid. pp. 275-6.

³ Journal, Jan. 12, 1850. Ibid. p. 272.

Not only must every sentence be perfectly clear, but sentence and paragraph alike must run easily. There was to be no sense of effort anywhere visible—all, however laborious, was to seem unstudied and natural.

July 28.—My account of the Highlands is getting into tolerable shape. To-morrow I shall begin to transcribe again, and to polish. What trouble these few pages will have cost me! The great object is that, after all this trouble, they may read as if they had been spoken off, and may seem to flow as easily as table talk.¹

Mere improvement of the style, however, was only one part of his care. The arrangement of his matter and the order of his topics were still more important. He did not hesitate to take a paragraph or a chapter to pieces and to rearrange it, in order to make the story develop itself more naturally and flow more easily.

After breakfast, I fell to work on the conspiracy of the Jacobites in 1690. This is a tough chapter. To make the narrative flow along as it ought, every part naturally springing from that which precedes; to carry the reader backward and forward across St. George's Channel without distracting his attention is not easy. Yet it may be done. I believe that this art of transition is as important, or nearly so, to history, as the art of narration.²

Feb. 6.—I worked hard at altering the arrangement of the first three chapters of the third volume. What labour it is to make a tolerable book, and how little readers know how much trouble the ordering of the parts has cost the writer! ³

The result was the success which so much painstaking labour deserved, and an immediate and general success

¹ Journal, 1850. Ibid. p. 278.

² Journal, Apr. 15, 1850. Ibid. p. 276.

³ Journal, 1854. Ibid. p. 377.

which no previous historian ever obtained in England. Take a couple of extracts as proofs, from the letters of the most critical and sober historical writer of Macaulay's time—a man very sceptical by nature and not liable to be carried away by popular enthusiasm or any other kind of enthusiasm, namely Sir G. C. Lewis. He says: 'Everybody is in raptures with Macaulay's "History". He gets 500l. for six years for his two volumes, and divides the profits after 6,000 copies. This number is *already* sold. It has had more success than any book since Lord Byron's poems and Walter Scott's novels.'¹ On volumes iii and iv, he comments: 'Macaulay's book has had a prodigious success. It is exceedingly interesting, and throws a flood of light upon the period; but it is too long, and it is overdone with details. All the part about Ireland is excellent. He is peculiarly strong upon ecclesiastical and controversial questions of all sorts.'²

Some authors write for fame and some for money. According to Pope, the greatest of all English writers wrote simply for money.

Shakespear (whom you and ev'ry Play-house bill
Style the divine, the matchless, what you will)
For gain, not glory, wing'd his roving flight
And grew Immortal in his own despight.

Macaulay, mainly seeking fame, found that he had won gain as well as glory, wealth as well as immortality. In 1856, on the publication of volumes iii and iv of his History, Longmans sold 26,500 copies of the work in ten weeks, and eleven weeks after publication the author received a cheque for £20,000 from his publisher. An

¹ Sir G. C. Lewis to Sir E. Head, Jan. 8, 1849. Letters of Sir George Cornwall Lewis (1870), p. 197.

² Ibid. p. 310.

American who visited him, George Ticknor, was dazzled by the opulence and luxury he saw. 'He lives in a beautiful villa with a rich, large, brilliant lawn behind it, keeps a carriage, and—as he told us—keeps four men-servants including his coachman, and lives altogether in elegant style for a man of letters.'¹

However, the success of Macaulay's History was not due merely to the genius or the labour of the author. The prosperity of any book depends on the temper of the audience to which it is addressed. Macaulay's was happy in the moment of its appearance; it expressed ideas which just then were universally popular; it expressed them in such a way that it flattered the self-esteem of the English people. We are not as other nations, Macaulay seemed to say; compare their revolutions with ours. Our Revolution of 1688 was 'the least violent' and 'the most beneficent' of all revolutions. The panegyric upon it which closes Macaulay's account of the interregnum forms a kind of peroration to the first instalment of the History. It was written in November 1848.

Now, if ever, we ought to be able to appreciate the whole importance of the stand which was made by our forefathers against the House of Stuart. All around us the world is convulsed by the agonies of great nations. Governments which lately seemed likely to stand during ages have been on a sudden shaken and overthrown. The proudest capitals of Western Europe have streamed with civil blood. . . . Meanwhile in our island the regular course of government has never been for a day interrupted. . . . And, if it be asked what has made us to differ from others, the answer is that we never lost what others are wildly and blindly seeking to regain. It is because we had a preserving revolution in the seventeenth century that we have

¹ Life, Letters, and Journals of George Ticknor (2 vols.; 1876), ii. 323.

not had a destroying revolution in the nineteenth. . . . For the authority of the law, for the security of property, for the peace of our streets, for the happiness of our homes, our gratitude is due, under Him who raises up and pulls down nations at His pleasure, to the Long Parliament, the Convention, and to William of Orange.

Ranke in his *History of England* points out the causes which account for the reception of Macaulay's *History* by Europe. He says that the Revolution of 1688 was important and interesting because the great contest of universal history, between absolute monarchy and monarchy limited by a parliamentary constitution, was brought to a decision here, and as the world in general has come to adopt the principle of a mixed constitution, the English had become almost a pattern for all nations.

'This general tendency is one cause of the immense success which Macaulay's *History*, appearing just at the right moment, had in Europe. Up to that time the Tory view, as represented by Hume, had not yet been driven from the field. Macaulay decided the victory of the Whig view.'¹

¹ Ranke, *History of England* (1875), vi. 29.

CHAPTER II

MACAULAY'S CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

THE immediate popularity of Macaulay's History was partly due to its subject and partly due to the moment when it appeared. But there was a novelty about Macaulay's treatment of the subject which was a still greater factor in the success of his book. Something in the conception of history which it embodied and something in the way in which it was written, appealed to those whom other historians had failed to interest. From the first he proclaimed that he was an innovator and announced that he sought to reach the largest possible circle of readers. He has clearly explained for us both his aim and his method ; we are not obliged to deduce them from the pages of his History. In his essays, his letters, and his journals, Macaulay sets forth his views about his art, gives us his estimates of other historians, and points out their merits and their defects. Evidently he had reflected on the theory of historical writing before he began to practise it, and all the time that he was composing he was endeavouring to realise an ideal which he had before his mind. His method of treatment, in so far as it differed from that adopted by other historians, was the result of a deliberate choice—he thought he saw more clearly than they did, what a historian ought to aim at achieving, and how that aim could be attained.

A passage in Macaulay's journal for 1849 proves this :
' There is merit, no doubt, in Hume, Robertson, Voltaire,

and Gibbon. Yet it is not the thing. I have a conception of history more just, I am confident, than theirs. The execution is another matter. But I hope to improve.'¹ What was this juster conception of history?

It is certain that Macaulay did not underrate the difficulties of the historian's task. Some authors have not thought it difficult. 'It is natural to believe,' asserted Dr. Johnson in the Rambler, 'that no writer has a more easy task than the historian.' He explained to Boswell the reasons for this view.

Great abilities are not requisite for an historian; for in historical composition, all the greatest powers of the human mind are quiescent. He has facts ready to his hand; so there is no exercise of invention. Imagination is not required in any high degree; only about as much as is used in the lower kinds of poetry. Some penetration, accuracy, and colouring will fit a man for the task, if he can give the application which is necessary.²

Macaulay's view, set forth in the Essay on History, published in 1828 in the Edinburgh Review, was exactly the opposite, though to a certain extent he agreed with Johnson.

To write history respectably—that is, to abbreviate dispatches, and make extracts from speeches, to intersperse in due proportion epithets of praise and abhorrence, to draw up antithetical characters of great men, setting forth how many contradictory virtues and vices they united, and abounding in *withs* and *withouts*; all this is very easy. But to be a really great historian is perhaps the rarest of intellectual distinctions. We are acquainted with no history which approaches to our notion of what a history ought to be.³

¹ Journal, Dec. 7, 1849. Trevelyan, ii. 269.

² Boswell's Life of Johnson, ed. G. B. Hill (1887), i. 424-5.

³ Edinburgh Review, May 1828, p. 331.

He goes on to explain that the sphere of history is a debateable land, partly ruled by reason and partly by imagination. A historian must possess a powerful imagination if he is to make his narrative sufficiently 'affecting and picturesque'. He must be a profound reasoner if he is to understand the relation of facts to each other and their relation to general principles. Leaving the general question, Macaulay at once plunges into a criticism of the Greek and Roman historians.

Herodotus he did not greatly admire—his book was 'an incomparable book' but hardly to be called a history. At most, he might be described as 'the earliest and the best' of the romantic historians, and belonged to the same class as Froissart.¹ Xenophon Macaulay despised, and for Plutarch he entertained 'a particular aversion'; the first was a dotard, and the second a pedant. As to the Latins, no historian was so indifferent to truth as Livy. 'He seems to have cared only about the picturesque effect of his book, and the honour of his country.'² Sallust was a partisan: his account of the conspiracy of Catiline had 'rather the air of a clever party pamphlet than that of a history'.³

This is a rough summary of Macaulay's verdicts: they must not be taken as representing his final estimates of the writers in question.⁴

The real value of the essay is that it shows that Macaulay

¹ Ibid. p. 332.

² Ibid. p. 348.

³ Ibid. p. 349.

⁴ Of Sallust for instance he expressed a more favourable judgement in his journal a few years later. 'I think Sallust inferior to both Livy and Tacitus in the talents of an historian. There is a lecturing, declaiming tone about him which would suit a teacher of rhetoric better than a statesman engaged in recording great events. Still, he is a good writer; and the view which he here gives of the state of parties at Rome, and the frightful demoralisation of the aristocracy, is full of interest.' June 10, 1835; May 6, 1837. Trevelyan, i. 468-9.

had carefully read the ancient historians, noted what seemed to him their merits and defects, and drawn from his examination of them very definite conclusions as to the way in which history should be written. He illustrates his conception of the art of writing history by a comparison with the analogous art of portrait painting. The portrait painter, he says, does not try to reproduce all the minutest details of the face of his sitter. So too the historian must not try to relate all the minutest details of the past. As a picture cannot be exactly like the original, so a history cannot exactly reproduce the facts.

History cannot be perfectly and absolutely true . . . for to be perfectly and absolutely true, it ought to record *all* the slightest particulars of the slightest transactions—all the things done, and all the words uttered, during the time of which it treats. 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. What is told in the fullest and most accurate annals bears an infinitely small proportion to what is suppressed. . . . No picture, then, and no history, can present us with the whole truth : but those are the best pictures and the best histories which exhibit such parts of the truth as most nearly produce the effect of the whole.¹

Macaulay's argument is that the business of the historian is to select the important and significant facts and details from the mass, and so to combine them that they produce a faithful representation of the portion of the past related.

He illustrates his view about the combination and arrangement of the facts by another comparison—this time with the art of landscape painting.

¹ Edinburgh Review, May 1828, p. 338.

History has its foreground and its background : and it is principally in the management of its perspective, that one artist differs from another. Some events must be represented on a large scale, others diminished ; the great majority will be lost in the dimness of the horizon ; and a general idea of their joint effect will be given by a few slight touches.

In this respect, no writer has ever equalled Thucydides. He was a perfect master of the art of gradual diminution. His history is sometimes as concise as a chronological chart ; yet it is always perspicuous. . . . He never fails to contract and to expand it in the right place.¹

Macauley concludes by asserting that ' in the art of historical narration ' Thucydides surpassed all his rivals. ' But narration, though an important part of the business of a historian, is not the whole. . . . The writer who does not explain the phenomena as well as state them, performs only one half of his office.' Thucydides failed as an interpreter of the facts ; though he discussed practical questions very ably, and was undoubtedly a sagacious and reflecting man, some of his general observations were very superficial.²

On rereading Thucydides in later years Macauley reiterated his conviction that Thucydides was the greatest of narrative historians. In 1836 he speaks of the intense interest which Thucydides inspired, and says that the Peloponnesian War made the Annals of Tacitus seem ' cold and poor ' when he read them side by side. ' Indeed, what colouring is there which would not look tame when placed side by side with the magnificent light, and the terrible shade, of Thucydides? Tacitus was a great man ; but he was not up to the Sicilian expedition.'³

In 1848, he had come to think that even in the art of

¹ Ibid. ² Ibid. pp. 339-41.

³ Letter to Ellis, July 25, 1836. Trevelyan, i. 449.

narration Thucydides did not always attain absolute perfection. 'I read the eighth book of Thucydides. On the whole he is the first of historians. What is good in him is better than anything that can be found elsewhere. But his dry parts are dreadfully dry; and his arrangement is bad. Mere chronological order is not the order for a complicated narrative.'¹

Next to Thucydides, amongst the ancients, Macaulay placed Tacitus. 'Of the Latin historians, Tacitus was certainly the greatest.' But he thought that his style was inferior to that of Thucydides, and that he did not tell his story so well. 'His style indeed is not only faulty in itself, but is, in some respects, peculiarly unfit for historical composition. He carries his love of effect far beyond the limits of moderation. He tells a fine story finely: but he cannot tell a plain story plainly.'²

On the other hand, said Macaulay, there was one part of the historian's art in which Tacitus surpassed Thucydides—in which, indeed, he had no equal amongst ancient historians.

In the delineation of character, Tacitus . . . has very few superiors among dramatists and novelists. By the delineation of character, we do not mean the practice of drawing up epigrammatic catalogues of good and bad qualities, and appending them to the names of eminent men. No writer, indeed, has done this more skilfully than Tacitus: but this is not his peculiar glory. All the persons who occupy a large space in his works have an individuality of character which seems to pervade all their words and actions. We know them as if we had lived with them. Claudius, Nero, Otho, both the Agrippinas, are masterpieces. But Tiberius is a still higher miracle of art. The

¹ *Journal*, Dec. 4, 1848. *Ibid.* ii. 245.

² *Edinburgh Review*, May 1828, p. 350.

historian undertook to make us intimately acquainted with a man singularly dark and inscrutable,—with a man whose real disposition long remained swathed up in intricate folds of factitious virtues, and over whose actions the hypocrisy of his youth, and the seclusion of his age, threw a singular mystery.¹

Here, as in the case of his remarks on Thucydides, Macaulay's admiration for some particular quality in the author he estimates reveals his own ideals. The perfect historian must unite the narrative skill of Thucydides with the power of Tacitus to penetrate, to realise, and to depict persons. At the same time, there were certain qualities which the ancient historians did not possess, but the ideal historian should possess. In the latter part of the essay, Macaulay turned to consider the moderns. He felt that they surpassed their predecessors in two ways. They were far more strict in their adherence to truth than most of the Greek and Roman writers. They did not insert imaginary speeches, conversations, or descriptions. But their chief superiority lay in another direction. In the philosophy of history, the moderns had very far surpassed the ancients. The natural growth of knowledge accounted for something, but it would not altogether account for their 'immense superiority' in this respect. The cause was the constant progress of the human intellect due to the substitution of progressive for stationary societies, the breadth and variety of modern civilisation compared to the exclusiveness and narrowness of ancient civilisation, and other general causes. 'Hence it is, that, in generalisation, the writers of modern times have far surpassed those of antiquity. The historians of our own country are unequalled in depth and precision of reason ; and even in the works

¹ Ibid. pp. 350-1.

of our mere compilers, we often meet with speculations beyond the reach of Thucydides or Tacitus.' ¹

On the other hand, modern historians had certain characteristic faults. Even the best of them were led astray by their desire to prove a theory or defend a system. 'They far excel their predecessors in the art of deducing general principles from facts. But unhappily they have fallen into the error of distorting facts to suit general principles.' 'This species of misrepresentation abounds in the most valuable works of modern historians'—in Hume's *History of England* or Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* or Mitford's *History of Greece*, for example.

Hume is an accomplished advocate: without positively asserting much more than he can prove, he gives prominence to all the circumstances which support his case; he glides lightly over those which are unfavourable to it; his own witnesses are applauded and encouraged; the statements which seem to throw discredit on them are controverted; the contradictions into which they fall are explained away; a clear and connected abstract of their evidence is given. Everything that is offered on the other side is scrutinised with the utmost severity;—every suspicious circumstance is a ground for comment and invective; what cannot be denied is extenuated, or passed by without notice; concessions even are sometimes made—but this insidious candour only increases the effect of the vast mass of sophistry.²

Minor writers, such as Southey, Lingard, and Mitford, were advocates too.

In the midst of these disputes, however, history proper, if we may use the term, is disappearing. The high, grave, impartial summing up of Thucydides is nowhere to be found.

¹ Ibid. pp. 353, 358-9.

² Ibid. pp. 359-60.

While our historians are practising all the arts of controversy, they miserably neglect the art of narration, the art of interesting the affections, and presenting pictures to the imagination.¹

The result was that while people read with avidity any tolerable biography that was issued they refused to read histories. 'Histories of great empires, written by men of eminent ability, lie unread on the shelves of ostentatious libraries.' A superstitious notion of the dignity of history led historians to omit the very things which interested readers most.

The writers of history seem to entertain an aristocratical contempt for the writers of memoirs. They think it beneath the dignity of men who describe the revolutions of nations, to dwell on the details which constitute the charm of biography. They have imposed on themselves a code of conventional decencies, as absurd as that which has been the bane of the French drama. The most characteristic and interesting circumstances are omitted or softened down, because, as we are told, they are too trivial for the majesty of history.²

Other conventions led them to neglect a whole series of facts of the highest importance. They looked only at the surface of affairs, and never thought of what was going on under the surface, and this vitiated their representation of events.

A history, in which every particular incident may be true, may on the whole be false. The circumstances which have most influence on the happiness of mankind, the changes of manners and morals, the transition of com-

¹ Ibid. p. 361.

² Ibid. pp. 361-2. Cf. the remarks on the dignity of history ('a vile phrase'), in *Essays*, ii. 256-9.

munities from poverty to wealth, from knowledge to ignorance, from ferocity to humanity—these are, for the most part, noiseless revolutions. Their progress is rarely indicated by what historians are pleased to call important events. They are not achieved by armies, or enacted by senates. They are sanctioned by no treaties, and recorded in no archives. They are carried on in every school, in every church, behind ten thousand counters, at ten thousand firesides. The upper current of society presents no certain criterion by which we can judge of the direction in which the under current flows. We read of defeats and victories. But we know that nations may be miserable amidst victories, and prosperous amidst defeats. We read of the fall of wise ministers, and of the rise of profligate favourites. But we must remember how small a proportion the good or evil effected by a single statesman can bear to the good or evil of a great social system.¹

In short, modern writers of history were not merely partial but dull and superficial. They confined themselves to relating political events, and neglected social changes and social facts. They told only half the story, and they told that badly. History ought to be written in a more artistic and a more interesting way ; the received conception of its province ought to be widened so as to include the life of the people as well as the fortunes of its rulers. Macaulay closes his essay by drawing the character of the ideal historian.

The perfect historian is he in whose work the character and spirit of an age is exhibited in miniature. He relates no fact, he attributes no expression to his characters, which is not authenticated by sufficient testimony. But by judicious selection, rejection, and arrangement, he gives to truth those attractions which have been usurped by fiction. In his narrative a due subordination is observed ;

¹ *Edinburgh Review*, May 1828, pp. 362-3.

some transactions are prominent, others retire. But the scale on which he represents them is increased or diminished, not according to the dignity of the persons concerned in them, but according to the degree in which they elucidate the condition of society and the nature of man. He shows us the court, the camp, and the senate. But he shows us also the nation. He considers no anecdote, no peculiarity of manner, no familiar saying, as too insignificant for his notice, which is not too insignificant to illustrate the operation of laws, of religion, and of education, and to mark the progress of the human mind. Men will not merely be described, but will be made intimately known to us. The changes 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.

If a man, such as we are supposing, should write the history of England, he would assuredly not omit the battles, the sieges, the negotiations, the seditions, the ministerial changes. But with these he would intersperse the details which are the charm of historical romances. At Lincoln Cathedral there is a beautiful painted window, which was made by an apprentice out of the pieces of glass which had been rejected by his master. It is so far superior to every other in the church, that, according to the tradition, the vanquished artist killed himself from mortification. Sir Walter Scott, in the same manner, has used those fragments of truth which historians have scornfully thrown behind them, in a manner which may well excite their envy. He has constructed out of their gleanings works which, even considered as histories, are scarcely less valuable than theirs. But a truly great historian would reclaim those materials which the novelist has appropriated. The history of the government, and the history of the people, would be exhibited justly, in inseparable conjunction and intermixture. We should not then have to look for the wars and votes of the Puritans in Clarendon, and for their

phraseology in *Old Mortality* ; for one half of King James in *Hume*, and for the other half in the *Fortunes of Nigel*.¹

Macaulay's words are quoted at length, perhaps at exorbitant length, because it is important to show exactly what he aimed at achieving, before we attempt to judge what he actually achieved. His *History* is the practical exemplification of the views set forth in his essay. He endeavoured to revive what seemed to him the lost art of historical narrative, to combine the qualities of Thucydides and Tacitus, telling his story as skilfully as the one and describing his personages as vividly as the other, but arranging his subjects as a whole rather better than Thucydides did, and avoiding in his style the overelaboration and lack of simplicity which he blamed in Tacitus. But he took Scott for his model too. He endeavoured to make his *History* interesting by adding the characteristic details which historians usually omitted. He endeavoured to make the field of history include social as well as political life, and to give it some of the charm of historical romance by employing the materials the historical novelist employed and describing common people as well as kings and statesmen. He said at the beginning of his book :

I should very imperfectly execute the task which I have undertaken if I were merely to treat of battles and sieges, of the rise and fall of administrations, of intrigues in the palace, and debates in the Parliament. It will be my endeavour to relate the history of the people as well as the history of the government, to trace the progress of useful and ornamental arts, to describe the rise of religious sects and the changes of literary taste, to portray the manners of successive generations, and not to pass by with neglect

¹ *Ibid.* pp. 364-5.

even the revolutions which have taken place in dress, furniture, repasts, and public amusements. I shall cheerfully bear the reproach of having descended below the dignity of history, if I can succeed in placing before the English of the nineteenth century a true picture of the life of their ancestors.¹

Nor was Macaulay's example without effect. A few years after his death, J. R. Green tried to do for the whole of English history what Macaulay tried to do for a particular period. 'I have preferred,' wrote Green in his preface,² 'to pass lightly and briefly over the details of foreign wars and diplomacies, the personal adventures of kings and nobles, the pomp of courts, or the intrigues of favourites, and to dwell at length on the incidents of that constitutional, intellectual, and social advance in which we read the history of the nation itself.' The difference is that Macaulay, while as determined as Green to write 'the history of the nation itself', was resolved also to write that of foreign wars and diplomacies, and the personal adventures which Green preferred to exclude. For he had none of Green's dislike and disdain for what is termed 'drum and trumpet history'. On the contrary, he rejoiced like the war horse in Job, when he sniffed a battle afar off, a thing very becoming in a former Secretary at War.

In conclusion, there is one characteristic of Macaulay's conception of history which must be pointed out. He treats history throughout as a part of literature—'a department of literature' is his precise phrase. In this he differs from most modern historians. Their tendency is to regard history as a branch of science rather than literature, and to enlarge upon the difficulty of finding out the truth,

¹ I, 2.

² *A Short History of the English People* (4 vols. ; 1892).