

ACTON: THE WAVY LINE

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THIS year sees the fiftieth anniversary of the death at Tegernsee of Lord Acton, and the anniversary has been commemorated by the publication of two books, one adding to the small collection of Acton's works in book form—now all out of print—and the other an analysis of his political philosophy.¹ The only work of Acton published in his lifetime, apart from occasional essays in innumerable reviews both British and foreign, was his inaugural lecture, on *The Study of History*, as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge in 1895. After his death, friends and disciples collected various lectures and essays into four volumes, and these, together with some incomplete collections of letters, are all that has been left to us of the man who was acclaimed in the latter half of the nineteenth century as being the most erudite in Europe. The more welcome then is the book of *Essays on Church and State* which is the first volume of what is to be a complete edition of Acton's works. These essays have been chosen by Mr Douglas Woodruff, assisted by Mr Roland Hill, from Acton's contributions to those short-lived but impressive reviews of the 1860's, *The Rambler* and the *Home and Foreign Review*, and were all written when Acton was in his thirties. To this volume Mr Woodruff contributes an introduction whose chief merit is to tell the story of these reviews, of how the effort of the laity came to grief in its first attempt at a lay apostolate of the Press. The age was not propitious for such initiative and the spirit of the Syllabus brooded over any suspected temporising with the spirit of the age. No attempt is made in this Introduction to assess Acton's thought, but one must agree with Mr Woodruff's conclusion that 'his relevance for the twentieth century comes from his prophetic preoccupation with

¹ *Essays on Church and State*. By Lord Acton. (Hollis & Carter; 30s.). *Acton's Political Philosophy*. By G. E. Fasnacht. (Hollis & Carter; 21s.)

the very questions with which the twentieth century has found itself preoccupied. The great objects of his studies in history were the moral ends of government, the relation of politics to morality.' Indeed Acton himself, when in his late forties, wrote to Mary Gladstone: 'I have never had any contemporaries, but spent years in looking for men wise enough to solve the problems that puzzled me, not in religion or politics so much as along the wavy line between the two'.

Of all the men he found to help him in the solution of these problems there was none who had more influence on him than Dr Döllinger, with whom he lived from 1848 to 1854 while studying at the University of Munich, in lieu of the Cambridge forbidden to him because of his Catholicism. (Incidentally one may express the hope that the new edition of Acton's works will include his correspondence with Döllinger, with whom he kept up an affectionate and grateful connection until his death in 1888.) Through Döllinger he was formed in the scientific school of German historians who were personified in Ranke, and from them he derived some of the main principles of his subsequent writing: scientific and disinterested enquiry, and the continuity of the historical process. Archbishop Mathew has shown the great formative influence of Burke on the thought of Acton, and in Gladstone Acton found a statesman who believed that all political questions were at bottom moral questions, and so in his enthusiasm Acton was moved to describe him as 'the man who, of all now living, has the greatest power of doing good'. His acceptance of the Gladstonian ethic as the climax of the historical process of centuries would seem to some to show one of a number of weak, even blind, spots in Acton's practical judgment. Where W. G. Ward looked for a papal bull to read with his breakfast, Acton helped the digestion of his family when staying on the Riviera by reading to them at breakfast the latest of Gladstone's perorations.

However, Acton's power and his weakness can only be estimated in terms of his philosophy and here one is faced with several difficulties. The first is that Acton never got to the point where he actually wrote a systematic treatment of his

views. Seated in his library of 40,000 books, he could never find the perfect expression of the errors he wished to refute. In fact one may apply to him the words that he wrote of his master Döllinger: 'His collections constantly prompted new and attractive schemes, but his way was strewn with promise unperformed and abandoned for want of concentration. He would not write with imperfect materials, and to him the materials were always imperfect. Perpetually engaged in going over his life and reconsidering his conclusions, he was not depressed by unfinished work.' To his industry many hundreds of boxes and folders of manuscript notes preserved at Cambridge bear witness. A further difficulty is that Acton said that his thought was always in process of evolution, and that at times he would say things which might seem inconsistent. For this reason it is not easy to know which is the true Acton: is it the Acton of *The Rambler* days, or the Acton of the letters (e.g. to Mary Gladstone), or the Acton of the final glory at Cambridge? One must confess that Mr Fasnacht¹ does not help nor justify his claim to have made an analysis of Acton's political philosophy. It is impossible in this book to tell which is Acton and which is Fasnacht, what is quotation and what is commentary. In fact his method is very like Acton's own system: a welter, at times a confusing welter, of names and opinions in which the reader is expected to discern the golden grains of wisdom.

Acton's key to the knowledge of history and the keystone of his political philosophy is the idea of freedom, its growth in history and its realisation in political forms, such as the

¹ Among errors of commission and omission one may note the following: (i) Louis Blanc did not write the work referred to on Heraclitus (p. 185); (ii) There is no mention, not even in the chapter on 'Acton's relations to other thinkers', of Donoso Cortes; (iii) Mr Fasnacht has made great use of the Acton papers at Cambridge, as did Professor U. Noacke before him when writing on the same subject. It is the more astonishing, then, to find that, despite Mr Fasnacht's acknowledgment of gratitude to Professor Noacke in his Preface, he does not list the two most relevant works of Noacke in his very comprehensive bibliography, namely *Geschichtswissenschaft und Wahrheit* (1935) and *Katholizität und Geistesfreiheit* (1936).

representative systems, the abolition of slavery, the domination of public opinion, the security of weaker groups within society and freedom of conscience. For all his appreciation of St Thomas Aquinas as the first Whig, it remains doubtful whether Acton did understand the position of the common good as the source of political authority. He had a great admiration for Grotius for separating religion and politics and as the founder of modern political science. 'Grotius', he says, 'founded real political science on the universal principle of our subordination to a law of nature, to which all legislation must conform, that is to say, the voice of universal reason, through which God enlightens the consciences of men. Politics are therefore a matter of principle and conscience.' This latter position Acton accepted and took to the limits of fanatical obsession. Hence he was prepared to say that 'Liberty is not a gift but an acquisition, not a state of rest, but an effort of growth; not a starting point, but a result of government; or at least a starting point only as an object—not a *datum*, but an aim. Just as the regular movements of the heavenly bodies produce the music of the spheres, liberty is the result of the principle *suum cuique in action*.' Yet at the same time he could say with approval that 'liberal progress aims at a point where the public is subject to no restrictions but those of which it feels the advantage'. Hence, although these and other statements (such as 'Liberty is not a means to a higher political end. It is itself the highest political end.') are susceptible of a Christian interpretation, his reliance on and exaltation of Grotius makes one suspicious. Because Grotius *did* mark the break between the great natural law tradition reaching from Augustine to the Scholastics and the modern theory of natural law. His system of law was based on a rationalist and secular hypothesis; it did not need God. This rationalism of Grotius was developed and became dominant in the Age of Reason, and in this sense Acton cannot be viewed as a great European scholar of the Renaissance but as a product of the Aufklärung, with an admiration for the American *Declaration of Independence* (he wrote of 'the universal, abstract, ethical character of the American *Rights of Man*'), and for the French *Rights of Man*. Professor

d'Entrèves, who has shown the true position of Grotius at the parting of the ways, has commented on these two documents: 'The laws of nature are to Jefferson the laws of Nature's God. The French legislators solemnly put themselves "in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being". But Nature's God or the Supreme Being are no more akin to the God Omnipotent of the Creed than Deism is to Christianity. What Grotius had set forth as a hypothesis had become a thesis. The self-evidence of natural law had made the existence of God perfectly superfluous.'²

The wavy line of hypothesis which Grotius drew had become an Iron Curtain of division. Acton seems to have recognised this when he wrote to Mary Gladstone, 'Therefore, although I fully admit that political Rights proceed directly from religious duties, and hold this to be the true basis of Liberalism, I do not mean to say that there is no other foundation for a system of rights for men who know of no relations between man and God'. It may have been that Acton was conscious of the ambiguity of liberalism in a secular state and that this generated in him an ambivalence which prevented him from formulating a political philosophy, for one must admit that his philosophy was even more fragmentary than that of, say, Dilthey.

His idea of liberty was abstract, continental and non-English, but this was balanced by a preoccupation with those political institutions which should be a safeguard of liberty; and here he showed considerable insights which justify praise of his prophetic vision. He foresaw—though he did not state them as clearly as his friend and contemporary Tocqueville—the dangers of totalitarianism arising from modern democratic systems, and his chief praise of Gladstone was that he had preserved England from these dangers. His views on federalism, on the dangers inherent in the principle of nationality, and on political pluralism, are penetrating, advanced and of extreme relevance today. Most interesting of all, although he was 'the only nineteenth-century writer who was completely master of the philosophy, politics and economics of both his own age and of earlier ages also', he was so aware of the dangers of economic

² *Natural Law*. By A. P. d'Entrèves; pp. 52-3.

liberalism that he 'inclined towards socialism. This was based on four assumptions that he made: (i) private enterprise had failed to solve the problem of distribution; (ii) what the poor needed before they could make their political power effective was comfort and security; (iii) division of power is the condition of liberty; (iv) the right of self-government is inherent in all corporations and associations. He would have sympathised with Orage, the early G. D. H. Cole and other Guild Socialists.

His greatness in the political field is to be found in these insights, and not in the construction of a system, for to the extent that he accepted the wavy line as inevitable it was impossible for him to provide a new synthesis of those things which had been integrated by St Thomas Aquinas and divided by Grotius. As a historian he was one of the great luminaries of the Whig intellectual tradition, recalling to his fellow Catholics (notably in the essay on 'The Catholic Press' reprinted in the *Essays on Church and State*) the necessity of facing scientific fact, that 'authority can only condemn error; its vitality is not destroyed until it is refuted'. The *Cambridge Modern History* is more than a monument to its architect, it is also a symbol of his greatness and of his flaws. Maitland rightly said that Acton might well have written the whole twelve volumes himself; in fact he wrote none, not even a chapter. The breadth, humanity and true liberal character of the principles on which it was conceived mirror the universality of this good European who was a Catholic, child of an English father and German-Italian mother, born in Italy, educated at Oscott, Edinburgh and Munich. At the same time it demonstrates his prejudices which amounted almost to a phobia. It should not be forgotten that he had the Papacy in mind when he uttered his famous dictum about the corruption that power brings in its wake. His view of the Papacy was warped by his belief that assassination was part of papal policy, and he himself whenever in Rome went in mortal and daily fear of being assassinated. 'The papacy', he wrote, 'contrived murder and massacre on the most cruel and inhuman scale. They were not only wholesale assassins, but they made the principle of assassination

a law of the Christian Church and a condition of salvation.' Little wonder that he chose H. C. Lea to write the chapter on the causes of the Reformation, dealing with the abuses of the Papacy. He could not have found anywhere what Fr Thurston has called a more prejudiced or more persistently inaccurate writer.

'Acton's ultimate thought', writes Mr Fasnacht, 'is that it is the truth that makes us free. And the ultimate truth is that Caesar and God are different. His philosophy is the philosophy of freedom. It might be argued that, in the last analysis, Acton's system contains two indefinables, liberty, which is a thing that grows, and depends on innumerable conditions, and social evolution, which is charged with interminable consequences. But Acton's philosophy is not strictly a system, it is rather a developing spirit.' This is a just appraisal, and the value of Acton to us is to share in the evolution of his spirit and to profit from the many incidental insights which are the by-products of his major preoccupations.



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND ECUMENISM

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A REVIEWER in the August number of *Theology* has written that 'Rome's tragic rejection of the Ecumenical Movement is one of the challenges of our day, and it has yet to be faced and met'. By its context, a review of Salmon's *Infallibility of the Church*, this rather cryptic sentence seems to imply that the nature of the Church (as Catholics conceive it) makes Catholicism essentially incapable of absorbing the spirit of Ecumenism. If that were actually the case it would be truer to say that Ecumenism rejects Rome, not that Rome has rejected the Ecumenical Movement.

In order to test the validity of this judgment it is necessary to define what constitutes the essential spirit of Ecumenism, and what are the aims to which it gives birth. But it is