

The Whig View of History

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G. M. Trevelyan: A Life in History, by David Cannadine, *New York: W.W. Norton, 1991. xvi + 288 pp. \$32.95.*

When Herbert Butterfield wrote his little essay, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1933), many of his fellow historians believed him to be attacking a living and influential historical position. A generation later, graduate students in history, in spite of two World Wars, still took Butterfield seriously even though Whiggery had been moribund for nearly half a century. The Whig interpretation was, from the outset, a distinctively English interpretation, and its demise was linked to the long declension of British power and wealth and the decline of the British aristocracy which became apparent in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The Whig notion of progress was distinctive to British religious and political history. It was, moreover, much influenced by eighteenth-century British industrial development. There were few influences of Enlightenment French ideas of the inevitability of progress in the Whig interpretation.

With the decay of Whig-Protestant political ascendancy and the decline of Britain's industrial fortunes Whiggery as a cultural certitude was also bound to decline. The wrongness of the Whig theory of history was not a consequence

of its not fitting the newer and more sophisticated historical theories as Butterfield argued but was due simply to the fact that its religious, economic, and political base had been eroded. The erosion, of course, was not specifically Whig but also involved the decay of the Tory-Whig aristocracy.

In recent historiography there has been a rising market for studies of the British and European aristocracies. There has, from the outset, been a note of nostalgia in these studies. Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* had pointed out the cultural price Western society had to pay for the triumph of democracy. In politics, in art, in literature and manners an ethic based upon honor, bravery, and excellence passed away to be replaced by envy, alienation, and a thorough and complete cultural leveling. By the early 1970s students of British society began to notice the impact of the decline of aristocracy and the disappearance of the artifacts of aristocracy. It was then that Yale University Press began its preoccupation with the "country house," that emblematic distillation of aristocracy, with the publication of Richard Gill's *Happy Rural Seat: The English Country House and the Literary Imagination* (1972). Then followed Mark Girouard's monomaniacal production of endless volumes dealing with country house architecture

and country house life. The culmination of this taste for the artifacts of a dead aristocracy occurred in the tremendous National Gallery exhibition of 1985, *The Treasure Houses of Britain: Five Hundred Years of Patronage and Art Collecting*.

Just as the historical moment when vulgar Marxism made ill-defined conceptions of class the pivot of history it became axiomatic that every society is governed by a particular class. It also became axiomatic, based upon socialist and Labor governments and the Bolshevik nomenclatura of the Soviet Union and Central Europe, that every class government carries within itself certain disadvantages and exacts particular social costs. It does not follow, however, from this line of reasoning that all class governments are equally socially disadvantageous or socially costly. To these students of history it became clear that some classes are more culturally creative and socially enabling than others. It seemed to these observers that the movement from aristocracy to plutocracy and thence to democracy was down hill all the way.

It was in this atmosphere of historical nostalgia that David Cannadine wrote and published his book, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (1990). This superb study is not quite nostalgic for while the author's facts are on the Right his heart, by his own admission, is on the Left. Still he details with great precision what the old society was like and how democracy eroded landownership and eventually plutocracy. No one can understand the nineteenth century, its politics, economics, religion, art, and literature, who has not read this book and mastered its arguments.

It came as a surprise when David Cannadine's second book appeared under the title, *G. M. Trevelyan: A Life in History*. At first it seemed that the life of the last of the great Whig historians could have little to do with the great themes of

Cannadine's magisterial first book. Surely a study of the public and publishing life of Trevelyan could be little more than a precis of his enormously popular historical writings and a consideration and reply to his chief critics, Herbert Butterfield and Lewis Namier. And Cannadine's book is, indeed, these things, but the life of Trevelyan is, above all, an extended footnote in illustration of the great themes of *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*.

To those who have studied Whiggery closely it is apparent that Whig ideas must lead inevitably to democracy and socialism. It was never clear to the great Whigs, Trevelyan among them, that this must be the case or just what the consequences of this development would be.

Whiggery was finally and ultimately a political system which disguised itself as an historical explanation. Yes, no doubt there is a connection between Whig economics and politics and Whig history. That is an easy and clear enough perception, but Whig history is a far more complicated system than that. We do the great Whig historians such as Macaulay and his grand-nephew, Trevelyan, an injustice if we see in Whiggery no more than the defense of bourgeois liberalism.

Trevelyan's great uncle, Macaulay, had been born in 1800 into an obsessively evangelical Protestant family. I say Protestant rather than Anglican for in the Clapham sect, of which the Macaulay family were members, Protestantism had triumphed at last, albeit not in a Calvinist form, over the diluted Catholicism which remained the heritage of Anglicanism. Unless one understands the strength of this Protestant historical perspective one will not understand Whiggery whether it is formulated by Macaulay or Trevelyan. One must recall that in the Whig revolution of 1688 Protestantism was the linchpin and the ostensible reason for revolution. Whatever else that revolution was, it was the final triumph of Protestantism

in England. And so it is that the most important ingredient in the Whig interpretation of history is a triumphant and defiant Protestantism.

It is well and good to assert that the Whig interpretation of history is a defense of the ideas of liberty and progress. And true enough it is. But the liberty and the progress which the Whig celebrates is not the liberty and the secular progress of the eighteenth-century French philosophies which were essentially anti-religious in tone. Burke, Macaulay, and Gladstone all testify to that. The words on the banner which the Whig carried read "Protestantism, Liberty and Progress," and of the three Protestantism was the most important, for it made the other two possible. Even though Trevelyan was an agnostic (doctrinal Protestantism having withered away), he maintained the anti-Catholicism of the Whig stance in his treatment of John Wyclif and his three major treatments of Garibaldi and Italian unification. But though Protestantism had triumphed, it was not at all certain that this triumph would endure. There was the terrible fear that ancient Catholic tyranny, superstition, and ignorance might rouse itself and sweep once more, like some gigantic pestilence, over the world. This was the substance of Macaulay's famous review essay of Leopold von Ranke's *History of the Popes* (1834-1839).

David Cannadine's life of Trevelyan is not a biography in the usual sense. He has mercifully spared us the by now conventional thousand-page odyssey. Moreover, Trevelyan's life was one of such consuming dullness that it would be difficult to read more than a few pages describing its routines. Cannadine presents Trevelyan's life only as it impinges on his historical work and his public activities — one can hardly call them politics for they were as natural to him as the twitch of a reflex action. Cannadine's justification is that "during the first half

of the century Trevelyan was the most famous, the most honored, the most influential, and the most widely read historian of his generation." Moreover, he was what his brother Charles described as a member of a "governing family." What he wrote and what he thought had historical importance and consequences. The title of Cannadine's book, *G. M. Trevelyan: A Life in History*, is ambiguous, perhaps deliberately so. If Cannadine implies that we are to understand that Trevelyan's life is only the context of his historical writing and his public undertakings, then indeed Trevelyan's life was "a life in history." But the chief argument of the book, it seems to me, is that being in history meant suffering (as all Britons suffered in the twentieth century), time's erosion and its bloody destruction.

The family estate, Wallington, where Trevelyan grew up and which he loved, counted 22,000 acres. It was of middling size as estates went and was hardly to be classed with the 100,000 acres and over held by the grandees. Birth had from the outset assured Trevelyan wealth, status, and power. Harrow and Trinity College, Cambridge, cemented his associations and position. He took to writing history as naturally as his father and his great-uncle before him. Long after his attenuated Protestantism had faded into a robust agnosticism he saw his life in terms of the fulfillment of moral obligations. Writing history was a self-imposed moral task. Trevelyan was not genuinely aristocratic. His tastes, his style, his manner of life were bourgeois. It was a family failing. Small wonder that his brother Charles drifted into Socialism. And he believed in progress and held to the hope that every day in every way we are getting better and better.

The barbarism and the irrationality of World War I, in which because of his defective eyesight he participated as an ambulance driver, provided a severe shock to his faith in progress. Still, at the

war's end he recovered his Whiggish hopes and told his mother, "I believe democracy is on the march now, all along the line. The world's great age begins anew." The despotisms of the old order in Central and Eastern Europe had been overthrown and this held out the prospect of a "newer," a "bold adventure." He was soon to be disabused of his naiveté. His historical work became a refuge from the present and the future rather than the harbinger of a golden age. The Liberal Party died, the aristocracy was bled white on the battlefields of Europe, and democracy brought in its wake vulgarity and barbarism. The triumph of industrialism, which Macaulay had hailed, destroyed the landscape and the way of life which his grand-nephew loved. Plutocracy displaced aristocracy, to be in turn displaced by herd-socialism. Trevelyan found himself drifting to the right. It was too late to effect important change when he began voting Tory.

As his world darkened his success became evermore pronounced. He was by instinct a moral, a noble, and a good man. Faced with the death of his world, he sought through the foundation of the National Trust to save as much of it as possible. This courageous effort was, perhaps, more important and enduring than his historical writings. Museum-building and museum-keeping are, however, not exactly the work of a Whig believer in progress or a Whig dedicated to the future.



The Soundness of Reinhold Niebuhr

RUSSELL KIRK

Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role in the Twentieth Century, by Charles C. Brown, *Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1993. 317 pp. \$34.95.*

A Reinhold Niebuhr Reader: Selected Essays, Articles, and Book Reviews, compiled and edited by Charles C. Brown, *Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1993. 173 pp. \$18.75 (paper).*

Thirty-two years ago, when I published in *Fortune* an article entitled "Can Protestantism Hold Its Own in a Modern America?" I let cheerfulness break in, concluding that the Protestant churches showed promise of renewed vigor. When recently I had opportunity to bring out that essay again, I found that I had been dead wrong, and so deleted it from a volume of my periodical contributions.

I had written my *Fortune* article while Reinhold Niebuhr still lived, though recently retired from his post at Union Theological Seminary. The Thirties, Forties, and Fifties—Niebuhr's age—had been an era of great religious writers and preachers of divers confessions: Bernard Iddings Bell, Lynn Harold Hough, Paul Tillich, Richard Niebuhr, Reinhold Niebuhr, and others touched upon in this book; also (not touched upon by Mr. Brown) of a good many talented Catholic theologians and apologists. The glory seems to have departed from Protestantism and Catholicism alike, here in these United States.

As Charles Brown puts the matter in his final chapter, "The Niebuhrian Legacy," less than a decade after Niebuhr's death "there were signs that American religious and political life was