

# Lord Acton: Another Eminent Victorian

*Stephen J. Tonsor*

**Lord Acton**, by Roland Hill, *New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000. xvii + 548 pp.*

HISTORY IS A GREAT SIEVE sifting out the important from the unimportant in men and in events. The process is not instantaneous. Often the judgments close on the man or the event are in error. Stature is an optical phenomenon which only the perspectives of time can measure. Lord Acton has been dead for very nearly a century and it is high time that the man and the events of his life were given proper assessment.

In the post-World War II era, Lord Acton was increasingly the center of interest in England, in the United States, and in Germany. Articles and monographs were frequent. The Acton-Simpson, Acton-Newman, Acton-Döllinger correspondence was published. Finally, when the Acton archive of family papers became available a biography was at last possible. And what a biography it is! Roland Hill's elegant essay is, in fact, a more interesting and complete account of a man and his era

than Sir Roy Jenkins's recent, splendid reevaluation of William Gladstone (1809-1898), Acton's friend.

When Acton was born in Naples, Italy, in 1834 the Romantic era was drawing to a close. Hegel had died in 1831, Goethe in 1832, Byron in 1824, and Wordsworth's powerful lyric line had declined into the doggerel of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*. Acton came of age intellectually in the era of Realism and Positivism, a fact which was both to mark and to mar his conception of history. He lived into "the strange death of Liberal England" and saw into their graves both William Gladstone and Queen Victoria. When Acton died in 1902, Europe stood on the eve of the Great War, to be followed shortly by the Russian Revolution and the rise of National Socialism.

The central fact in Acton's life was his Roman Catholic faith. It was colored by the Romantic revival of Catholicism and the recusant faith of his ancestors, Catholics before the impact of the Irish immigration, the Oxford converts, and the renewed and revitalized papacy which followed in the wake of the French Revolution and Napoleon. Rome was a distant city where Englishmen bought pictures and statues and admired the monuments, and even though Acton's uncle was a cardinal and his grandfather had been prime minister of Naples, Acton was al-

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ways less Roman than Catholic.

On his mother's side the Dalbergs had been the chief formulators of Febronianism, the German equivalent of Gallicanism. It emphasized the power of the German bishops and the emperor, and kept the Pope at a safe distance. That there can be no doubt as to the intensity and the piety of his Catholicism is made more than evidently clear by this magnificent biography.

But if Acton was intensely religious, he was also intensely political. When Acton was fifty he wrote to Mary Gladstone, "...The Duke of Orleans nearly described my feelings when he spoke testatorially, of his religious *flag* and his political *faith*. Politics came nearer religion with me, a party is more like a church, error more like heresy, prejudice more like sin, than I find it to be with better men...." In 1881 the mature Acton wrote, "I never had any contemporaries, but spent years looking for men wise enough to solve the problems that puzzled me, not in religion or politics so much as the wavy line between the two...."

That "wavy line" is dangerous territory particularly for young men who overestimate both their own commanding intelligence and the intellectual and moral inferiority of those who disagree with or oppose them. In his clearer moments Acton knew that religion and politics were completely and irremediably different and distinct. That awareness, however, tended to be lost in the rough and tumble of temporal making and doing. The moral world and the world of power, although often contingent, are independent of one another. The world of politics is the world of power and we all know what Lord Acton thought of power. Still, coercion is the *sine qua non* of political

life. Acton, the *eminence grise* of William Gladstone, may have thought himself a moral man acting in the hidden recesses of politics. We know that the moral and the political life are both more ambiguous than that.

Acton's life reads like the scenario of one of Anthony Trollope's great novels.

Perhaps this is the case because Acton was so quintessentially Victorian. Marrying cousins is always dangerous, as Queen Victoria realized, and near incest was a pattern in the Acton family, the necessary dispensations, ironically, provided by their Roman connections. One wonders what Trollope would have done with this tangle of high place, of political, social, and intellectual ambition,

of great and mismanaged wealth, of religious confusion and moral certitude.

The young Acton in his admiration for German scholarship and intellectuality was not unlike Trollope's Bertie Stanhope in *Barchester Towers* (1857). Ethelbert Stanhope carried dubious German scholarship like a concealed blackjack with which he unexpectedly whacked over the head of what he considered clerical Philistines. "Talking of Professors," Bertie said, "how much you English might learn from Germany, only you are all too proud."

At the end of the eighteenth century the Germans discovered the historical critical method and began the intense exploitation of archival materials. The implications of German historical scholarship were immense in every field but especially in the field of religion and the nationalist awakening which swept Europe. The great innovators in historical study were initially Protestant and Prussian. The Reformation was conjoined to the rise of German nationalism. How-



ever, historical study is always a two-edged sword, and soon Catholics were as adept as Protestants at using history to support their cause. The leader among the Catholics in the new science of history was Ignaz von Döllinger, Acton's mentor and surrogate father.

The hope of these German Catholic scholars was that history would provide them with a weapon against Protestantism and would enable them to construct a historical theology displacing the revived scholasticism which was especially strong among the Jesuits. There was always the hope that in the dusty recesses of some unexploited archive they would find evidence for the clinching argument and devastating demonstration. They sought, Newman said, a certitude in history which history could not possibly yield.

Döllinger was himself an example of the wavering uncertainty of the conclusions of the historical-critical method. Over time his attitude to the Papacy, to the Reformation, to Luther, to Prussia and Bismarck, and to the Jews changed radically.

The Jews are a case in point especially as Roland Hill has glossed over this delicate subject. Whatever Döllinger's attitude to the Jews became in the 1880s his position and speech in the Bavarian Landtag in 1846 on the subject of Jewish emancipation can only be described as extremely anti-semitic.

After six years in the Döllinger household and Munich University, Acton brought the new learning to England. Acton believed that Romanticism and the accompanying revolution in historical studies was an intellectual movement on a par with the Renaissance. Acton was prepared, nearly over-prepared, for his self-appointed task of defending Catholicism by bringing the scientific study of history to England. That he confused history with theology is not surprising, but that he found Newman, to whom he

referred, casually, as "the venerable Noggs," as deficient in theological learning, is extraordinary. Newman is now reckoned the greatest theologian of the modern period.

After 1854, when Acton and Döllinger accepted the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception as an exercise of the extraordinary magisterium of the Papacy, both mentor and pupil mounted increasing resistance to the "Ultramontane" demands for a conciliar definition of papal infallibility. That resistance took the form of an organized opposition not lacking on either side of the debate the elements of a conspiracy. As a historian Acton was given to conspiracy theory, what he called "back stairs" historical explanations.

The minority of bishops opposed to the definition who met in Rome in 1870 was divided between a larger number who were "inopportunist," that is, bishops who accepted infallibility, but who felt the moment for the proclamation of the doctrine had not come, and those who simply refused to accept the proclamation of the dogma as authentic and ancient Catholic belief. After great organizational and publicistic efforts by Acton, the dogma was approved by the Council without schism and Acton returned to England to lick his wounds.

It should not come as a surprise that Acton did not know what infallibility meant theologically—nor did many of the bishops who attended the Council. It was left to the work of later theologians to define its conditions and to describe its parameters. This might have happened in 1870 had not the Council been cut short by the Italian seizure of Rome. If universal consensus is a measure of doctrinal authenticity then Acton was mistaken. However, many great and good men have been mistaken. Were the infallibility controversy the only claim to fame in Acton's life his memory would be banished to a long footnote in church-his-

torical accounts. Acton was a far greater and more influential man than that.

The intellectual efforts in the remaining decades of his life guarantee Acton a place among the great intellectual figures of the late nineteenth century. They were two in number.

After 1870 Acton devoted himself to the exploration and the propagation of the idea of liberty. The end of the nineteenth century was the great age of freedom in the Western world. Acton was aware of this and like Tocqueville saw that liberty was the consequence of Providential agency. Moreover, again like Tocqueville, he saw the growth and centralization of state power as the great enemy of freedom. Racism and nationalism were, Acton believed, the handmaidens of militarism, centralization, and the growth of state power. Austria was to be preferred to Prussia, the Confederate States to the more monolithic North in the American Civil War, and the ideal of a federal Europe on the Imperial model to a collection of national states. A federal Europe was for him a most desired European future. Acton was never quite English, never quite German, and never Italian. He was a European man well ahead of his time.

There were, of course, difficulties with Acton's notion of liberty. It was difficult to tell just what liberty was, for as Acton admitted there were many differing definitions of liberty. To say, as Acton finally did, that liberty was freedom to do what one's conscience dictated did not resolve the problem, for conscience has dictated diverse and conflicting behaviors. Moreover, liberty was often linked to grave sin, as indeed the link between slavery and the Confederate States made clear to Acton's conflicted mind. Acton found the ambiguities of liberty baffling.

Conscience proved to be an equally difficult problem. Acton wished the dictates of conscience to be clear and universal in character. He was, in fact, a

Catholic Kantian in this respect and would have agreed with Newman that it was better that the whole world should perish than that a single venial sin be committed. There is an absence of scale in Acton's moral thought and a lack of a sophisticated idea of the problem of evil. This made it difficult for Acton to forgive sin and error and to understand the mitigating influence of place, time, and circumstance.

What Acton needed was a well developed natural-law philosophy. We can see him searching for such a philosophy in his admiration for George Eliot who, in spite of being an agnostic freethinker, was a person of deep moral convictions. Acton was so much the moral athlete because he saw sin as the great enemy of freedom.

Acton was better at identifying the enemies of liberty and describing the circumstances in which liberty could flourish than in forging a covering definition. As the world after 1900 sank into the monolithic structures of unmitigated democracy, socialism, and fascism, Acton's vision seemed remarkably prescient. However, even though Acton knew that socialism was the enemy of freedom, he toyed in his thought more and more with the idea of the justice of socialism. This was, perhaps, another sad consequence of his German education and his half-baked reading of Karl Marx.

Secondly, Acton had been trained in a critical historical method which led directly to historical relativism. This school of German historicism taught its adepts to make no moral judgments; to explain, to understand, and if not to forgive, at least to draw no condemning conclusions. Acton adopted the historical-critical method but rejected its conclusions. His warning to historians not to depreciate the moral currency was a most enduring influence on contemporary thought. We understand now that no amount of historical window-dressing can

exculpate the crimes of Hitler and Stalin, their tinhorn imitators, and the millions who gave their assent to crimes which they knew to be monstrous. Evil is never "banal"; only its practitioners merit that description.

Roland Hill's biography does not offer us judgments and conclusions but the rich fabric of a life and a detailed description of a past time. Acton's grave is unknown and his bones are probably in the *Beinhaus* at Teegernsee. He has, however, a better monument than an identified grave in this extraordinary biography.

## *Unraveling the Riddle of Progress*

BRYCE CHRISTENSEN

**From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life, 1500 to the Present**, by Jacques Barzun, *New York: HarperCollins, 2000. xviii + 877 pp.*

A MAGISTERIAL VOLUME chronicling five centuries of Western civilization provides an ideal opportunity for reflecting on the remarkable power of history to inspire and to chasten. The need for such reflection has never been greater, for contemporary thought has radically narrowed history's cultural significance, reducing it to an ideological chart, a reason for congratulating ourselves on our escape from a nightmarish past of injustice and oppression in our upward march towards a utopian future. Readers who seek a truer and more inclusive sense of history

may count themselves extremely fortunate to have a guide as learned and wise as Jacques Barzun.

This distinguished French-born scholar does, it must be acknowledged, defend progress against those who would dismiss it as a "foolish fantasy of the [eighteenth-century] philosophes," insisting on the indispensability of this "cultural yardstick." Barzun thus defends the great Whig historian Thomas Macaulay against the charge of having invented a version of history which falsified its meaning by enshrining progress as its central theme. We need this historical ideal, Barzun reasons, in order "to see that the fruits of western culture, human rights, social benefits, machinery have not sprouted out of the ground like weeds; they are the work of innumerable hands and heads."

Yet in his use of progress as a cultural yardstick, Barzun steers well clear of Whiggish complacency, consistently evincing a sophisticated understanding of the ironies and reversals which forever complicate the course of civilization. Progress, he well understands, "does not occur along the whole cultural front, though it may appear to by throwing into shadow the resistant portion." By dispelling the shadows obscuring hidden cultural developments, Barzun defies the regnant orthodoxies erected around "the 20C dogma that latest is best." Indeed, Barzun's stout defense of progress as a cultural ideal makes all the more biting his criticisms of recent cultural trends which have betrayed that ideal. "It is a false analogy with science that makes us think that latest is best," he explains, and it is accordingly not to the present age but to past times that he typically turns in illustrating just how "Progress does occur from point to point...for a given time" (emphasis added).

Barzun sees progress, for instance, in Shakespeare's poetic achievement in creating a "roundness of character" never

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