

Lord Acton: The History of Liberty

by Tricia Wallace

Lord John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, the Victorian crusader for Liberalism, is one of the more unwieldy scholars of historical thought, the reason being that his life's work and passion encompassed far more than just historical research. He was member of Parliament, a noted figure in the Liberal Catholic movement and archenemy of Europe's Ultramontanism, part owner of the liberal newspaper *The Rambler*, a Lord in waiting to Queen Victoria, and known just as well as a moralist and critic of politics, as he was an historian. In each of these capacities, however, he always remained, as G. P. Gooch described him, "an apostle of liberty." <1>

Until he was appointed the Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University in 1895, he was not widely known as an historian. In fact the library at Cambridge discovered only prior to his inauguration that their collection contained not a single work by Acton, the main reason being that at the age of 61 he had yet to actually complete an entire book. <2> It has only been since his death that his essays and lectures have been collected into numerous volumes in order that his contributions to historical thought may be studied more readily.

The person of Lord Acton, and particularly his family and education, lend a great deal to understanding who Acton the historian was. Born in Naples on January 10, 1834 to Sir Ferdinand Richard Acton and Marie Peline de Dalberg, he came from an old English family of country squires. The Actons had held the estate of Aldenham in Shropshire since the beginning of the fourteenth century while his mother, a Dalberg, came from an even older line of aristocracy in Bavaria. <3> His father died when he was three years old, and his mother married Lord Levinson, the second Earl of Granville, yet another aristocratic lineage. <4> Along with the estate at Shropshire, Acton had family in Naples, Rome, Paris, and Bavaria, and subsequently by the age of ten could speak English, French, and German, eventually adding Italian, Latin, and Spanish to the list. <5> Although Acton never played the part of a typical European aristocrat, (facing lean financial years instead of accepting money from the estate of his grandfather whom he found morally reprehensible), his background, family, education, and travel enabled him to "inhabit simultaneously the worlds of scholarship and society, to delight his aristocratic friends with his erudition and his academic colleagues with his intimate knowledge of high society." <6>

At the age of sixteen and a half, having been refused admission to Cambridge because he was a Catholic, he moved to Munich to study with Professor Dollinger, a Catholic historian. It was Dollinger whom Acton held responsible for purging him of such Whiggish tendencies as judging the past based on the standard of the present. <7> Dollinger, who would later be excommunicated for his outspoken beliefs against Ultramontanism and papal infallibility, grew to become the greatest influence on the thoughts of Acton. Prior to this introduction, however, Acton was also exposed to other

crucial intellectuals of his time. His first teacher, Monsignor Dupanloup had been among the liberal Catholics in France who attempted to reconcile their Catholic beliefs with a politically liberal government. <8> Moreover, the President of Oscott College where Acton was schooled prior to moving to Munich was Cardinal Wiseman, who was at the forefront of the Ultramontanist movement, the antithesis of the beliefs held by the other two men and Acton himself.

After his formal education Acton occupied himself with a wide variety of positions before he was finally appointed to the Regius Professorship of Modern History at Cambridge. He won a seat in the House of Commons as a Liberal in 1859, representing a small Irish district. He served only one six-year term, his interests being increasingly drawn towards research and writing. From 1858 to 1862 he was part-owner and contributor to the liberal Catholic publication, Rambler. Although he was cajoled into leaving this post, rather than be excommunicated for his Liberal Church views and criticisms, he continued writing and publishing essays and editorials throughout most of his life. Prior to his appointment in 1895, he had been a Lord in Waiting to Queen Victoria for three years.

Lord Acton's life-long goal was to write a "History of Liberty," but unfortunately it was yet another project that he began, but never felt prepared enough to complete. Those that have studied Acton have instead had to depend upon his essays, lectures, articles, and letters in order to delineate a theory which never materialized in one specific volume.

The progression of liberty was not, for Acton, the meaning of history, but it was the one theme that unifies history. Acton used the standard of liberty to evaluate events in history and to base his moral judgements on the outcome of the events. He was, therefore, in no sense trying to be objective. On the contrary, he found it to be the obligation of the historian to make such judgements in order to further the cause of liberty. That is, by the term moral judgement he limited himself strictly to the progression or regression of freedom. For freedom was not merely the optimal means to a better society. It was the very essence of the ideal society. Acton defined liberty in his essay "The History of Freedom in Antiquity" as "the assurance that every man shall be protected in doing what he believes his duty against the influence of authority and majorities, custom and opinion." He added, "The most certain test by which we judge whether a country is really free is the amount of security enjoyed by minorities." <9> The goal of liberty seemed to be an obvious and universally acceptable standard to Acton and one by which moral judgements could be feasibly made by any historian.

The two main components of Acton's theory of history were ideas and revolution. Gertrude Himmelfarb explains that his theory of history was essentially the history of ideas. <10> Those ideas had little meaning and purpose within themselves. They "acquired meaning only by comparison with a fixed moral standard outside of them, and purpose by fulfilling a moral end imposed upon them." <11> The moral standard was obviously liberty.

His confidence in the power of ideas leads to his historical necessity of revolution, because ideas subvert existing institutions and are critical of both individuals and events. Himmelfarb elaborates on his idea of conscience, explaining that having the ability to distinguish between good and evil is the very root of revolution, "for it destroys the sanctity of the past." <12> This he termed "revolution in permanence."

This history of liberalism contrasts sharply with the two prominent schools of thought at this time: the historicists and the whigs. Acton had admired von Ranke for his contributions to the science of history and was actually instrumental in bringing this rigorous method from Germany to England. <13> While studying in Munich he attended a lecture of von Ranke's and was definitely influenced by his new methodology. In 1895 in his inaugural address at Cambridge he proclaimed that von Ranke "has done more for us than any other man." <14> However, Acton Was not content with merely discovering the past, as he felt historicists were; instead he evaluated the past with an eye to the future. Acton perceived the German school to be reviving the sentiment of the Medieval era in much the same spirit as the scholars of the Renaissance revived the Greek classics, except that he did not view this revival as favorably. Their goal, he thought, was to eradicate eighteenth century optimism, faith in the infallible conscience, the metaphysics of natural law, and the mechanical Newtonian society. Although Acton does not wholeheartedly defend the ideas of the Enlightenment as infallible, he rejects the historicist method of what he considers a search for the lost vision of Christianity." To Acton this new school idealized the past and encouraged a return to the tradition in ideas and patriotic sentiments. <15>

The historicists fascination with the process of history, with the law of discovery, led to a "disruptive and uncertain historical relativism," according to Acton. <16> Relativism was the root of their weakness, in light of the moral judgements that Acton felt were such an important responsibility for historians.

Lord Acton also critiqued the antithesis of historicism -- whiggism. Hugh Tulloch contends that "Actons entire historical canon is nothing less than a sustained assault on every variety of Whig presentmindedness." <17> Whiggism, embodied in Macauley; was a means to confirm and strengthen the present order and in the process denied history its proper context. In his "History of Progress in Britain," Acton wrote:

It is in reality the notion of perpetual progress which lies at the bottom of this style of historical writing. It comes from admiration of the present, not the past The true view of history is the reverse of this narrowness ... Each event and period of history must be viewed in its own natural light. It is the business of historians everywhere to furnish us with this light, without which each object is distorted and discolored. <18>

This distaste for the whig school of thought was simultaneously a critique of contemporary whig politics. Progress in history, for them, was the succession of conquests, and their inquiry into the past often centered on biographical sketches of men of power -- Cromwell, Frederick the Great, or Attila the Hun. Acton, in his Lectures on Modern History and Lectures on the French Revolution, often took issue with the notion

that superiority and progress were found with battle victories and the enslavement of the conquered. He lamented that "Louis XIV was held up in textbooks as a model for children to admire while his six million subjects who starved on the grass went unmentioned." <19>

In view of the previous criticisms of two historical extremes, it is logical that Acton's theory of history lie somewhere in between. One of the best insights into his historical disposition, as well as one of the best inaugural addresses in the history of Cambridge, is his " Inaugural Lecture on the Study of History," given in June of 1895 on the occasion of his acceptance of the Regius Professorship of Modern History.

As the professor of Modern History, he first used his theory of ideas and revolution to define his use of the term "Modern History." The beginning of the Modern period was quite obvious to him. It began with the explorations of men like Columbus 400 years before the year in which he stood in front of his audience. <20> The "law of innovation" distinguished the modern era from the Medieval period and epochs before that. Revolution overcame the Modern period as stability disintegrated under the force of new ideas. Specifically he identified Columbus, Machiavelli, Erasmus, Luther, and Copernicus as catalysts in the liberation of society from the past. Columbus 11 subverted the notions of the world, Machiavelli released government from the restraint of law; Erasmus diverted the current of ancient learning from the profane into Christian channels; Luther broke the chain of authority and tradition at the strongest link; and Copernicus erected an invincible power that set forever the mark of progress upon the time that was to come." <21>

The history of ideas and revolution demanded that one look further than politics and the affairs of governments. The most important task of historians, he explained is to monitor the movement of ideas, "which are not the effect, but the cause of public events." <22> His stress on the future became more evident as he explained the value of historical knowledge in developing judgement. "If the Past has been an obstacle and a burden, knowledge of the past is the safest and surest emancipation." <23> Specifically he stressed the study of Modern History because it was the story of ourselves, of problems that have yet to be resolved, of events that have yet to climax, of curiosities left unsatiated.

For Acton, the modern period became important because people developed a curiosity about the world that was foreign to them. This was crucial because the influence of ideas expanded outside the Medieval realm of experience. Because new ideas became more accessible and old ideas were revived, revolution was more probable and therefore the study of history was more than just a narrative of events. Acton encouraged his colleagues to focus on the influence and power of ideas in their study of history as he said:

If we are able to account mind not matter, ideas not force, the spiritual property that gives us dignity and grace and intellectual value to history, and its action on the ascending life of man, then we shall not be prone to explain the universal by the national, and

civilization by custom. A speech of Antigone, a single sentence of Socrates, a few lines that were inscribed on an Indian rock before the Second Punic War, the footsteps of a silent yet prophetic people who dwelt by the Dead Sea and perished in the fall of Jerusalem, come nearer to our lives than the ancestral wisdom of barbarians who fed their swine on the Hercynian acorns." <24>

Acton also described and critiqued the modern study of history of his contemporaries. First modern historical endeavor had been changed by a flood of new materials and information never before acknowledged or available. Modern historians began documentary studies as never before, led by Mackintosh, Bucholtz, Mignet, and Michelet. With such a deluge of material, modern history became impossible for one mind to completely grasp. The second characteristic of the "amended order" was the art not just of accumulating material, but "the sublimer art of investigating it, of discerning truth from falsehood and certainty from doubt." <25> The discovery of more material or documents was no longer as crucial as critical analysis of the mass of documents already discovered. The third distinctive character of the new historians was their doctrine of impartiality. To them history was completely dependent upon the documents, not opinions. Ideas in politics and religion would be acknowledged as influential, but not necessarily as truth; never could they be affirmed, only respected. Acton does not uphold this ideal however, and confronts this frame of mind : "If men were truly sincere, and delivered judgement by no canons, but those of evident morality, then Julien would be described in the same terms by Christian and pagan, Luther by Catholic and Protestant, Washington by Whig and Tory, Napoleon by patriotic Frenchman and patriotic German." <26>

Another facet of Lord Acton's theory is the manner in which he actually evaluated the status of liberty in the historical context. All of his essays on historical time periods illustrated his method of evaluating and critiquing past events with respect to his moral standard of liberty. One of his earliest pieces, "The History of Freedom in Antiquity," however, not only highlighted advances and regressions in liberty before the time of Christ, but also demonstrated how he reconciled his devout religious fervor with the ultimate ideal of universal personal liberty.

He glorified the society of the "Chosen People" because power was granted by a contract of the people and the king was not given the right to legislate. The only lawgiver was God, making the prophets of God's laws at times more powerful than the king. Faith in the prophets was based on the moral principles of the people and their adherence to religious beliefs. <27>

He also found the seeds to free societies within ancient Aryan nations, although he does not specify which ones. They were small societies with a common interest in common concerns. They looked within themselves for leadership and disregarded outside authority. Lastly, because they did not have a clear conception of the role or supremacy of the State, the power of the State over individuals' lives was inhibited in its development. <28>

Acton's thought on "good" government and "bad" government become clearer in his discussion of Athens and the "most profound political genius of Antiquity," Solon, the man appointed to revise the laws of Athens. By no means does Acton applaud this Greek civilization as the ideal liberal state, but he praises the accomplishments and the innovation for which Solon is responsible, recognizing that the path to freedom is an extremely slow and arduous one based on the evolution of the consciousness of liberty. Most importantly, Solon introduced the idea that citizens should have a voice in determining the leaders on whose wisdom and honor their lives, family, and estates depended. Citizens were not blindly called upon to trust their leaders; rather, they were given the means as well as the responsibility to remain vigilant of those in whom they instilled the power to rule them. <29>

Despite Acton's belief that a libertarian society was awaiting the gradual progression of society, he also identified the mistakes that humans made which have impeded this progress. Within Roman civilization he highlighted some of the more typical problems that often occurred. For example, Acton was always troubled by stagnation, by a people's desire for continuity and tradition. Innovation was the means to progress for him, and he saw that many societies tried to hold on to old institutions to solve problems instead of abandoning them for new ones. Because the circumstances surrounding institutions change, harboring old methods in the face of new problems was only a form of enslavement. This was the problem that he saw as the Roman Republic evolved into the Roman Empire. Acton suggested that they only looked to "analogous cases" when trying to solve problems instead of encouraging new and innovative thinking. He described the Romans in this way:

Their peculiar character prompted them to ascribe the origin of their laws to early times, and in their desire to LEFT the continuity of their institutions, and to get rid of the reproach of innovation, they imagine the legendary history of the kings of Europe." <30>

The other classic shortfall of the state which was also made by later governments was the unity of Church and State. A society structured in this way was probably the worst condition for liberty in Acton's estimation. Religion and its influence on people's morals were most successful in societies where they were free from state control and where religious toleration was the norm. Acton, nevertheless, adhered steadfastly to the "teaching of the divine voice" and was convinced that when the state had no control over morals, the standard, "treat others as you would have them treat you" would prevail. This, he felt, would eventually and once and for all, even close the door on slavery. Slavery, he contended, contradicted the law of nature and persisted because the state failed to allow moral beliefs to overturn custom. <31>

The concept of freedom, however, did not culminate in the granting of power to the people. The other major area of interest to Acton was the volatility of power and various efforts made at balancing power between the law and the people. Acton indulged in an intricate, yet inconclusive, discussion of this dilemma in his essay "The Political Causes of the American Revolution." In this piece Acton explained the controversy between a government upholding the supremacy of the law and the strict principle of popular

sovereignty, using the history of the United States from the time of the drafting of the Constitution to the onset of the Civil War as his example. At times he also contrasted the use of power by the people of the U.S. with the people of the French Revolution.

The tyranny of the majority was a vital concern of Acton and the sole reason he rejected the notion of popular sovereignty. He explained that "the minority can have no permanent security against the oppression of prepondering numbers, or against the government which these numbers control, and the moment will inevitably come when separation will be preferred to submission." <32> The ideal government was one based on an ideology or philosophy, rather than a succession of compromises which may have represented the majority of votes. Although he never offered specific recommendations, he saw a role for a central document or figure which would protect and embody the philosophy of liberty. The U. S. Constitution, according to him, was no more than a succession of compromises, in the eyes of Acton, which ultimately sacrificed the true ideal of liberty.

The Constitution of the United States and the debates that preceded its adoption were clear examples of the dilemma faced with the right of freedom and the right of people to rule themselves. Those who drafted the Constitution were, according to Acton, in greater favor of the political system of Britain, monarchism, than true democracy. By failing to take a clear stand on the issue of states' rights, and instead, working out a compromise, Acton felt the United States was destined to see these ambiguity culminate in bloodshed, which it did in the Civil War. The rejection of the right of nullification by the States, according to Acton, was the triumph of the tyranny of the majority and the beginning of the end of the rights of the minority to protect their own interests. <33>

The greatest problem with Acton's view on states' rights and the Civil War was his lack of clarity regarding the question of slavery in the Southern States. Was slavery the right of the States? Slavery was obviously a gross violation of freedom for Acton. Despite this, Acton mournfully lamented the surrender of the South and the centralization of the U.S. government as great violations of liberty. Although this is definitely the case also, was or was not the emancipation of the slaves the greatest of outcomes?

The only justification Acton provided for the position that the loss of states' rights was more detrimental was his belief that attitudes were changing in the South concerning slavery and if their power had not been jeopardized, the Southern states would have continued on their path to emancipation. Instead they tried to protect all of their power, and slavery mistakenly became an issue of power, when the South was threatened by Northern and Federal control. Acton drew on a speech given by Daniel Webster which held that the Virginia House of Delegates had been discussing the gradual abolition of Slavery only to draw back and "shut itself in its castle because of the fanaticism of the Northern abolitionists. " <34> Granting that all of this may be true, Acton is still unclear on his toleration of slavery versus states' rights and which freedom should have taken precedent in this matter. For a moralist historian who wants scholars to learn from his judgements of the past, he has certainly left posterity wanting a decision.

Nevertheless, his methodology has been nearly completed. Acton has traditionally been associated with the whig political views; and, despite his distaste for both political parties, this is more accurate in comparison to his view of the Tories. Tories he considered to be the epitome of political immorality and the antithesis of liberty because their main concerns were their preservation of office and the distribution of patronage. The rise of the Whigs he appreciated because they encouraged the sanctity of private affairs and religion as a voluntary association. The Whigs, however, did not go far enough: "A Whig was a reconciled Roundhead, who wanted only to improve, not to reconstruct, to destroy little and innovate little." <35> With respect to their views of history, Acton required a much more radical involved action to progress: limiting the power of the state in the lives of its citizens as well as in foreign affairs. To him liberty did not seem inevitable, as the "Whig interpretation" might imply. Liberty was possible only through the process of history and experience and the benefit of judgement.

Ultimately the advancement of freedom was possible only through knowledge of history. Although the historian should be merciful, understanding and aware of societal customs, he is also answerable to his conscience. Acton taught that facts are never certain in the present, they can only become so in history. To study history was to study the human race and a necessary exercise in the development of the conscience. Passing judgments on the past did not mean condemning individuals to hell or canonizing them as saints. It meant learning which behavior inhibits the freedom of individuals and which allows it to flourish. <36>

Notes

1 G. P. Gooch, "Lord Acton: Apostle of Liberty," *Foreign Affairs* July 1947, p. 629.

2 Hugh Tulloch, *Acton* (London, 1988), p. 87.

3 Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Lord Acton: A Study in Conscience and Politics* (Chicago, 1952), p. 3.

4 Himmelfarb, p. 7.

5 Herbert Butterfield, "Acton: His Training, Methods, and Intellectual System," *Studies in Diplomatic History and Historiography in Honour of G. P. Gooch* (London, 1961), p. 169.

6 Himmelfarb, p. 32.

7 Butterfield, p. 170.

8 Himmelfarb, p. 12.

9 Lord Acton, "The History of Freedom in Antiquity," *Essays in the History of Liberty* (Bridgenorth, 1877), p. 7.

10 Himmelfarb, p. 201.

11 Himmelfarb, p. 203.

12 Himmelfarb, p. 205.

13 J. Rufus Fears, *Essays in the History of Liberty* (Indiana, 1985), p. ix.

14 Lord Acton, "Inaugural Lecture on the Study of History," *Essays in the Liberal Interpretation of History* (Chicago, 1967), p. 335.

15 Tulloch, p. 90.

16 Tulloch, p. 91.

17 Tulloch, p. 92.

18 Tulloch, p. 93.

19 Ibid.

20 Tulloch, p. 94.

21 Acton, "Inaugural Lecture, " p. 302.

22 Acton, "Inaugural Lecture," p. 304.

23 Acton, "Inaugural Lecture," p. 302.

24 Acton, "Inaugural Lecture, " p. 306.

25 Acton, "Inaugural Lecture, " p. 303.

26 Acton, "Inaugural Lecture," p. 329.

27 Acton, "Inaugural Lecture, " p. 334.

28 Acton, "History of Freedom in Antiquity," p. 8.

29 Acton, "History of Freedom in Antiquity," p. 9.

30 Acton, "History of Freedom in Antiquity," p. 15.

31 Acton, "History of Freedom in Antiquity," p. 24.

32 Acton, "The Political Causes of the American Revolution," *Essays in the Liberal Interpretation of History* (Chicago, 1967), p. 60.

33 Acton, "The Political Causes of the American Revolution," p. 74.

34 Acton, "The Political Causes of the American Revolution," p. 83.

35 Himmelfarb, p. 206.

36 Owen Chadwick, "Acton and Butterfield," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (July 1987), p. 400.

[Return to 1991-2 Table of Contents](#)