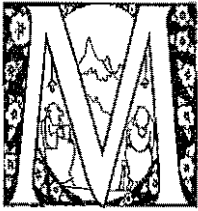


A LOVER OF BOOKS

Lord Macaulay communes across the generations

COMPULSIVELY READABLE

By R. J. STOVE



MACAULAY – or, to give him his full name and peerage, Thomas Babington Macaulay, first Baron Macaulay – died exactly a century and a half ago. No historian who ever lived has aroused a greater range of emotions, from deep love to wild hate. The deep love became evident in his own day, when his *History of England* and his numerous essay collections achieved a commercial success now associated exclusively with supermarket tabloids and with Oprah-endorsed chick-lit.

Affection also characterised both his chief biographers, namely, his nephew G.O. Trevelyan (whose *Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay* appeared in 1876) and his spiritual heir Sir Arthur Bryant (whose mostly admiring, though intermittently censorious, single-volume account *Macaulay* dates from 1932).

Throughout the former British Empire, schoolteachers long accorded Macaulay's name a reverence that in classrooms of 2009 is confined to Gandhi, JFK, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela. Even Ignatius Reilly, the ferociously anti-Protestant hero of John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, quoted with approval the Protestant Macaulay at least once.

This firm admiration existed alongside equally firm detraction. After Macaulay's death Matthew Arnold, never a guru to stand idly by when there was a mindless slogan in need of publicising or a literary reputation impudent enough to arise without his help, bestowed on Macaulay a downright demonological role as 'the great apostle of the Philistines.'

Arnold thereby introduced into popular currency a noun as devoid

of meaning, even in his own time, as 'fascist', 'Islamofascist', and 'racist' are nowadays. In 1931 Cambridge history professor Sir Herbert Butterfield, who differed from Arnold in having a genuine philosophical impulse, devoted his renowned pamphlet *The Whig Interpretation of History* to criticising triumphalist historical narratives in general, and by implication Macaulay's own. With his insights, Butterfield – who, it so happens, shared Macaulay's Protestantism – helped clear the air, and he always paid Macaulay's outlook the compliment of seriously arguing with it.

Very different was the personal vendetta waged against Macaulay soon afterward by one Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill, who

seethed at Macaulay's refusal to deify Churchill's own forebear, the Duke of Marlborough. Churchill taxed Macaulay with having 'vilified Marlborough's early life in order by contrast to make the glories of his great period stand out more vividly.' Ancestor-worship is doubtless an honourable enough trait, but in writing *Marlborough: His Life and Times* (1933-38), Churchill had no compunction about serving up cartoon historiography far more objectionably shrill than anything ever perpetrated by his intended target.

A 1958 survey – *The Jacobite Rebellion*, by Anglo-Irish historian Sir Charles Petrie – shows how Churchill accused James II of displaying, in 1682, physical cowardice extending to manslaughter. Churchill's accusation

Bide Your Time

THE BEST START that a leader can have is a widespread sense of the need for strong leadership. When the executives start muttering: "If only we had any policy at all we'd be fine", "If those idiots upstairs could make up their minds about anything we'd be able to get down to work", "How can I give a production forecast if no one knows what we're supposed to be making?" and finally "What we need is someone to come in and bang all their heads together" – that is the time for the outsider to step in. It was the aimlessness and corruption of the French Directory that cleared the ground for Napoleon, the division and conflict of the triumvirate that conditioned the Roman Republicans to the dictatorship of Augustus, the exhaustion after interminable baronial wars that made the English willing to accept the stern measures of Henry II (after Stephen) Edward I (after Coeur de Lion and John and Henry III) and Henry VII (after the Wars of the Roses). In that sort of situation, not only are people willing, even anxious, to accept the sort of firmness they would have resisted in more confident times: they are waiting with a halo in their hands for any head that looks worthy to receive it.

— Antony Jay, *Management and Machiavelli*,
Hodder and Stoughton, 1967, pp. 152

rested on no more secure a basis than a politically motivated letter written 60 years after the event by Marlborough's widow, and it wilfully ignored three eyewitness reports on James' behaviour.

Whilst reviewers at the time were inconsiderate enough to point out Churchill's reckless agenda, no such scruples afflicted American Churchill cultists. Leo Strauss - whose own knowledge of English politics in the late Stuart era could have been fitted on the back of a postage stamp and still have left room for his name and address - dubbed Churchill's filial *agitprop* 'the greatest historical work written in our century.' The best that non-Churchill-cultists can say for *Marlborough: His Life and Times* is that at least its words are Churchill's own, whereas 'his' *History of the Second World War* is now recognised (thanks to David Reynolds' superbly researched 2004 analysis *In Command of History*) as having been mainly ghost-written, when not simply plagiarised from Rear-Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison (who threatened to sue). Meanwhile, such invective as Arnold's and Churchill's prompts the question: Will the real Macaulay please stand up?

The real Macaulay's career consisted of broadly disinterested public service and little else. Born in 1800, he never married; and if he had a love-life or even a lust-life, he kept it dark. Bryant refers scornfully to debunkers 'seeking ... evidence of sexual perversities and scandals, rather as little dogs seek out truffles,' yet one doubts if any canine,

CHEVALIER 

RESOURCE CENTRE

IDEAL FOR CONFERENCES

- ★ Conference Rooms and Hall
- ★ Accommodation for 56 people
- ★ Dining room for up to 80 people
- ★ Tennis Court
- ★ Extensive Grounds
- ★ Ample parking

Contact (02) 9315 2222

CHEVALIER RESOURCE CENTRE
is in the beautiful grounds of
Sacred Heart Monastery
1 Roma Avenue Kensington 2033 NSW

however industrious, could ever dig up vices which would incriminate Macaulay.

Young Tom loved the sound of words as few other children do. When but four years old, and having been scalded by spilt coffee, he responded to his hostess's concern with the assurance: 'Thank you, madam, the agony is abated.' Someone who talked like this at the age of four could hardly be tongue-tied as an adult. From his redoubtable father, Zachary Macaulay - statistician, veteran anti-slavery activist, and erstwhile governor of Sierra Leone - he inherited evangelical fervour, an exalted conception of duty, and at the same time an 18th-century tough-

mindedness that precluded such vague pious uplift as Woodrow Wilson subsequently taught the world. He attended Cambridge, to little effect, since he had already read so much that ordinary students bored him witless.

No other great writer in the English pantheon has surpassed Macaulay for sheer learning. Milton alone came close. Macaulay knew at first hand all the surviving productions of all the leading Greek and Roman authors. Naturally he felt bound to study them in the original languages (no nonsense about depending on mere English translations). He also knew every major French author, recent or ancient. Again, he studied those authors in the original tongue. During adulthood he acquired enough German to read Goethe and Schiller. He could read Luis de Camoens's epic 16th-century poem *The Lusads* in Camoens's own Portuguese. On the Elizabethans and their Italian contemporaries, he had wider expertise still. When he said of Milton's *Comus* that 'It is as far superior to *The Faithful Shepherdess* as *The Faithful Shepherdess* is to the *Aminta* or the *Aminta* to the *Pastor Fido*', he assumed every reader would recall these three works as having been created by, respectively, John Fletcher (1579-1625), Torquato Tasso (1544-95), and Giovanni Battista Guarini (1538-1612).

Within Macaulay's world-view, 'dumbing down' existed neither as a phrase nor as a concept. 'Every schoolboy', runs one of his more sanguine pronouncements, 'knows who imprisoned Montezuma, and who strangled Atahualpa.' Every schoolboy in *Beverly Hills 90210*, one wonders? Every schoolboy even in Macaulay's own lifetime, when many schools' curricula comprised no more than elementary spelling, arithmetic, and Bible classes, all punctuated by near-homicidal floggings? That said, it should be noted afresh that Macaulay never lacked readers in his own day. And publishers ate up his output, even as they privately felt a certain alarm at his prose's sheer authoritative exuberance. One of his very first patrons, the *Edinburgh Review's* editor Francis Jeffrey, marvelled: 'The more I think, the less I can conceive where you picked up that style.'

Vocations to the Priesthood

Figures from the Church's Statistic Yearbook for 1997 were given in a June 4, 2000 Zenit News Agency report which stated: "In 1978 there were 63,882 seminarians; at present there are 108,517, an increase of 69.87 percent. The increase in Africa and Asia, in fact, is incredible. Over the last twenty years, these two continents have seen an increase of 238.50 percent and 124.01 percent, respectively." Over the past twenty years, vocations have increased in every continent around the globe. In America, the number of seminarians has increased from 22,011 to 35,000 in the last two decades.

Jason Evert, *This Rock*
(San Diego, Catholic Answers Inc., January 2002)

In Macaulay's Britain, libel legislation had yet to be passed, and duelling had grown unfashionable. Thus, British periodicals' warfare attained an *ad hominem* belligerence which would never again be witnessed among Anglophones until the 1930s.

Macaulay's antagonists, when in benign mood, contented themselves with misspelling his name 'Babington' as 'Babbletongue'. Harsher and more typical was the ultra-Tory magazine *Blackwood's*, which in its October 1827 number expressed for Macaulay the loftiest contempt: 'We scarcely ever met with a more striking specimen of frothy, shallow, pointless feeble declamation - of puerile, low, scurrilous "sound and fury, signifying nothing"'. When Wordsworth died, *Blackwood's* obituary notice called the Lake District poet 'a fat ugly cur.' If we must sometimes regret the way Macaulay dished it out, we should remember that Macaulay also needed to take it.

Perhaps the zenith of Macaulay's dishing-out propensities came with his onslaught upon J.W. Croker, a Tory boss whose slide from moderately talented scholar to party-political goon - bungling party-political goon, at that - anticipates with eerie perfection the metamorphosis of some academics in our own time. Croker ill-advisedly released, in 1831, a new edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, with annotations as lavish as they were inaccurate. Macaulay, who had forgotten more about Dr Johnson (and much else) than Croker would ever learn, let him have it from the opening sentence:

'This work has greatly disappointed us. ... We are sorry to be obliged to say that the merits of Mr. Croker's performance are on a par with those of a certain leg of mutton on which Dr. Johnson dined, while travelling from London to Oxford, and which he, with characteristic energy, pronounced to be "as bad as bad could be, ill fed, ill killed, ill kept, and ill dressed." This edition is ill compiled, ill arranged, ill written, and ill printed. Nothing in the work has astonished us so much as the ignorance or carelessness of Mr Croker with respect to facts and dates. Many of his blunders are such as we should be surprised to hear any well educated gentleman commit,

The Crusades

The Crusaders or the Christians who fought the war did not pretend to have done it based on the Gospels. Instead, they did it in defence of Christianity (or so they thought), or for the defence of their national state, or for the defence of what they considered to be their rights. That is to say, as men belonging to a culture, a nation, a tradition, they went to war. They did not act in the name of the Gospel.

- Samir Khalil Samir, SJ and Wafik Nasry, SJ, *111 Questions on Islam: Interviews of Samir Khalil Samir, conducted by Giorgio Peolucci and Camille Eid*, Ignatius Press, 2002, pp. 71-72.

even in conversation. The tomes absolutely swarm with misstatements into which the editor never would have fallen, if he had taken the slightest pains to investigate the truth of his assertions, or if he had even been well acquainted with the book on which he undertook to comment. We will give a few instances.'

And give them Macaulay does, on subjects as diverse as Juvenal, Thucydides, Suetonius, Herodotus, Demosthenes, Pitt the Elder, the 17th-century Scottish Royalist general Montrose, and the correct translation of the Greek term *philokertes*.

One might wonder what the polymathic Macaulay did when neither reading nor writing. The answer is, not a lot. His tenure as parliamentarian, and later as minister - he held cabinet rank in the governments of two Whig leaders, Lord Melbourne

and Lord John Russell - allowed him expansive leisure for his studies, politics being then considered a hobby for gentlemen rather than a full-time job. Though no debater, he gained bipartisan respect as an orator. Future Tory Premier Sir Robert Peel, a lifelong opponent, admitted after one Macaulay utterance: 'Portions of that speech were as beautiful as anything I ever heard or read.'

In 1835 Macaulay, crushed by the death of his sister Margaret, wrote to his closest friend Thomas Ellis: 'What a blessing it is to love books as I love them - to be able to converse with the dead, and to live amidst the unreal.' Not the kind of reflection to be heard from the lips of modern policy wonks. Eventually even his undemanding administrative duties came to annoy him; and in his last years, worn down by cardiac trouble, he would have endorsed the sentiments that Evelyn Waugh confided to his diary in 1943: 'I ... don't want to influence opinions or events, or expose humbug or anything of that kind. I don't want to be of service to anyone or anything. I simply want to do my work as an artist.'

Of course Macaulay the artist had his flaws. When he wrote, opportunities for archival research in the present-day sense had hardly begun. These days, any teenage halfwit with Google access can trawl through more 17th-century primary sources in an hour than Macaulay could have obtained in a decade. To cite Bryant:

'At the time when Macaulay was working, English historical scholarship was at its lowest ebb.



Those who blame him for his neglect of documents might as justly censure Napoleon for failing to use machine-guns at Waterloo. ... Of technical training for his task he had scarcely any, for there was then scarcely any to be had.

The miracle is not that Macaulay made mistakes, or that he glorified King William III with a zest incredible to us, who have access to more data about William's political corruption and erotic perversions than Macaulay ever knew or than we ever wanted to know. Rather, the miracle is that despite his weaknesses he remains compulsively readable. And at times profound, because his summary of the historian's function packs as much wisdom into one sentence as others have dragged out over several dozen pages:

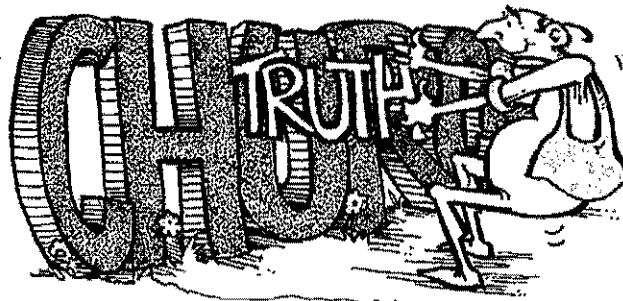
"The real use of ... studying the annals of past times, is to preserve men from the contraction of mind which those can hardly escape whose sole communion is with one generation and one neighbourhood, who arrive at conclusions by means of an induction not sufficiently copious, and who therefore constantly confound exceptions with rules, and accidents with essential properties."

For all his biases, Macaulay sought the truth. A thinker who, like Macaulay, risked ostracism by rebuking Queen Victoria to her face - when the sovereign referred to her 'ancestor' James II, the tactless Macaulay shot back: 'Not Your Majesty's ancestor, Your Majesty's predecessor' - would hardly have taken the 20th century's blood-drenched Caesars at their own ethical rating, had he lived to witness them.

Before he could attain his hopes of finishing the *History of England*, Macaulay died, on 28 December 1859. No latter-day chronicler can equal Bryant's exquisite closing paragraph:

"They found him sitting upright in his chair, with a book still open at his side. The heart had stopped, and the historian had become part of that which he had made it his business to record."

R. J. STOVE lives in Melbourne. A slightly different version of this article appeared in the December 2009 issue of *The American Conservative*.



To learn the truth about

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

A series of ten booklets

'Understanding Catholicism'

attractively printed, 24pp plus cover, pocket-sized

By Paul Stenhouse, MSC PhD

Ideal for families, parish discussion groups, school RE courses, RCIA groups, Church book stalls, parish libraries etc.

1. The Catholic Church founded by Christ
2. Christ's Church in the world
3. The Catholic Church and the New Testament
4. The Tradition of the Catholic Church
5. The Primacy of St Peter
6. The Primacy of the Bishop of Rome
7. The Mass - centre of Christian worship
8. Catholic devotion to Mary the Mother of God
9. Heaven and Hell
10. Purgatory, limbo and prayers for the dead

Price for the set of 10 - \$33 (post free anywhere in Australia)
 All orders: Chevalier Press, P.O. Box 13, Kensington NSW 2033 Australia
 Phone orders: (02) 9662 7894 Fax: (02) 9662 1910
 (Price includes GST)

Name:

Address:

Postcode: Phone:

Please send me _____ sets of the complete series @ \$33 each

Please find enclosed \$

Bill me including Postage

Please debit my:-

VISA-CARD MASTERCARD BANKCARD

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Signature: Expiry Date:/...../.....