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Lord Acton, A Great European
(*Part II*)

By Francis Neilson

The Historical Critic

Those who are planning a career in the field of historical literature cannot afford to overlook the aids given so abundantly by Lord Acton in his reviews of books. Scholars of twenty years ago frequently pointed out examples of literary criticism from his pen which were of exceptional value. His essay on the "Introduction to L. A. Burd's Edition of *Il Principe* by Machiavelli" has been selected several times as a unique specimen of critical achievement.

In many respects it is a review of the opinions of writers who have dealt with "The Prince" or have been influenced by its State creed. To enjoy it thoroughly the reader should be a master of five or six languages or have the passages translated for him by a scholar. This writer was fortunate enough to have a friend who had no difficulty in doing this. Nevertheless, it is possible to read it without translating all the passages, for Acton sustains the interest in his own language; and one is never at a loss in following the direction of his opinion. The chief reason why Acton's review of Burd's Edition is referred to here is that we should be reminded of the ideas of Machiavelli. The principles he formulated for the State have not fallen into desuetude, but are as vital today to its strength as they were to the rulers of Florence and Venice. Acton points this clearly:

> Among these utterances of capable and distinguished men, it will be seen that some are partially true, and others, without a particle of truth, are at least representative and significant, and serve to bring Machiavelli within fathomable depth. He is the earliest conscious and articulate exponent of certain living forces in the present world. Religion, progressive enlightenment, the perpetual vigilance of public opinion, have not reduced his empire, or disproved the justice of his conception of mankind. He obtains a new lease of life from causes that are still prevailing, and from doctrines that are apparent in politics, philosophy, and science. Without sparing censure, or employing for comparison the grosser symptoms of the age, we find him near our common level, and perceive that he is not a vanishing type, but a constant and contemporary influence. Where it is impossible to praise, to defend, or to excuse, the burden of blame may yet be lightened by adjustment and distribution, and he is more rationally in-

telligible when illustrated by lights falling not only from the century he wrote in, but from our own, which has seen the course of its history twenty-five times diverted by actual or attempted crime ("Hist. of Freedom," p. 213).

Had Acton lived through the two wars that have blighted this century, he would undoubtedly have marked the influence of the famous Florentine at work in the nationalistic policies of the powers.

Another review of particular value to us is that on "The American Commonwealth," by James Bryce. The lecture that he delivered at the Literary and Scientific Institution, Bridgenorth, 1866, on "The Civil War in America" is also of unusual interest to our readers, for it contains an appraisal of the termination of the conflict that we might consider deeply at this time:

> It is a noble sight to see this mighty soldier [Lee], the greatest of the countrymen of Washington, exhorting his people to obey their conquerors, and giving the example of peaceful retirement and submission. But it is also a noble sight to see the chief of a mighty and victorious nation . . . staying the hand of vengeance, remitting punishment and disbanding armies, and treating as an equal the man who had been so lately and so long the most terrible of enemies, and whose splendid talents had inflicted on the people of the Union a gigantic loss in treasure, blood, and fame. It is too soon to despair of a community that has among its leading citizens such men as these ("Hist. Essays & Stud.," p. 142).

Whether the men of today are less fitted to make terms of peace, on which a future of amity may be built, than those of Lincoln's day may be inferred from such a tribute as Acton paid to Grant and Lee. Then the atrocities of war were overlooked, as the angel of peace spread her wings over the fields saturated with the blood of heroic men who obeyed their commanders. The main object of those who had been engaged in the conflict seemed to be to leave no gaping wounds of hate behind them, if they could do anything to salve them. How different it has been with warring States in our time and generation! What reversions of thought and practice have taken place! If a reading of Acton's essays and reviews had no other purpose than that of reminding us of these changes, they would merit the profound consideration of people who desire peace. He said, "The reward of history is that it releases and relieves us from present strife" ("Letters," p. 237).

So far, we have not enjoyed this reward, and there seems to be little chance of our doing so. Perhaps we shall have to find another definition for barbarism, for nothing that went by that name in the past is comparable to what has occurred during the last ten years.

Not a few of the books that have been given to us as history, written since the end of the first World War, will suffer severely at the hands of a future Acton, if the next generation is so fortunate as to be blessed with one. The sins of writers on serious subjects, which he made it his duty to expose, were never so prevalent as they are today. But the printing presses serving publishers and journalists have simpler means for reaching the multitude; and the radio, a device for distoring the public mind by time-serving propagandists has wrought irreparable damage upon the minds of people. In recent months we have witnessed several examples of the difficulties of publication encountered by writers who oppose the popular trends. There is a censorship in force today which, in some respects, is as strict as what we suffered during the war. Persons and policies must not be questioned, and it is just as hard to get at secret documents in the archives of government offices as it was to get into the cupboards of the Quai d'Orsay for information after World War I. It seems strange now to read the advice that was given to the students at Cambridge when Acton delivered his "Inaugural Lecture on the Study of History." He said:

. . . For our purpose, the main thing to learn is not the art of accumulating material, but the sublimer art of investigating it, of discerning truth from falsehood and certainty from doubt. It is by solidity of criticism more than by the plentitude of erudition, that the study of history strengthens, and straightens, and extends the mind. And the accession of the critic in the place of the indefatigable compiler, of the artist in coloured narrative, the skilled limner of charcter, the persuasive advocate of good, or other, causes, amounts to a transfer of government, to a change of dynasty, in the historic realm. For the critic is one who, when he lights on an interesting statement, begins by suspecting it. He remains in suspense until he has subjected his authority to three operations. First, he asks whether he has read the passage as the author wrote it. For the transcriber, and the editor, and the official or officious censor on the top of the editor, have played strange tricks, and have much to answer for. And if they are not to blame, it may turn out that the author wrote his book twice over, that you can discover the first jet, the progressive variations, things added, and things struck out. Next is the question where the writer got his information. If from a previous writer, it can be ascertained, and the inquiry has to be repeated. If from unpublished papers, they must be traced, and when the fountain-head is reached, or the track disappears, the question of veracity arises. The responsible writer's character, his position, antecedents, and probable motives have to be examined into; and this is what, in a different and adapted sense of the word, may be called the higher criticism, in comparison with the servile and often mechanical work of pursuing statements to their root. For a historian has to be treated as a witness, and not believed unless his sincerity

is established. The maxim that a man must be presumed to be innocent until his guilt is proved, was not made for him ("Lect. on Mod. Hist.," pp. 15–6).

Professors of history who have undertaken the responsibility of teaching our youths the canons of historical method might spend time on Acton and impart to their pupils some of the great principles that he laid down. The suffocating air of the classrooms, of which so many complain, might be dispersed; and if the windows of enlightenment were thrown open to let in the air he breathed, historical writing, within a generation, might flourish as he believed it would.

It is not only the depth of Acton's learning that is revealed in his literary criticisms, but also the keen desire to hold the balance fairly between the opposing forces and give judgement in a spirit of understanding the issues. With all his severity expressed against error, he weighed the acts and consequences impartially, without a tinge of prejudice.

Acton's Critique of "John Inglesant"

When the novel, "John Inglesant," appeared, it created something of a sensation. The author, John Henry Shorthouse, was a Birmingham chemical manufacturer. He came from a Quaker family, but on reaching manhood, was baptized into the Church of England. Eighty thousand copies of the work were sold. In the most unlikely quarters, it made people think, and it was discussed widely in intellectual circles. All who were concerned in the eternal conflict between the flesh and the spirit debated the merits of this book for a long time. In a letter to Mary Gladstone, Acton wrote:

> Wickham lent me John Inglesant yesterday, and I finished it before bedtime. I have read nothing more thoughtful and suggestive since Middlemarch, and I could fill with honest praise the pages I am going to blacken with complaint. But if I had access to the author, with privilege of free and indiscreet speech, it would seem a worthier tribute to his temper and ability to lay my litany of doubts before him. Not having it, I submit my questionings to yourself, as the warmest admirer of his work . . . ("Letters," p. 243).

Then for fourteen pages we read one of the most extraordinary reviews of a serious novel that has ever been published. He not only points out the errors in the work as to names, periods, and occurrences, but he supplies the information the author did not possess. This should be a compulsory study for any young man fitting himself for a career in literature of the higher order. The chief complaints that Acton makes are concerned with the historical errors. It might be well to quote one paragraph which gives

a sample of Acton's method, and in which he reveals the high standard that he placed upon historical accuracy:

> The Jesuit who is so hopeful of Anglican reunion that he will not allow his favourite pupil to join the Church of Rome is called Sancta Clara. There was a Father Sancta Clara in those days, who is peculiarly well remembered among English Catholics as the greatest writer we had between Stapleton and Newman, less acute than the one, less eloquent than the other, more learned than either; remarkable for opinions so conciliatory as to resemble those of his imaginary namesake, and to make him the originator and suggester of No. XC. [an Oxford Tract]; remarkable also for the extreme difficulty of getting his books. But he was a Franciscan, not a Jesuit, a scholar, not an intriguer; and his name was not Hall, but Davenport ("Letters," p. 246).

If the practice of taking pains be an attribute of genius, Acton had it in good measure. In the criticism of "John Inglesant" there is clear evidence of the speed and thoroughness of a skilled workman. The feat of reading a long novel and writing a review of it was accomplished within forty-eight hours. Such a performance gives one an idea of how Acton devoured books—a wonder that puzzled many who came under his spell. We can present no better example of the value of having an immense background of knowledge in literature, for he seems never to have been at a loss to verify a statement and, furthermore, none of the essays reveals the slightest uncertainty in his attack upon the errors of an author. He seemed to be at home in any period and to be familiar with the personages who ruled, and their courtiers also, whether they were at St. Peter's, at Westminster, or at the Louvre.

The scope of the "Historical Essays and Studies," which deals with "Wolsey and the Divorce of Henry VIII," "The Rise and Fall of the Mexican Empire," "German Schools of History," "A History of the Papacy," "Mabillon," and many others, forms a towering monument of knowledge which for grandeur of thought will never be surpassed.

His Rigid Standards of Rectitude

As a critic, Acton has been accused of severity and ruthlessness, and there may be some truth in this. But when it is realized how high the standard was that he set for himself, no one should take exception to it. Who would wrest from him the rod he used figuratively upon the backs of the writers who blundered? Some of the wittiest passages we have in our language may be found in the castigations he administered. Dealing with M. Laurent, he remarks that:

> sometimes it even happens that his informaton is not secondhand, and there are some original authorities with which he is evidently familiar.

The ardour of his opinions, so different from those which have usually distorted history, gives an interest even to his grossest errors . . . ("Hist. of Freedom," Intro., p. xi)

Why should he spare a careless author? He was never known to spare himself. In literature, mercy cannot be extended to stupidity. As a judge of men and their actions in and out of Church and State, he was supreme. Consider the following gem:

Lord Liverpool governed England in the the present crisis of the war, and for twelve troubled years of peace, chosen not by the nation, but by the owners of the land. The English gentry were well content with an order of things by which for a century and a quarter they had enjoyed so much prosperity and power. Desiring no change they wished for no ideas. They sympathised with the complacent respectability of Lord Liverpool's character, and knew how to value the safe sterility of his mind. He distanced statesmen like Grenville, Wellesley, and Canning, not in spite of his inferiority, but by reason of it. His mediocrity was his merit. The secret of his policy was that he had none. For six years his administration outdid the Holy Alliance. For five years it led the liberal movement throughout the world. The Prime Minister hardly knew the difference. He it was who forced Canning on the King. In the same spirit he wished his government to include men who were in favour of the Catholic claims and men who were opposed to them. His career exemplifies, not the accidental combination but the natural affinity, between the love of conservatism and the fear of ideas ("Hist. of Freedom," Intro., p. xii).

Lord Acton, however, held an essential degree of rectitude for himself in dealing with the works of his day by exercising an assiduous care for the public mind which might be led astray by popular reviewers of a book that attracted attention. He wrote two articles for *The Rambler* on Buckle's "History of Civilisation in England." After showing clearly the many errors of which Buckle was guilty, Acton remarks:

. . . We have said quite enough to show that Mr. Buckle's learning is as false as his theory, and that the ostentation of his slovenly erudition is but an artifice of ignorance. In his laborious endeavour to degrade the history of mankind, and of the dealings of God with man, to the level of one of the natural sciences, he has stripped it of its philosophical, of its divine, and even of its human character and interest. . . . We could not allow a book to pass without notice into general circulation and popularity which is writen in an impious and degrading spirit, redeemed by no superiority or modesty of learning, by no earnest love of truth, and by no open dealing with opponents.

We may rejoice that the true character of an infidel philosophy has been brought to light by the monstrous and absurd results to which it has led this writer, who has succeeded in extending its principles to the history of civilisation only at the sacrifice of every quality which makes a history

great ("Hist. Essays and Stud.," pp. 342–3).

His candor was sharp, incisive. He hated a sham, and he knew that it was easy for a so-called bigwig to shine in the company of bald-headed minds. Yet, no one was ever so open and generous to those who desired knowledge. He seemed to be ready at all times to lend the stores of his mind and his library to those who sought information. There is no record of anyone who appealed to him being turned away unsatisfied.

On George Eliot

THE INTELLECTUAL CALIBER of Acton appears in many of his reviews, but there is none that shows it so brilliantly as the one on "George Eliot's Life." She is now forgotten, but she had a great influence on the English people while Acton was at work. Her atheism did not preclude her from his consideration. Perhaps no one has given such proof of the realization of her genius as we find in this essay and in the "Letters to Mary Gladstone." Coming from such a source, what could be finer than the following:

> . . . She thought that the world would be indefinitely better and happier if man could be made to feel that there is no escape from the inexorable law that we reap what we have sown . . . ("Hist. Essays & Stud.," p. 286).

and

> . . . There will be more perfect novels and truer systems. But she has little rivalry to apprehend until philosophy inspires finer novels, or novelists teach nobler lessons of duty to the masses of men. If ever science or religion reigns alone over an undivided empire, the books of George Eliot might lose their central and unique importance, but as the emblem of a generation distracted between the intense need of believing and the difficulty of belief, they will live to the last syllable of recorded time . . . ("Hist. Essays & Stud.," p. 303).

The European Mind

IN THESE DAYS when we are served in history with the work of the specialist, it is almost an educational duty for the man who wishes to be informed and to acquire a large view of the religious and political events of the centuries, to turn back to these essays and enjoy the treasures they contain. It is sad to think how few of our libraries have Lord Acton's books upon their shelves. Several years ago, two American universities of high standing contained only one volume apiece: the "History of Freedom," and the "Lectures on Modern History," respectively. When, about 1927, I lectured at a university on "Freedom in Antiquity" and "Freedom in Christianity," I was amazed to find only one man at the gathering who had read a volume of Acton.

And, yet, there was never greater need for his knowledge and wisdom.

Most of the mistakes we have made in the past two generations have arisen from our unutterable ignorance of European affairs. The politicians in Great Britain and in this country have shown either that they have not understood the history of Europe, or that they have deliberately ignored it.

It cannot be said that Stanley Baldwin or Neville Chamberlain knew Europe, and who would claim that Roosevelt or Hull was familiar with her history? The men at the head of affairs since the first World War (including the totalitarians of all descriptions) were nationalists pure and simple and were unable to direct their policies toward the maintenance of European peace. During the fifteen years I devoted to politics in Great Britain I met not one of her politicians who was familiar with the Continent as a student or as a traveler having direct knowledge of her cultural institutions. Outside the domain of party politics, I was intimate with several men whom I met frequently in the capitals of Europe, who could be called Europeans. In "The Tragedy of Europe" I have made some observations on this curious failing of British politicians and merchants, and the shocking neglect they often betrayed of information that would have given them a clearer understanding of the issues with which they had to deal. The European mind cannot very well be cutivated at home in the midst of national strivings. It has been described by Jakob Burkhardt as follows:

> The European quality is that by which all human forces become articulate, expressing themselves in stone, in images, in words, in institutions, and political parties, down to the individual. It is the vitalization of everything spiritual in very aspect and direction. . . .

Now that we consider ourselves a world power and are going to send our military police to keep order far from our shores, the least we can do is to learn something about the people to be subordinated to our conception of how they should live and think. There is no one who can supply the necessary information as well as Acton.

There is a passage in his essay on "German Schools of History," which reminds me of the many references to Sir Henry Maine to be found in the "Letters to Mary Gladstone." It is as follows:

> When Germans assert that their real supremacy rests with their historians, they mean it in the sense of Bentley and Colebrooke, not of Machiavelli and Saint-Simon, in the sense in which the Bishop of Durham [Dr. Lightfoot] and Sir Henry Maine take the lead in England, the sense in which M. Fustel de Coulanges calls history the most arduous of the sciences . . . ("Hist. Essays & Stud.," pp. 344–5).

Now that Dr. Toynbee has found thousands of readers for his "Study

of History,"[2] it is not inappropriate to remind students of the works of Maine. Toynbee seems to have overlooked them, and yet such a master as Acton paid high tribute to the author of "Ancient Law." He considered him one of three of the finest minds in England, and he told Mary Gladstone that "what pure reason and boundless knowledge can do, without sympathy or throb, Maine can do better than any man in England." How seldom one comes across a reference to him now! Has he been forgotten, entirely overlooked by those historians who write upon the economic problems which affect States? Forty or fifty years ago his works were of deep interest to American students. The subjects dealt with by Maine are just as timely now as when they were written. Indeed, "Village Communities" is a necessary work for those who desire to know the primitive beginnings of a people.

Kant's Debt to Joseph Butler

It is impossible to read many pages of Acton's essays and miss the flashes of enlightenment which reveal a well-stored mind. Who, but Acton, would have divined the link which bound Kant to Joseph Butler, the old Bishop of Durham, whose "Analogy of Religion" was one of the great books that influenced many of the leading thinkers more than two hundred years ago. Lord Brougham said it was "the most argumentative and philosophical defense of Christianity ever submitted to the world." And Sir James Mackintosh proclaimed it "the most original and profound work extant in any language on the philosophy of religion." Acton wrote:

> Kant is the macrocosm of Butler ("Analogy" and "Sermons"). From him he got his theory of conscience, which has so much influenced political as well as religous thought. His most famous saying, on the teaching of conscience within us, and the firmament above, is taken straight from Butler. I do not despair of convincing German friends that what Butler compressed into a crowded and obscure volume is substantially expanded into the minute and subtle philosophy of his successor. Kant stands on the shoulders of the "Analogy" when he elevates the probability into a substitute for proof, and on those of the "Sermons" when the makes the infallible conscience a basis of certainty and the source of the Categorical Imperative (Lally, *op. cit.*, pp. 199–200).

A reference to this is to be found in that very useful book, "As Lord Acton Says," edited by Professor F. E. Lally, and published by Remington Ward, Newport, R. I. (1942). This work may be highly recommended to students who would seek an excellent introduction to Acton's life and work.

There seemed to be no limit to the riches of his knowledge, and one is amazed at the ease with which he united thought to thought and traced

the parentage of ideas from ancient times down to modern days. It is hard to imagine an activity of daily life that he neglected. Of him it may be said his youth was well spent in constant study. There were no simple manuals, then, for the student; the hard way was the only one to be pursued, and he, with unflagging energy of spirit, acquired the erudition which made him famous. The following from a letter to Mary Gladstone gives us an idea of the years he spent "in looking for men wise enough to solve the problems that puzzle me."

> . . . I was always associated with men a generation older than myself, most of whom died early—for me—and all of whom impressed me with the same moral, that one must do one's learning and thinking for oneself, without expecting short cuts or relying on other men . . . ("Letters," pp. 208–9).

The Wit of Lord Acton

BEFORE CLOSING THIS SKETCH, it is advisable to present another side of Acton. In the "Letters to Mary Gladstone" he displays a wit in many of them which is most unusual in a pre-eminent scholar. He tells his correspondent to "remember that one touch of ill nature makes the whole world kin." And of a friend he remarks: "His only artifice is his discretion."

Mr. Gladstone frequently visited Holmbury, the house of Frederick Leveson Gower, who gave fine dinner parties and had a host of friends. Acton observed, "Freddy Leveson has a touching fidelity to monotonous friendships."

How Mary Gladstone must have chuckled when she read: "Please remember I am possessed of a Whig devil, and neither Peel nor Pitt lives in my Valhalla." And in the same letter he wrote, "It is a vice, not a merit, to live for expedients and not for ideas."

What could be neater than to observe that certain actions of politicians are "more parliamentary than statesmanlike?" It would be interesting to learn if Mary Gladstone showed her father all the letters she received from Acton. One wonders if he saw the following: "Many things are better for silence than for speech: others are better for speech than for stationery" ("Letters," p. 223).

How true of so many people is the point in this: "The Duke of Orleans nearly described my feelings when he spoke, testamentarily, of his religious *flag* and his political *faith*" ("Letters," p. 314).

Acton's description of a self-possessed lady is hard to beat:

> ——— is very intelligent, agreeable, amiable, a little complex in design; accurate calculation sometimes resides in the corner of her eye,

and she knows how to regulate to a hair's breadth, when she smiles, the thin red line of her lips ("Letters," p. 325).

Sometimes in a line or two he makes a pronouncement that startles one. Here are two: In writing of Ruskin, he said, "He is one of the few Englishmen of genius one of the most perfect masters of our language that ever wrote" ("Letters," p. 140). And of Origen he remarked, "The ablest writer of early times, who spoke with approval of conspiring for the destruction of tyrants" (Lally, *op. cit.*, p. 142).

The Letters are a revelation of the intrigues and schisms of Gladstone's political career, and in summing up his estimate of Mary's father as a statesman, he declared boldly that it was not his successes that impressed him so much as his failures. Acton's mind was big enough to distinguish the greatness in a genius who fails. Always aloof from the popular clamor and the vaporings of the press, his judgment of men and their policies never swerved.

No one looked down on the arena of parliamentary strife and international discord with a more discerning glance and a better appreciation of the weaknesses and foibles of the protagonists who held the fate of the world in their hands. But the hopes he cherished for enlarging the bounds of freedom and his faith in an extension of knowledge as a means of encouraging an understanding of the aspirations of the peoples of Europe were darkened toward the end of his active life. Yet, who would have dreamed when he died at Tegernsee, in 1902, that the leading politicians were already deliberating moves on the map of Europe which would destroy the continent that he had known and loved? When one reads the Essays on Freedom, it seems inconceivable that two World Wars have taken place within fifty years of his death.

New York

Land Reform in Syria

WHEN THE GOVERNMENT of Col. Husni Zaim took over in Syria last April, it announced that land reform was foremost among the plans it had for the improvement of the country's welfare. A committee was formed in Damascus for distribution of State land among small landowners and peasants. This seems a measure of limited value, but we await details before forming a judgment upon it. Premier Zaim said he expected land reform would enable Syria to attain the largest output from its agriculture; he would have considerable warrant for this if he introduced a program that was far-reaching enough.

W. L.