Macaulay as an Historian

Thesis

For the Degree B. L.

by

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1887.
There have been few persons who by the original structure of mind, education and surrounding circumstances have been better qualified to become a great historian than Lord Macaulay.

He possessed naturally an intellect of unusual strength and clearedness accompanied by a vigorous and healthy imagination, sharpened by an insatiable curiosity, and assisted by an unerring memory.

It is integrity and honesty of purpose and his love of justice and truth may be seen in every act of his life.

His education was of the kind to best develop his peculiar talents and form studious habits.

He was a good classical scholar according to the requirements of the system of University education pursued in England and was familiar with the best Greek and Latin writers, especially the historians.

He had also a critical knowledge of the French and Italian literatures and history.

He possessed an intimate acquaintance with every part of English history and almost every department of
English literature and may be said to have been the creator of a new department of literature in the field of critical and historical essay writing and he was inferior in no field in which he exercised his genius. This long practice as a writer combined with his natural taste for historical pursuits and erudite habits would be enough of themselves to ensure success, but added to this was his experience in public affairs.

For many years he had been a member of parliament, had twice a seat in the cabinet, was a member of the Supreme Council of India, and in the performance of all these duties he gave ample proof of his ability as a jurist and a statesman.

Thus, having in public affairs gained him an opportunity of becoming familiar with history as it is formed in the legislative assembly, the cabinet council and the halls of justice, aside from what gained from books, thus prepared and with his idea of a perfect history, he set
about his task.

Surely his lofty conception of the duties and responsibilities of an historian has never been surpassed.

These ideas are set forth in his essay on History written many years previous to his attempt to illustrate his principles in his history of England. He says, "A perfect historian must possess an imagination sufficiently powerful to make his narrative afflicting and picturesque. Yet he must control it as absolutely as to confine himself with the materials..."

which he finds and refrains from supplying deficiencies by adding of his own.

He must be a profound and sagacious reasoner. Yet he must possess sufficient self-command to obtain from casting his facts in the mould of his hypothesis.

It was his purpose "To mix a history of England from the accession of James II. down to a time within the memory of men still living," but the "pen dropped from his hand before he had quite completed his narrative to the death of..."
William.

The period of seventeen years about which he wrote formed one of the most important epochs in English history. It included the short and turbulent reign of Jas. II; the struggle and failure to restore Papal supremacy in England and the unsuccessful attempt to establish the uncontrolled will of the crown upon the rebellion and rebellion; the Revolution of 1688; subjugation of Ireland; laying down of a British Empire in India; William in the Continent; and

the restoration of England to her former rank among the nations of Europe.

It was a period in which public morality was at its lowest ebb. Men in the public trust would return allegiance to Williams and at the same time betray the State secrets to France, thus abetting at the Court of Louis XIV.

William is the hero who in the midst of this moral degradation saved England from the dangers by which she was threatened. There is evidence throughout that he had endeared to
carry out the principles
which had formerly advocated so strongly.
While he has carefully observed what may be called
the philosophy of history,
the tracing of its causes,
showing the influence
of laws, institutions, foreign
and domestic policy,
up to society and thought—
he has not failed to enrich
and enrich the narrative
with the latent glow of his
imagination.
It was one of his aims to
make his history readable as To enliven
the words on the tables of

fashionable young ladies.
In this he achieved a singular success and by his blend
of style and clearness he has attracted not only the cultivated and won
the approval of the learned, but has been eagerly
read by the more common
class of readers.
It has been unanimously declared to be as far reaching
as the last new work of
Tocqueville or Ricardo, while
its "sound philosophy came
conviction to the multitude."
The North American Review says:
"Indeed wherever description
is combined with narration
The superiority of Lord Macaulay over most, if not all of his predecessors is at once shown.

His model of historical narrative was clear and direct, and in his diary, we read that after writing on his history, he would often take up his model and compare his own with it, discern wherein he was excelled and how he might best profit by the comparison.

There was no qualification to which Macaulay attached more importance than the hourly virtue of honesty. He is seen censuring me strongly and deeply rooted, but they were the result of the most careful weighing of both sides of a question.

Her has sometimes been accused of being partisan in his accounts, more perhaps because he was known to have been a strong Whig in politics than from any positive evidence from his writings, for by those who knew him best, he was known to be consistent in his habits of thought.

He has brought to light traits of character of prominent men of history which cannot but lessen her esteem for them character which in many cases have been held up as
models of virtue and honor, but it cannot be said to have been done with any other than an honest purpose in view.

His account of William Penn takes away much of the renown with which we have been taught to regard him. He does not prize unnoticed the many admirable qualities displayed in Penn's public and private life, but further research would add to his account of acts for which others ought not to be unjustly accused and Macaulay did not hesitate to disclose them, although he knew the gold contradictions to which his account would be subject.

In this as well as in other chapters brought against him, he has brought forward evidence to sustain every statement he has made.

After reading Macaulay's account of Cromwell Lord Auckland expressed it as his opinion that it always saved trouble to agree with Macaulay at once, because he says, 'he is one to make you do as at last.'

The thoroughness with which he investigated individual characters is only an instance of the thoroughness with which he investigated every part of his narrative.
It did not hesitate to rely upon his infallible memory for facts once learned, but when collecting facts for his history he used great accuracy by carefully noting every item that pertained to the subject.

In speaking of his work in a letter to the Bishop of Exeter he says, "I have undertaken a task which makes it necessary for me to treat of many subjects with which it is impossible that one man should be more than superficially acquainted—law, divinity, military affairs, trade, finance, manufactures, literature, arts, sciences. It would therefore, the height of folly and arrogance in me to receive ungraciously suggestions offered in a friendly spirit by persons who have devoted many branches of knowledge to which I have been able to give only a passing attention."

No arena was left unexplored through which he might obtain fair information on any subject he was considering. After the publication of his first five volumes, he writes in his journal, "I will first set myself to know the whole subject; to get by reading and by travelling a feel acquaintance with William's reign..."
I must visit Holland, Belgium, Scotland, Ireland, France.
I must see Condordancy, the Bœufs, Aghrim, Linnick, Kiel
cale, Namur again, Lourdes, Tourn-

d'aim think this must have served a hun-
dred thousands of pamphlets.
This is certainly strong proof of his intention to deal fairly
ly with his subject.
This programme of travel and research was faithfully
ly carried out. He even paid a second visit to Killiecrankie
for the special purpose of walking up the old road along the Gangs that he might
make the account of the time spent by the English army.

He mounting a certain pace
which they were to descend at a quicker rate.
His battle pieces are especially noted for their clearness and
strength and in his descrip-
tion of the scene of Condordancy
or the battle of Sedgemoor, the
re and the Bœufs, he
is not behind the best of mil-
dary historians. A military
movement is described by him
nearly as well as a debate in
Parliament.

Nor does he display a
less thorough knowledge of
ecclesiastical affairs.
To use Whipple's words he con-
battle the Logians with mal-

One drawn from antiquity am-
ories unknown to themselves.
In his account of the discus-
sione between the Established
Church of England and the
Scotch Presbyterians, he has
faithfully and correctly re-
corded the opinions and ar-
guments held by each party
and leaves the reader to judge
for himself from his fair state-
ment which party was more
justifiable.
In this he has done all we
can demand of an historian.
He has expressed their opinions
clearly and correctly without
trying to influence us by
setting forth his own views
Another feature of historic ex-
cellence which Macaulay has
strongly recommended and which
he has successfully employed
is the portrayal of individ-
ual characters.
He was a close observer of
action and possessed an unusu-
ally clear insight into the
motives which prompt them.
The three most conspicuous
characters with which he has
adorned his pages are, William
James III and Mary.
William is evidently an ob-
ject of hearty admiration with
the historian and is made the
central figure on his richly
painted canvas.
Painters and sculptors have tried with each other in portraying this sublime character, with brush and chisel, but none have given us so complete a picture of his towering intellect, his indomitable will and noble virtues as Macaulay has done by a few bold strokes of his master pen.

It is generally acknowledged how well while the author describes so eloquently his many virtues, he has not so strongly set forth his less praiseworthy actions.

Mary is another favorite character with the historian, and her devotion to her husband, her distinguished love of country, the beauty of her writing both in public and private acts are described with warmth.

He shows himself equally a master in his less pleasing side of James. In this the bigotry and sullenness of James are shown by his unprincipled acts standing out in direct contrast to the admirable traits exhibited by Nelson and Mary.

In his delineation of character he has shown himself to be a master of intellect and of men of action, and while he deals with large facts whose influence are apparent to everyone...
he does not pass over the nar-
row yet often powerful facts of his-
tory. Of this Whipple says: "It is both microscopic and tele-
scopic concern at once with the
animalculae of society and the
larger objects of human concern."

He has been criticized by
some for dwelling so at length
on so small a portion of history
and accounting so minutely his-
torical events, but this will
hardly be objected to by those
who appreciate his high ideal
of history.

Whacking says on this point:
"The man who tells us of the
coldest soul-drift of a year,
teaches us more of that souls
life than he who gives outside
statistics of a score of years."

It was Macaulay's object to
give us the soul-drift of the na-
tional life during the period, a-
bout which he wrote and since
the appearance of this work
people have been able to get
a clearer idea of the periods,
and public opinion has under-
gone a complete change in re-
gard to it.

To be sure we have only a
fragment and it is to be regret-
ted that life was too short to
allow him time to continue his
magnificent scheme, according to his high
standard; but quite enough
has been given to posterity
To count Macaulay among the world's greatest historians.