



Macaulay

The Tragedy of Power

ROBERT E. SULLIVAN

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Statue of Lord Macaulay by Thomas Woolner (1863), antechapel of Trinity College, Cambridge (Photograph by Jonathan Smith; reproduced with the kind permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College). The inscription on the pedestal reads in part: Baron Macaulay of Rothley: “India litteris et legibus emendanda.”

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Ai miei amici di Lilliano

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MACAULAY

INTRODUCTION

An irony governs the reputation of Thomas Babington Lord Macaulay 150 years after his death. Within living memory much of the English-reading world has demoted him from an Eminent Victorian properly mentioned in the same breath with John Stuart Mill and George Eliot to a name known only to liberal-arts graduates of a certain age and to students of nineteenth-century culture. Meanwhile, his legacy flourishes in South Asia, where he detested living but relished power. The Latin inscription below his statue in Trinity College, Cambridge University, acclaims him for reforming the letters and laws of India. The tribute sounds like imperial hyperbole until you hear the voice of a fluent English-speaker in a call center in what was recently Bangalore (Bengalooru) and consider that in 1835 Macaulay, not yet thirty-five, was instrumental in launching English as the subcontinent's shared language. A glance at his Wikipedia entry will inform you that his penal code remains the law there and elsewhere in the former British Empire. Then remember that fifty years ago Britain—the nation that Macaulay compressed into “England”—still ruled an empire and preserved the nationalist ethos that Macaulay, as the best-selling nineteenth-century historian writing in English, helped to invent and popularize. His *History of England from the Accession of James II* is now seldom read even in his beloved Cambridge. But there George Macaulay Trevelyan, his grandnephew, propagated his style of history, which thrives in two hemispheres.

There are many twentieth-century books about Macaulay, all useful and some distinguished, but the only full account remains the double-

decker *Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay* (1876), by Sir George Otto Trevelyan, O.M., his devoted nephew and intellectual heir. Living mainly in the world Macaulay helped to invent and writing his kind of history, Trevelyan died in 1928, but his virtually filial piety colors and distorts everything later published about his uncle. Until 1962 G. M. Trevelyan, also O.M., a more formidable historian than his father and an academic eminence first as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge and then as Master of Trinity College, controlled access to Macaulay's letters in his college's library, where he also deposited and guarded the eleven-volume manuscript of his granduncle's journals. Appended to volume one is a handwritten note addressed from the Master's Lodge in December 1945, in which Trevelyan declared that he felt "strongly . . . that they ought never to be published as a whole, or any large continuous section of them," because they had "already been put to their full literary use" by his father, and "Wholesale publication would be very unfair to . . . [Macaulay's] memory."¹ In "excerpting" the diaries, Sir George routinely used tendentious discretion and sometimes pure imagination. There were family secrets, but above all Professor Trevelyan was concerned to forestall the publication and sensationalizing of Macaulay's unconsummated passion for his two youngest sisters. One of these was Trevelyan's grandmother, Hannah Lady Trevelyan.

Macaulay kept his journal from October 1838 until May 1839, during June 1840, and then—apart from a spell during 1855 and 1856 while finishing the second installment of his *History*—almost daily from late October 1848 until the eve of his death at the end of 1859. Thousands of scrawled entries expose the emotional consciousness of the unknown Macaulay, a powerful and representative leader of a tenacious and resourceful caste that governed England when England was on top. He wrote quickly, usually at the end of the day but sometimes for several days at a time in a retrospective flurry, and primarily for his own pleasure: "No kind of writing is so delightful, so fascinating, as this minute history of a man's self." Perhaps more than many, he had his secrets and thus occasionally regretted what he had committed to paper. On 28 July 1849, after a largely idle day and dining alone at home, he wrote: "In ye evening"—almost two lines following are obliterated. His final sentence remains: "How my hieroglyphics will throw out any prying person." Lest these fail, he occasionally resorted to a code in Greek letters, usually

to designate “the short titles of popular novels which he knew were ‘trash’ but often reread.” In the beginning he wrote only for himself. But William Thomas, the editor of Macaulay’s recently published journal, persuasively maintains that he increasingly wrote with a view to Lady Trevelyan’s “properly” using it as a “record”—presumably for an official biography. Knowing there were aspects of his life and opinions that would shock her, Macaulay “omitted or disguised” them. He also censored his journal by defacing unseemly material, and after his death both Hannah and her son, George, defaced more, or occasionally tore out an offending page.²

In 1973 John Clive began to explore the unknown Macaulay in a masterful biography that ends before his return from India and remains definitive for the years 1800–1837. *Macaulay: The Shaping of the Historian* discreetly reveals the secret the Trevelyans fearfully guarded. Trying to rewrite Clive’s work would be impertinent and redundant. Rather, my account of Macaulay’s childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood highlights what it slighted or overlooked.

Despite the revelation of Macaulay’s passion for his two youngest sisters, he continues to be depicted as an almost transparent man. He was more protean, subtle, and effective than G. O. Trevelyan and those who followed him allowed. Macaulay’s aptitude for power and subversion challenges our illusion that people became uniquely complex during the twentieth century. From adolescence onward he needed to conform and be accepted, as well as to simulate and dissimulate. The old word “doubleness” encapsulates better than “duplicity” or “deviousness” the ambivalent sensibility that underlay his virtuosic ability to exercise power as a cultural warrior, a front-bencher, a nationalist historian, and a proselytizing imperialist.

Macaulay’s doubleness took charge when he wrote and talked subversively about religion, which is a major achievement of the unknown Macaulay. At once a nominal Anglican and an unbeliever, he presented himself publicly as a “Christian,” but on his own terms, which he kept to himself. Because the supersession of religion was long held to be inevitable, the impact of Macaulay’s religious subversion of it has never before been studied. During his lifetime he won widespread acceptance as a sage because he could make his opinions seem familiar, even commonsensical. But what explains the long Anglo-American afterlife of his rep-

utation? Decisive were the slow waning of Macaulay's England and his ability to sustain, articulate, and perhaps sometimes half-believe enduring contradictions. Macaulay lived several lives, some of them known, others unknown or irretrievable. My subject is the tragedy of power that killed him and confounds us today.

During the winter of 1919 the social theorist Max Weber lectured on the cost of "Politics as a Vocation": power must imperil humanity. He spoke of the "ethical paradoxes" that bedevil the vocation. Primary were "the diabolic forces lurking in all violence," because, ultimately, the "tasks of politics can only be solved by violence." Those who sought "the salvation of the soul," both their own and others', should avoid the "avenue of politics." It was the domain of a "genius or demon" that "lives in an inner tension with the god of love" and with "the Christian God." In defeated and revolutionary Munich Weber captured the tragedy that Richard Holbrooke discerned in McGeorge Bundy a generation ago. A uniformed noncombatant during World War II and thereafter self-confidently one of "the best and the brightest," Bundy became an architect of the Vietnam War. During his only visit to the combat zone he dined in Saigon with a group of notables. Holbrooke recalled the occasion. At the American ambassador's table, "Bundy quizzed us in his quick, detached style for several hours, not once betraying emotion," distant "from the realities of Vietnam," and either hostile or indifferent to "far less intelligent" people around him who nonetheless knew more about those realities than he, unless they could "present their views in quick and clever ways."³ Bundy's encompassing emotional "detachment" depended on his ability to reduce groups and individuals to bloodless abstractions. Macaulay could do the same.

Schooled to call "tragedies" everything from monstrous crimes to playground accidents, we have largely forgotten the somber reality that Weber sought to evoke. Aristotle, who taught Macaulay the meaning of tragedy, captured the essence of his life: "A perfect tragedy should imitate actions which excite pity and fear." It is not a matter of a virtuous person being "brought from prosperity to adversity," nor "of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity" or "the downfall of the utter villain." Rather, Aristotle's "tragic hero" is "one who is highly renowned and prosperous," whose fortune changes "from good to bad," not as the result "of vice, but of some great error or frailty." His "unmerited misfor-

tune” arouses our pity, and that he is someone “like ourselves” makes us fearful.⁴ Neither a conspicuously “virtuous man” nor an “utter villain,” Macaulay was afflicted with the “great frailty” of conjoining the narrowest human sympathies with a genius for power. It enabled him to embrace “the diabolic forces lurking in all violence,” while his sympathies narrowed until he wanted only Hannah Trevelyan’s care and, threatened with its loss, longed for the death without leave-taking that he was granted. More unknown than transparent, his was a tragic life.

But Macaulay, and particularly the unknown Macaulay, has cast a long and sometimes sinister shadow. His origins and education shaped his uncommon mingling of the typical, the idiosyncratic, and the spectacular. Both a stern evangelical Anglicanism—imposed at home but rejected at school—and his classical rhetorical education—also imposed but ultimately irresistible—marked him permanently. They inform everything from his doubleness to the method and style of *The History of England from the Accession of James II*. Even more decisive for Tom Macaulay’s formation were his increasingly fraught relations with Zachary, his implacably pious father, best known as a leading abolitionist. Zachary’s hapless parenting taught his heir to see human sympathy as circumscribed and human relations as mostly a matter of power and competition. Entering Cambridge at eighteen, Tom, still a boyish prodigy, found liberation in a blend of doubt, Hellenism, duplicity, and Utilitarianism. When his enthusiasm cooled into skepticism, he was poised to fight and finally prevail in the cultural and political wars that defined the 1820s and early 1830s. At issue was how to remake England after the unraveling of the counterrevolutionary regime that overcame Napoleon. Evangelizing for a modern because post-Christian England, Macaulay seemed to outgrow his ardor for the classics. There was, however, no outgrowing his two youngest sisters. Enthralled with them and refusing to form any other “serious attachment,” he was left “with nothing else to love.”⁵ Margaret, the younger, became the emotional anchor of his young adulthood, and when she married his already-stunted capacity for human sympathy began shrinking.

Margaret once heard her idolized brother declare “that in politics right and might [are] very much the same thing.” Then a member of Parliament, he was establishing himself as the premier spokesman for modernizing English politics by admitting “the middle class to a large and direct

share in the representation.” But India gave him the opportunity for real political power, first at long distance in Westminster and then on the ground in Calcutta. Seeking money as well as mastery, he browbeat Hannah into joining him there as his companion. He soon lost her to marriage and Margaret to death and came to loathe the subcontinent and to disdain its people. The brilliant, farsighted legislator whom Clive so learnedly and readably evoked was also an evangelizing imperialist and again, but now enduringly, an ardent classicist. Convinced that “Greek literature” kept him sane after his double loss, Macaulay read Greek and Latin from five to eight almost every morning for more than three years in Calcutta. It amounted to the second and permanent of his classical conversions. Although he was now a chronic depressive shadowed by a death wish, he started prophesying a happy future propelled by “Progress” and “Utility” and resolved to write the *History* that would narrate its English origins and worldwide growth.⁶

Helping to rule India left him with time for writing as well as reading. In 1837 he published over 100 pages on Francis Bacon. Once famous on three continents and still controversial, his essay has never been closely read. A learned and cunning insinuation of his vision of England as progressive, calculating, nationalist, materialistic, and only culturally Protestant, “Bacon” is an achievement of the unknown Macaulay. What Macaulay wrote and implied there both illuminates everything he subsequently taught and predicts much that was widely accepted as common sense during Britain’s century and afterward.

In Calcutta the unknown Macaulay also projected what became his most chilling achievement: he appears to have been the first responsible European to advocate publicly what the mid-twentieth century learned to call “genocide.” From London during the summer of 1838, he wrote about Sir William Temple, a second-tier seventeenth-century politician and writer. Zachary had died on 13 May. Tom despised his father and, even more, the scheme of Zachary’s antislavery allies to protect endangered native peoples against various European and American civilizing imperial projects. He turned “Sir William Temple” into a preemptive strike against those meddling “philanthropists.” The essay proved to be as prescient as “Bacon.” More than ever an enthusiast for human progress and English power, he insisted that “it is in truth more merciful to extirpate a hundred thousand human beings at once, and to fill the void

with a well-governed population, than to misgovern millions through a long succession of generations.” Presented as a counterfactual history of modern Ireland, his ethic of civilizing and imperial slaughter was embraced globally before World War I and practiced into the second half of the twentieth century. During all those murderous years no one publicly objected to what he advocated in “Temple” and reiterated elsewhere.⁷

Macaulay’s diary during a sojourn in Italy in the autumn of 1838 and the early winter of 1839 exposes the brittle iron of his self-absorption. For almost a decade afterward his inner world is largely inaccessible, but the public record of his career of political and cultural power reveals much about the unknown man. Whether as a cabinet minister, a compelling orator, or a molder of the public mind, he regularly embellished his realistic calculations with lofty professions. Above all, Macaulay sold the British Empire. His thumping *Lays of Ancient Rome* instructed modern Britons in the bellicose virtues that made the Romans both imperial and great. In 1857 rebellion in India transformed his ballads into a best-seller and the surrogate national epic. Having long diagnosed Ireland as “the diseased part of the empire,” he clinically monitored its depopulation by famine, disease, and emigration during the late 1840s.⁸ Finally detaching himself from routine politics, he finished the first volumes of his great book. Informed by classical models, this modern history is at once pellucid and artful. Because Macaulay wanted to persuade different audiences to identify their nation with the state and themselves with its interests, he wrote in several voices, some of which have gone undetected.

The *History*’s immediate success matured into sustained and unrivaled popularity, in part because he was often misread as liberal-minded. Scared by revolutionaries and would-be revolutionaries in 1848, Macaulay in fact wrote as a fierce counterrevolutionary. His triumph made him anxious about falling short in future volumes, but seeing the famine-stricken Irish during his only visit to their island did not cause him to reappraise the human cost of his imperial ethic. It was, in any case, already gaining acceptance as the way of the world, perhaps unfortunate but likely the law of nature. Alive with concern about honor and respectability and devoid of any sense of guilt, Macaulay’s intense classicism was widely shared. Its values therefore counted publicly as well as personally during his last decade; interconnected elites found in the ancients both refuge

from contemporary theological divisiveness and an adjunct to—perhaps even a surrogate for—Christianity. Now wealthy, honored, and famous, Macaulay began living out his own cliché about the self-destructiveness of power: “ruinous to powerful himself.”⁹

The Great Exhibition of 1851 validated his hope that progress would become England’s common faith without motivating him to finish the even more rhetorical and amusing second installment of his book. Although he was widely accepted as a national sage, the discrepancy between his public voice—all eloquent optimism—and his experience became palpable. A potentially lethal medical regime too much in thrall to antiquity ravaged his last years. Surviving maltreated heart attacks, he completed two more volumes of his book, now a consensus history as well as a great commercial success. Neither his return to the House of Commons nor his subsequent elevation to the House of Lords rallied him to reengage domestic politics. But there could be no neglecting India. After managing the re-creation of its British bureaucracy for the benefit of the classically educated alumni of the ancient universities, he endured the trauma of the 1857 rebellion. In declining health and working as he pleased, he felt his death wish more insistently until the atrophied emotional consciousness that had stunted his humanity ceased to sustain his will to power.

HEIR

More than most of us, Thomas Babington Macaulay never outgrew his upbringing. He was the firstborn of Zachary. Tom rejected much in that autodidactic, arriviste, evangelical, and abolitionist authoritarian while assimilating at least as much. Zachary's success story was classically Scots. Nearing thirty in 1797, he wrote confessions that looked backward to St. Augustine's to edify himself and his fiancée, Selina Mills. Born with partial sight and later maiming an arm, he endured a hardscrabble childhood in a western fishing village as one of a Church of Scotland minister's dozen children. At fourteen apprenticeship in a Glasgow counting-house ended his formal education and left him with "great regret" at losing the "hope of academical honors" that had energized him. He grew into a tough and anxious man. Almost on his own he acquired mathematics and modern English literature, French, and "a pretty general knowledge of the Latin language, and . . . such a tincture of Greek learning as enabled me to read Homer." For a lifetime he emulously respected classical learning and imposed it on his reluctant heir. Zachary's religion was less stable. In Glasgow he converted to freethinking under the influence of "men of wit and taste," hard-drinking coworkers, and the kind of "trashy" novel that Tom later devoured. Zachary also anticipated Tom's religious doubleness. In a society in which religion was normative and public doubt could be dangerous, hypocrisy was the compliment that any prudent freethinker paid to respectability. Zachary disguised his unbelief because he needed his father's Glasgow connections.¹

The skeptical crisis that has ebbed and flowed in Europe and its extensions since the Renaissance touched first the father and then the