



Old Hickory's Diary - 2

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Lord Macaulay

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Tony Blair's Green speech

Thomas Babington Macaulay

On 25 October 1800, Thomas Babington Macaulay was born at Rothley Temple, Leicestershire. He went on to rival Edward Gibbon and David Hume as one of the greatest historians ever. He died at Holly Lodge, Kensington on 28 December 1859. It is not easy to gauge how many read his *History of England* (1848-61) nowadays. It is haply most often bought from second-hand bookshops and that is how I got my copy. The essays and lays can also be had by anyone who wants them from a second-hand bookshop. Yet he was the most modern author of his day, which lasted until 1859.

His father, Zachary Macaulay, was a keen member of the Clapham Sect that set out to abolish slavery. He even moved the family to live in Clapham in 1802, and the boy was brought up in a radical household. The young Macaulay was said to read lots and to argue and debate almost from the cot. Later, he got to like the Tory Dr Johnson, who would never let the Whigs have the last word. Macaulay turned the tables by never letting the Tories have the last word. His father was a Pittite Tory, as was Wilberforce, and Zachary rather expected

his son to follow suit. But in the Cambridge Union, the students of Tom's day found the Tories oppressive, especially in the Peterloo attack on Leigh Hunt's meeting in Manchester. Tom was a Liberal even though it flouted the opinions of his beloved parents. He wrote a letter home saying that he got the creed from great ancient authors rather than from the current liberal propagandists like Leigh Hunt, and that consoled his father somewhat.

Earlier, in 1812, he had been sent to a private school near Cambridge and two years later to Aspenden Hall in Hertfordshire from where he entered the college of Isaac Newton, Trinity, Cambridge in 1818. Unlike Newton,

"Of Macaulay, too, something must here be said, because an undistinguished condemnation of him used to be the shibboleth of that school of English historians who destroyed the habit of reading history among their fellow-countrymen."

G.M. TREVELYAN

Macaulay never could get on with mathematics, which he soon found himself hating no end. Again, unlike Newton, he hated theology and thought that religious disputes of the past were the only ones where both sides were wrong. He detested superstition and all the talk of ghosts that was becoming ever more common throughout his life. He preferred mundane common sense. As such, he did

not think well of philosophy. He even doubted the Stoic wisdom of Seneca, thinking that it was even worse than a 'load of cobblers', saying, "It may be worse to be angry than to be wet. But shoes have kept millions from being wet; and we doubt whether Seneca ever kept anybody from being angry." In fact, Seneca's outlook works, even if many fewer have tried it than tried shoe repairers.

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Macaulay was excellent at English and he took to Latin with ease as well. He won prizes, such as the Chancellor's medal for English verse, whilst an undergraduate and got his BA in 1822. In 1824 he was elected to a fellowship. He was very much at home debating in the Cambridge Union. He was called to the bar in 1826 but found law to be a bore. By then he had been submitting articles to various magazines and it is here that he sought to make a living.

The *Edinburgh Review* had accepted his piece on Milton in August of the year before. It was one of the leading magazines of the day and it was quite clear that Macaulay could make a living by writing for it. For the next 20 years he continued as a major contributor to that magazine. In 1830, he entered parliament for the pocket borough of Calne and he immediately took part in the parliamentary reform movement that led to the Reform Bill of 1832.

Macaulay's debating skills were fully exercised in the House of Commons in the debates leading up to that event. His first speech brought praise that made him feel like a lion and it won him an invitation from Lady Holland to dine at Holland House.

Like his hero, Dr Johnson, Macaulay was becoming very well known as a conversationalist at this time, a reputation that was to be undiminished for the rest of his life. He took the post of legal adviser to the Supreme Council of India at £10,000 a year in 1834 and set sail to Bengal, remaining in India for four years. There, he attempted to read the full corpus of the extant Greek and Latin literature, saying that it was folly to have spent the first 20 years of his life learning the two great classical languages only to neglect the literature that they gave access to. He found his adult readings of Greek and Latin to be far more rewarding than he had expected from the snippets he had confronted whilst learning these dead languages. Imagining the past to be as alive as the present was the acme of his talents.

He returned to England in 1838 and in 1839 was elected as an MP for Edinburgh. He took up the cabinet position of secretary of war. His liberalism was not as doctrinaire as that of Cobden, who would not go into a Government that might declare war, let alone be the one responsible for that most illiberal of activities. He lost his seat in 1847, but won it back in 1852 without having to visit the constituency. He retired from the Commons in 1856. In 1857 he was put into the House of Lords, but within two years he was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Macaulay never married, but was inordinately fond of his sisters and of his nieces. He regretted not having children but he felt that theirs were also his. His father lost quite a bit of money while Thomas was at Cambridge and from the mid-1820s, as the eldest child, he helped the family of three girls and another boy. His favourite sister, Hannah, married into the Trevelyan family from the West Country via Charles, whom Thomas had met in India. Macaulay's nephew and biographer George Otto Trevelyan was a child of that marriage, and George Macaulay Trevelyan, the great historian, was George Otto's son.

More than anyone else, Macaulay was known as the author who eulogised progress. Fools feel that the human race has learnt not to be so naïve since his day, but they have not come up with criticisms of the idea of progress that Macaulay did not read over and again in his beloved Dr Johnson. As he said, we cannot refute those who tell us that society has reached a turning point, that we have seen our best days. "But so said all before us, and with just as much reason. On what principle is it that, when we see nothing but improvement behind us, we are to expect nothing but deterioration before us?" Of late, Julian Simon has given the meme of progress a boost but it never was the case that the Whigs thought that progress could not be checked from a logical point of view. Macaulay had among his contemporaries no

end of Romantic authors who thought that change meant decline, that the race was going along a tunnel that had no light at the end of it – merely the dark Satanic mills. Macaulay saw such mills as “populous and opulent hives of industry”. Progress in the “multiplying of human enjoyments and the mitigating of human sufferings” was almost bound, if not quite bound, to continue. It was logically possible that progress would not be made but it was also logically possible that we might live forever.

The Whig Interpretation of History

Macaulay was the arch champion of the Whig Interpretation of History. How true is it? It haply always was under fire but Herbert Butterfield’s attack on it in 1931 made it very unfashionable indeed. Simon Schama in his book and TV series, *A History of Britain* (the book is due out on 5 October and the first TV episode was shown on 30 September), is reported as trying to revive it. The TV series comes in sixteen parts, seven this year and nine next.

In “Blair thinks the past is a drag” Allison Pearson interviewed Schama (*The Daily Telegraph* 22 September p.21). The book will cover more than the sixteen hours the TV series will allow for. The BBC has been trying to get this series for some time but Schama turned them down in 1995. It was only on re-reading great historians of the past like Clarendon, Macaulay and Gardiner that he decided to accept the offer to follow in their footsteps.

Britain is not a young country as Tony Blair is trying to make out, Schama tells Allison Pearson. It is one with almost 2000 years of history since the coming of the English and an older one if we look at the British before them. So Blair errs badly there. Schama wants to write about capitalism and how it goes hand in hand with social justice. However, he is a Labourite. He is neither Old nor New Labour but middle-aged Labour. He will

not bow to any form of Political Correctness if he thinks it is a lie. He has lived in the USA for the past 20 years but he does not think that this prevents him from presenting Britain’s history. In the 1960s he was dead set against the Whig Interpretation of History but with his recent re-reading of the great books, he is not so sure that the Whig historians are wrong. They saw Britain as progressive, democratic; for the common law and a perennial force against tyranny. When Schama came to revise his history, he decided that the Whig Interpretation was not so wide of the mark after all. Nevertheless, Englishness today is the identity that dare not speak its name. Its past is tainted and historians are taught to treat many of the great events of its past with irony. Schama found that the irony tended to fall away with the exposition of British history.

We should not be coy about the achievement of parliamentary democracy, says Schama. England broke with feudalism in the Middle Ages, and that happened nowhere else. The idea of continual progress was questioned all along by the Tories, but were they right to do so? The Tories sided with the Catholic ideology while the Whigs sided with the Protestant -- though not the Puritan side. The acme of Whig history is Macaulay with his massive book *The History of England* (five volumes from 1848 to 1861) which centred around the events of the year 1688. Butterfield thought it ridiculous that history should glorify the present and eulogise the past. He saw it as a disease of the general history of the type Schama is about to expound, rather than of scholarly historical research. In research the finality of an author like Macaulay would be out of place. It was more to do with the psychology of certain historians than with the philosophy of history. Lord Acton is another whom Butterfield seems to have in mind in his 1931 book and he cites him by name in his chapter “Moral Judgements In History”. He feels it is

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not right for historians to judge in the way Acton so often did. To moralise is not history. Instead of taking sides the historian should try to understand both sides better than they understood themselves.

In looking at the past, we do tend to assume that men were more or less like ourselves, though even giants like Thomas Aquinas may at first seem foolish and forever alien. Butterfield thought that we should study the past for its own sake rather than to make points about the present. We should attempt to forget about our own time and try to put ourselves in the times we set out to understand. We ought to realise that we do make assumptions and to think that we can be free of them he thinks is a major part of what he calls the Whig fallacy. It greatly abridges history for what does not contribute to the present is thought to be insignificant. The things that have no legacy at all will be unimportant. This gives us lots of excuses to leave things out. It makes history far more simple and intelligible but less realistic, and it leads to lots of anachronisms being passed off as history when they are really modern ideas. The Whig thinks that we get the British constitution despite the sea of troubles it passed through. It would be more realistic to think that we get it as a result of the dangers it faced. Questions concerning origins like “to whom do we owe our liberty?” are wrongheaded in this Whiggish way, says Butterfield. Such questions are certainly not answered by simply finding the first fellow to talk of liberty.

Although Macaulay was the doyen of the Whig historians, Butterfield did not cite him explicitly. He knew that Macaulay did attempt to bring the past to life and would often visit the districts which he was writing about so that he could, as near as possible, relate the landscape as it was. Macaulay often gives the impression that he was there at certain battles and presents the characters

of the past as if the reader is meeting them or reading an account of one who knew them. Macaulay was a Whig but not quite the Whig that Butterfield captures in his 1931 book. Macaulay presents those he disagrees with quite vividly and he does take sides.

For Butterfield, the Whig thinks that unless he can say who was in the right in a struggle of yesteryear, he will not have done his job. Butterfield thinks that the verdict the Whig brings to conclude his story will always be beyond that which the past allows for. The past is just one thing after another, with no conclusion so far. Here Butterfield states a viewpoint that is usually thought of as the major verdict of the liberal historian H.A.L. Fisher, the author of *A History of Europe* (1936). History is about the contingent rather than about principles. It is concrete and particular rather than general. This cannot be reduced to a formula. It can never be a science. Above all, the historian should shun judgements of value. History can never show that any man was ever right. On this, most people, rather than just the Whigs, seem to be too Whiggish in their outlook on history. Yet the historian does have a part to play and maybe he cannot be completely without bias. He has to use his imagination to try to reconstruct the past. The often very different world he finds has to be explained to the present, and as time moves on, this will need to be done to every generation. This takes interest, sympathy and imagination. Butterfield admits that the Whigs have often done an excellent job, but only for one side. The other side of the story needs to be told. The historian can never be judge or jury in any case. His role is rather that of the quasi-witness who attempts to give evidence, and the job of later historians will be to go over the evidence to reproduce still more reports, none of which will ever be the last word on the matter. We can never presume to understand the past completely. What Butterfield will not like about Macaulay

is his sense of certainty. Lord Melbourne wrote that he wished he could have been as certain of anything as Macaulay was on everything. But certainty is not epistemologically germane. It is not the case that dogmatic agnosticism is the best standpoint. If anything, as Popper made clear, a bold hypothesis allows us to test our ideas while to fence-sit is to be utterly barren.

The BSE Crisis

This week saw the publication of some 16 volumes of the Phillips report on bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or mad cow disease. On Friday came the news that one man of 74 had died last year from *new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease* (nvCJD). This gave rise to the idea that many more might have died of it and that there might even be an epidemic.

“BSE teams rethink size of epidemic” James Meikie (*The Guardian*, 28 October, p1). Up till now, all reported cases of death from CJD had been between 15 and 54, though one girl was known to have had it at 12 and she, Zoë Jeffrey, died on 28 October at only 14. The estimates have shot up from 100 to 100,000 based on the percentage of the population thought to be open to the risk, the number of infected cattle and the period of incubation. It was uncertain whether this incubation period was 8 years or 30 years. 86 are now known to have died from nvCJD so far.

“Whatever Lord Phillips says, remember that survival is a risky business” was the title Richard North gave to his article in *The Times* (26 October, p20). Mishaps like the BSE affair are almost bound to arise in a society that makes progress. Risk is intrinsic to progress. The *Titanic* sinks, the Chernobyl nuclear plant blows its top and leaks out radioactivity, and Concorde crashes. There are any number of train crashes and even more car smashes, but they were far, far fewer

than the journeys that are successful completed. And a successful journey is the norm. Motor accidents are running at about 3,000 deaths a year, but are said to be as low as 10 from the railways – though a higher figure of 18 has also been cited. There have been over 40 deaths on the roads since the Hatfield crash. But the anxiety industry makes out that all risk is special and that the lot could be avoided, says North.

The anxiety industry loves the BSE problem. It is all too pleased when things go wrong, as this gives evidence that wolves do sometimes appear. It will say that the Ministry of Agriculture should have warned the public earlier – say 1986 rather than 1988. Even when the Ministry did issue a warning, it was somewhat downbeat, as the Ministry did not want to admit to the EU that British food was tainted, says North. It was never clear of its role and was confused as to whether it was there to regulate the farmers or to stand up for them. Should Douglas Hogg, the Agricultural Minister, have resigned in 1996? He and his forerunners saw that there was no evidence from mainstream science or from the government advisers on a danger. They took that to mean that the beef was safe, but that was a non sequitur, says North. He is right on that but fails to see what the modern philosophy of science recommends. Stephen Dorrell thought that what mattered was consensus in science and he knows no better today. Thus, in his apology on Any Questions on Friday 27 October, he merely thinks he was wrong because the consensus has now changed. What he should have done, if he followed Karl Popper, was to test the theories of the mavericks (Dr Helen Grant, Dr Stephen Dealler and Dr Richard Lacey) that were critical at the time,. We attempt to test by attempted refutation rather than passively conforming to the thought of the status quo at any one time.

However, when the officials said that the beef was safe, they were for the most part correct. Very few helpings of beef in the 1980s led to disease, says North. Dr Stephen Dealler repeated his fears that nearly all of us have eaten about 50

meals of contaminated beef. He said that a third of the sheep, a quarter of the goats and all the mice and mink he tested died. The dead man in the older age bracket means that the estimate of 136,000 needs to be pushed up. But those 50 meals may well have failed to do any harm. North may well be right that they were in fact safe. Nor can it truly be said that there was a failure of regulation in the BSE affair, he continues, for there is no firm reason to despair about the past. We could not have done much before we found out about the disease, but now we can make reforms.

The very popular idea that the affair arose because the feed was unnatural is not the lesson to draw at all, for many unnatural things work out well. And many natural things are great dangers. The idea that GM food is like BSE is not apt, nor is GM food going onto truly new ground. The future is not finally predictable and trying to keep to nature's way will certainly not ensure safety. It could be that one day the dreams of the Greens – their nightmares maybe – that the planet is ruined by progress comes to pass, though North feels that it is most unlikely. He nowadays tends to think that such an outcome might be better than to stagnate in fear, as they tend to recommend we should do. We should be thoughtful as well as progressive, but trial and error is bound to lead to some mishap.

On Saturday, the mad Hattersley give us his opinion on the 16 volumes of the report. "The diseased herd" (*The Guardian*, 28 October, p20) displays all the author's skills in his new career in writing. He begins with the Falklands war. Then the mad Hattersley goes on to the topic of arms to Iraq. No fault was found in either pulling the ships away from the South Atlantic or in selling arms to Iraq as far as the elite on the enquiry teams can see. They take it for granted that any error made arises despite those in charge, who like the enquiry

team are part of the elite. Whenever possible, blame is to be avoided completely. Given this class outlook, the mad Hattersley did not expect much criticism from Phillips. He said that two Agricultural Ministers, Gummer and Hogg, and one Health Minister, Dorrell, underplayed the risk of eating beef. But the government believed its own propaganda. Later when it emerged that it was possible for BSE to transform into CJD they still set out to avoid an over-reaction. Phillips thinks that was a mistake. Amen to that says the mad Hattersley. But he will not endorse the idea that the government did not lie. The report does not excuse or exonerate the guilty but it does treat them very gently. The mad Hattersley thinks that if they were doing their best, it was woefully inadequate. They have got off too lightly.

Nothing we do is free of risk. We can never be sure how dire are the risks we take but will need to think out the risks for ourselves in each case. The action we take will be our own and so will the responsibility for the results. Gummer, Hogg and Dorrell are not up to doing other than conforming to the status quo and so they were not much help, but it is not likely that the mad Hattersley knows better. What is needed in science is to test the knowledge by attempted refutation.

The Green Speech

There was a great deal of heralding of Tony Blair's Green speech. Michael Meacher came on Dimbleby, the TV show headed by Jonathan Dimbleby, on Sunday, 21 October. The Greens rather got to like Gummer, as he conformed no end to their hogwash, but if anything, they like Meacher even more. He boldly told us that the climate warming was not something of the future but is with us today. Far too much has occurred in the last two years to let him say anything else. But what of the great storms in England in 1913 or in 1872 or of the many storms Matthew Paris (1200-59) wrote of in his history of his

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times? Meacher seems to know nothing of that and he feels it is all a new phenomenon. The Green fad has, in fact, revived certain reactionary ideas formed at the end of the eighteenth century. Meacher held the state was well on its way to curbing emissions to meet the target agreed for 2010. The government was not lagging as some Greens said. A publication would be out in the next few weeks that would make all the work that the government was doing quite explicit, said Meacher.

The government had been accused of abandoning the fuel duty escalator, but the OPEC price rise had rendered it defunct. Indeed, the price was now too high. Dimbleby pointed out that fuel was still cheaper in real terms than it was 25 years ago and wages have doubled since then. Meacher agreed, but he said that the price rise was too sudden and too high. We are over-dependent on oil and there was a Green issue involved. We could have a carbon tax to stop the sort of flooding that has been seen in Sussex of late. But we must beware not to hit the poor too hard. If the poor are let off the extra cost by providing refunds below a certain income level, the carbon tax would still tend to catch quite a few people who have saved just enough to be unfairly hit by such a tax. The aim was to decrease carbon dioxide, said Meacher. He thought that the USA was a big problem as it caused 25% of the pollution. But they would be soon won round, whoever wins their election.

The speech itself was reported in the press on Wednesday. Blair called for a partnership between the Green lobby, business and the public. He thought that business could solve the problems and make a profit also. It all rather sounds like the new tune that the Lovins family now plays. Mr Lovins was the most anti-capitalist Green around 1980 when he was single, but since the early 1990s has been very pro-capitalism, seeing the market as the solution to pollution and other Green problems. And his wife agrees with this new outlook. Tony Blair said that the Green issue was a big one for New Labour, but it had taken more of a

back seat than he expected before the election. His big message was that there is no clash between greenness and progress. We can all get richer and be greener too. He wanted to push Green issues right up to the top of the agenda. He said, "millions in Britain are now Green in outlook. They want the air that they breathe to be fresh. They want the countryside that they live in or visit to be protected. They have respect for the world. They hate cruelty to animals, hate the destruction of natural beauty." He has arranged a one-off £5 million grant from the national lottery to support offshore wind energy projects and other renewable energy generation. There is also £50 million for waste disposal.

His speech was welcomed by the Greens for its analysis of the problems, but they felt he was not planning to do enough in response. Charles Secrett, director of *Friends of the Earth* (FOE) said, "It takes two to tango. Mr Blair's speech contained some sharp analysis of how environmental action can be good for business. Now we want to see specific and radical Green policies in Labour's manifesto." Secrett thought that it was not quite right of Blair to claim that he had been neutral on GM foods when he had clearly been in favour of them. Lynn Sloman said, "At long last, Mr Blair has made explicit the link between using cars and climate change. We hope this makes a change of tack for a government that has been on the run from the motoring and haulage lobbies." Lord Melchett the outgoing director of *Greenpeace* said, "We are pleased that the Prime Minister has accepted the royal commission on environmental pollution's conclusion that we need to cut down carbon dioxide emissions by at least 60% by 2050." It would mean investment in renewable technology.

The government expects to raise £50 million from a carbon climate change tax on business that is due next year. That will force industry to develop lower carbon emissions. They aim to aid international efforts to cut carbon

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emissions. But the Greens feel they should do more to help developing countries, especially through aid. Blair said, "We should proceed according to science and common values as there are points of real conflict between consumption and the environment. Politicians need to woo the electorate as well as to lead it. But on Green issues, business was part of the solution rather than part of the problem." If there are pollution problems, then the tragedy of the commons will be a factor in them and more privatisation will aid the solution. But many Green stories are mere scare stories. The Green solution is a modern version of the masochistic hair shirt that has gratified the Puritan fanatic down the ages; an end in itself rather than an actual candidate solution to any problem.

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