



## CONCLUSION

### *DESIRED PRESENTS AND RE-ORDERED PASTS*

If the nineteenth century was the age of history, histories themselves were a genre that most efficiently reconciled the contradictory needs of Victorian consciousness. Victorian histories asserted the authority of the real but provided the satisfactions of romance. They emplotted the actual so as to demonstrate the triumph of good over evil, recovery over loss, identity over disinheritance. As art that could both entertain and educate, histories escaped the evangelical disapproval and Utilitarian scorn that “mere” literature aroused. Macaulay’s penchant for conjuring up historical romances while at the same time insisting on the clear distinction between fact and fantasy provides the classic example of the tension between imagination and reason, escapism and pragmatism. Historical study satisfied even so rationalistic a mind as Macaulay’s by uniting “the clear discernment of truth and the exquisite enjoyment of fiction.” It satisfied the exacting consciences of Arnold and Carlyle for similar reasons: they could counter fears of self-indulgent escapism by turning their histories into “tracts for the times.”

Even more important was history’s ability to reconcile faith with reason. In the hands of these writers, history brought the facts of the past to bear on the truths of belief. It confirmed with law the order posited by faith. In an increasingly secular age, history took the place of dogma as the mainstay of meaningfulness. Without knowledge of

his past, man became for Carlyle an "aimless exile" from the spiritual community, deprived of a soul because he was deprived of a history. The very process of studying history satisfied quasi-religious needs by reestablishing this spiritual community and paying tribute to its ideals. Arnold defined the "power of connecting ourselves with the past" as "one of the very divinest parts of our nature." Studying history became an act of reverence toward all things "noble and just, and wise and holy" in human achievement. For Carlyle and Froude this meant hero-worship. The Whig might revere institutions more than individuals, but his alternative faith had similar purposes: to locate a teleological order in the past and to create a tradition that demanded and inspired emulation in the present. What was true for Macaulay, the most rationalistic of the six, was to an extent true of them all: the scenes of major historical events replaced religious shrines as the holy ground of a modern faith. History provided the sacred text and a secularized communion of saints for a religion in which "Admiration, Hope, and Love" bolstered the orthodox creed.

As Arnold's Christian teacher, Carlyle's poet-seer, or even Freeman's professional, the historian became the high priest for this religion, an interpreter who was supposed to provide consolation, direction, and inspiration for his flock. Arnold viewed his historical work in the same light as his clerical responsibilities: both were ways of wrestling actively with the doubt and scepticism of the secular world. For Arnold the priest and the historian were one because all knowledge was one. Victims of Truth's fragmentation, Froude and Green chose the latter vocation after failing at the first. Carlyle struggled with increasing difficulty to make historical study affirm the prophet's voice. Freeman succeeded by refusing to acknowledge a distinction between his moral and scientific messages. By devoting himself to historical writing, Macaulay retreated from his public duties and private griefs into a world of controllable experience. Like the others, he sought there a realm of more stable ideals and more conscious order than he found in the present.

For all six, public mission as well as private needs made objectivity and impartiality suspect if not irresponsible. Where ethical issues were concerned (and for the Victorians, where were they not?) impartiality became "unworthy indifference." Like Green, all six historians considered moral judgment "the very soul of history." Not just understanding but belief itself was at stake in historical investigation: the penalty for failing to make the past intelligible was scepticism.

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Carlyle evinced the most anxiety about the difficulties of discerning landmarks in history's dark void, but even Freeman feared that being too critical in analyzing sources threatened to make us despair of finding any reliable record of human achievement. There was in this sense no such thing as a search for truth "for its own sake."

For twentieth-century thinkers, one's way of knowing determines what one can know. For the Victorians what one believed determined one's way of knowing. Spiritual facts were revealed to the eye of imagination. There was a certain practical motive in supplying history with rousing narratives and purple patches: history had to have "the interest of romance" in order to retain its hold on "imaginative and moral feelings"; it needed art to "brand" lasting instruction on the mind. Here Arnold and Macaulay were in essential agreement. Choosing to downplay their scholarly apparatus in order to preserve readability appeared natural to them. This choice had become more polemical for Freeman and Green. Still, both were willing to make concessions in professional standards in the hope of holding the attention of the general public. However, far more significant in determining the literary shape of historical narrative was the conviction that imagination was necessary to understanding, that "poetic insight" was often "the truest philosophy of history." Given the complexity of great personalities, only poetry was adequate to re-create them. Given the fragmentary nature of the historical record, only an act of imagination could reconstitute the "scattered bones" into an organism, transform the "shot rubbish" into a reflection of the cosmic whole. To bridge the gap between past and present consciousness, the historian had often to project what he could not confirm. Carlyle was not the only one who felt that some invention could produce a truer, because more fully realized, picture. Verisimilitude often had greater persuasive power than "hard facts" because meaning in history was the domain of the suprarational—of inspiration, of sympathy, of will. The literary coherence of the Victorian history was an invitation to belief: a pact between the writer, the reader, and the past.

The different registers of Victorian history correspond to the different levels at which the reader could enter and experience. If engaging what Arnold called "poetical feelings" in itself enlarged one's mind, merely witnessing the pageant of great individuals engaged in great deeds was inspiring to the reader—all the more when he could believe such romantic scenes had "really" happened. Purple prose and the grand style were intended to overawe the worshipper in the same

way as did ecclesiastical pomp. But recognition of the familiar compelled a more powerful belief than did pageantry. In a secularized faith, sympathy did the work of conversion, and sympathy rested on the acknowledgement of a shared humanity. Glimpses of the private man or woman—More showing off his children's rabbit hutches, Cromwell troubled by hypochondria—did more than merely highlight or round out their portraits. They asserted the authenticity of common experience, the basis of claims that these characters were "friends and brethren." The fabric of common experience extended far beyond individuals to domesticate an alien world. The landmarks of daily life were as important as those of city and battlefield to force the reader from observation into participation. Through the minute documentation of the "life-method" of ordinary people, the historian proved that by-gone ages "were actually filled with living men." Believing that these ages would be unintelligible without some understanding of the shared consciousness that characterized them, he gladly stooped to materials formerly beneath "the dignity of history." The proliferation of quotidian detail authenticated this consciousness as it made the past habitable by imagination. In its "faithful representing of commonplace things," the Victorian narrative history aimed at asserting the authority of the ordinary in the same way as did many novels of the period. The crowded canvasses of both genres also testify to the multi-dimensionality and complexity of the historical process, the novel through its minutely detailed backgrounds, panoramic scale, and interwoven plots, the history through its layering of the private and public, the political and the social, the individual and the mass.

Belief in history's imaginative truths led to art; belief in its philosophical truths led to *Wissenschaft*. Order finally made claims more urgent than individuality. Imaginative realization of the historical datum was a means to an end, for history's meaningfulness rested on patterns accessible by law. Unlike the thinkers of the eighteenth century, the Victorians sought laws that subordinated detail without denying its particularity. They viewed society not as a machine but as an organism. It was not man himself but the process of social evolution that was the same. Recognizing resemblances in the development of different societies confirmed history's "continuity," its interrelatedness. It introduced system into the historian's work, making it scientific rather than merely antiquarian. The attraction of modeling historical change on nature lay partly in its reconciliation of identity

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with growth, permanence with variation. If change were in effect seasonal, even the most violent contrasts corresponded to a deeper regularity. If present were related to past as the man to the boy, the tree to the sapling, history could claim unity without uniformity. Manifestations of early stages of development were not scorned as backwards but appreciated as appropriate to their context and essential to growth. The historian could acknowledge the validity of relative standards of conduct without abandoning himself to them. More importantly, "natural" change conveniently secularized teleology. The dynamic behind the historian's version of evolution was not random mutation but the fulfillment of genetic programming. The growth of the germ into the organism became a realization of lineage, the perfecting of something innate. In some (usually) unarticulated sense, this development was predetermined, subject to higher, ultimately benevolent, laws. The distinction between process and progress was more useful for being ambiguous. The historian could manipulate the determinism and regularity of the system to serve his own ends.

Notwithstanding his willingness to borrow the authority of the natural, each historian imposed a system of absolutes on the freedom and relativism of the organic. Nature was not self-sufficient; nurture made the man intellectually superior to the boy, the tree more fruitful than the sapling. Cycles were not self-validating. History spiraled toward some goal. For each historian that goal was defined differently, but once defined, it ordered history according to its own priorities. Ultimate truth might be served by submission to authority or growth into self-determination, by the triumph of silent faith or of rational talk. In either case the definition of truth rationalized blindspots and made some ages more "immediate to God" than others, based on the extent to which they furthered a desired conception of progress.

Such a conception of change gave the historian an argument for reshaping society in his own image. He interpreted the political and social structure he desired for his own society as the issue of a progress that conflated the fulfillment of God's will with the maturation of the organism. This interpretation exploited the coercive power of both the providential and the natural. God's will would ultimately triumph, but man still had to decide whether or not to help further His scheme. Nature would take its course, but growth could lead to disease or deformation if maturation were obstructed. So long as people cooperated with the natural course of change, the evolution toward

the good society was guaranteed. Defy that process, however—resist the Reform Bill or shirk the responsibilities of a true aristocracy—and social chaos would come again.

Implicit in such explanations is a tension between a benevolent determinism and a responsible free will that structures the treatment of causation in all six historians. Only Macaulay went so far as to insist that the spirit of the age acted independently of even the greatest individuals—that “without Copernicus we should have been Copernicans.” But the others managed to escape this conclusion only by fusing the hero with the spirit of his time or people. Human progress advanced unconsciously in a tide that the hero might guide or the genius epitomize, but that neither originated nor really controlled. Even Carlyle’s heroes were modelers, revealers, guides, not creators. By making the spirit of the age a manifestation of the divine plan and the choice of whether to cooperate with it a meaningful one, these historians robbed the “force of circumstances” of its tyrannical influence. If the great man were merely the most prominent specimen of this spirit, his actions still gained significance from their contribution to progress. Victorians feeling lost in the rapid tide of change in their own day could take comfort in history’s assurance that the direction of change was ultimately toward the good. Meanwhile, the possibility of retribution or temporary breakdown prevented a fatalistic abandonment to circumstance and kept up the pressure for continued individual struggle.

It was not so much their deficiencies as researchers as the controlling power of their desired patterns that made Victorian historians seem amateur by later standards. Although it is true that most of them relied heavily on standard secondary sources for their data, Macaulay and Carlyle made significant use of original documents, and Froude undertook extensive archival research. They all helped to expand historical understanding by widening the scope of investigation to include geographical, artistic, intellectual, economic, and religious forces. Their treatment of historical sites, mythic and popular literature, religion, and race bespeaks a conception of historical explanation beyond the reach of the Enlightenment. And yet despite the greater complexity of their analyses, various factors prevented them from realizing the full importance of such sociocultural factors and from fully integrating them into historical explanation. This was inevitable given the breadth of their syntheses and the fragmentary state of research materials at the time. The real problems were more polemical

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cal than practical, however. Sociocultural evidence possessed no real autonomy in historical explanation because it became simply another means of vindicating the historian's preconceived sense of order. No inductive revelations were likely given the strength of the patterns already in the historian's mind. Each selected data to condone or condemn the mind of the time; each ransacked culture for analogues to a schema already imposed by his own political and moral precepts.

The Victorian need to demonstrate order and purpose in history made it difficult for the historian to appreciate any fact for its own sake, to understand any event entirely in terms of its context. Finally, only what still "reached to the surface" of the present was worthy of preservation; nineteenth-century needs and interests controlled the historian's perception of what survived. Froude and Carlyle took a "Whig view" of history as much as did Macaulay, Green, or Freeman in this respect: all of them judged and ordered events according to the priorities of the present. They overlooked the specific historical context of events in order to fashion them into anticipations or prototypes of issues decisive for their own society. Preaching the virtues of objectivity and impartiality as so many of them did was no guarantee of either. All were aware of and attempted to practice the scientific analysis prescribed by Ranke. But their foregone conclusions about the righteousness of certain causes made them truly critical of only what contradicted these conclusions. The coherence of history depended upon the timelessness of the values by which they judged it. Seldom could they accept opposing judgments as a matter of intellectual disagreement rather than sinful indifference to Truth. Their need to impose value-laden schema on the past finally made their capacity for romantic empathy highly selective and discredited their claims to what later ages would mean by "scientific" accuracy.

This is precisely why they served their audience so well. Each historian projected his ideal version of modern order back onto the past: each concentrated on materials most easily shaped to mirror that order. The historian devised a genealogy to make recognizable the traits of modern society. The Victorian history promised the general public that insofar as they could endorse and emulate the values of a designated tradition, its history could become their own; they became part of the fulfillment of Teutonic, Protestant, and middle-class destiny. Works so conceived put history's own seal of approval on selected aspects of Victorian success and offered a rationale for continued progress in the same direction. The historian's highest duty

was to make sense of the past in order to make sense of the present. In reality he reversed this process, first asserting a desired present and then assembling a past to justify it. If his powerful impulse toward order undercut historical objectivity and distance, it provided something of much greater use for society at large: a place and purpose in the flux of time.

The Victorian historian's desire to be both sage and scientist was the ideal of an age whose central task was reconciliation, the reconciliation of its different ways of knowing and of its different intellectual and social constituencies. Like other Victorian thinkers, the historian was engaged in defining some communality of vision for a society whose traditional unities were breaking down. When Matthew Arnold placed the authority of a universal culture over the anarchy of individual judgment, when John Henry Newman reaffirmed the existence of timeless truths overriding perennial change and falsehood, when George Eliot tried to replace truth of doctrine with truth of feeling, each was asserting the integrative power of some "idea of the world" over the "multitudinousness" of existence, the power of some common Reality over the increasing number of individual realities. The historian was similarly a mediator: his address to a wide audience was the counterpart of his belief in a shared order; his integration of the rational, the moral, and the imaginative made possible his refusal to surrender truth to relativism. The compartmentalization of intellectual life in the next century was the most prominent sign of the erosion of shared certainties. As a teacher the historian sustained the cultural ideals of an earlier age. His continuing belief in the humanizing power of history—a Victorian legacy—preserved to him an integrity of vision fewer and fewer professionals could claim (or wish to claim) in the multinormative world of the twentieth century.