

General History

ESSAYS ON FREEDOM AND POWER. By *John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton*, First Baron Acton. Selected, and with an Introduction by *Gertrude Himmelfarb*. Preface by Herman Finer. (Boston: Beacon Press [trade ed.]; Glencoe: Free Press [text and library ed.]. 1948. Pp. lxvi, 452. \$5.00.)

THIS new edition of Acton's writings includes the inaugural lecture on the study of history, the two papers on the history of freedom in antiquity and in Christianity, the essays on the Protestant theory of persecution; nationality; political causes of the American Revolution; the background of the French Revolution; the Vatican Council (perhaps the most illuminating of Acton's historical papers); and the Acton-Creighton correspondence. Gertrude Himmelfarb introduces the volume with a well-balanced biographical and critical analysis. A bibliography of Acton's writings is appended.

The experience of the last decades makes Acton's work appear in a different light: on balance, his contribution as a historian seems to be less significant than the moral emphasis which characterizes his work.

Toward the end of his paper on the history of freedom in Christianity Acton says, "In the ages of which I have spoken, the history of freedom was the history of the thing that was not" (p. 83). He adds that only since the Declaration of Independence or rather since the Spanish constitution of 1812 have "the only known forms of liberty, Republics and Constitutional Monarchy . . . made their way over the world." Acton qualifies this statement by his solemn warning that no form of government, no institution guarantees by itself the realization of freedom (pp. 31 f., 130 f.). To him, history is by no means assured progress in freedom, even though his idea of freedom is certainly not too ambitious or too radical. The devout Catholic, who throughout his life fought against any encroachment on individual freedom by the church as well as by the secular authorities, defines liberty primarily in terms of religious freedom and freedom of conscience. He insists that this liberty must be "effectually secured" (p. 15). The lack of such effectual guarantees in the ages which he discusses, and his suspicion of the materialistic content of liberty make his history of freedom little more than a survey of certain phases and aspects of political *thought*, with a strong overemphasis on ideologies and religion, which frequently gives a distorted picture of the actual historical conditions.

But while Acton's historiography hardly appears as an original contribution, his moral philosophy assumes an increasing importance.

In his preface to this edition, Herman Finer remarks that Acton's reputation

is above all due to his "moral integrity." It is precisely this moral integrity, the consistency with which Acton submits historical processes, persons, and institutions to severe moral standards, which has led to the reproach that he is a moralist rather than a historian, that he offends against the principle of historical objectivity. Here is the point where Acton's work deserves reevaluation. He like few historians felt that historical objectivity may imply a bias more deadly to the truth than any moral criticism of history. The bulk of historiography, at least up to the nineteenth century, is written in terms of the predominant historical nations, tendencies, institutions, and personalities. To report the facts objectively thus meant to report them in the light of the great historical forces. The fate of their nameless victims, their suffering and misery, appeared only as incidental, as by-product of the objective course of events. History almost inevitably records only the deeds and consequences of what has acquired power, position, and influence. The objective record is slanted in their favor, illuminated in their light; the rest remains in the shadow. Hegel's terrifying statement that world history is the slaughterbench on which the happiness of the individuals is sacrificed to the progress of reason reveals the hidden implications of historical objectivity.

Acton's entire work is the struggle against the injustice implied in this objectivity. It motivates his hatred and suspicion of all "power," his demand that the true historian should judge and criticize the lords and masters of the earth, the kings and popes and heroes much more severely and uncompromisingly than any ordinary person. He tried to remedy the injustice of historical neutrality by establishing the principle that historical persons and institutions are to be judged according to the greatest historical crime which they have committed: the papacy by the Inquisition, Luther by his writings against the peasants, Calvin by the execution of Servetus:

The one crime swells out of proportion to the rest. We all agree that Calvin was one of the greatest writers, many think him the best religious teacher in the world. But that one affair of Servetus outweighs the nine folios, and settles, by itself, the reputation he deserves. So with the medieval Inquisition and the Popes that founded it and worked it. That is the breaking point, the article of their system by which they stand or fall [letter to Bishop Creighton, p. 362].

To this reviewer it seems that Acton's insistence on this principle is his greatest contribution, and one of the greatest contributions, to historiography. Its truth-value may become clear when we apply it to our own period. To judge the totalitarian system by its concentration camps, that is, by its most conspicuous crime, is to uncover the deepest layer of the whole system, the structure which holds it together, the essential condition for the efficiency of its political and economic organization. It is indeed the "breaking point," the "article" by which the system stands or falls.

The morality implied in Acton's principle is not an arbitrary one; it has its

own historical objectivity. History is not written in a vacuum. Acton writes it in the Christian tradition of Western civilization which promoted the ideas of liberty, equality, and justice. It is the ideology by which this civilization explained itself, by which it justified its course, which it claimed as the very content of "progress." In taking this ideology seriously, in applying it to the reality as a moral standard, Acton judges the Christian period according to its own standards. He can thus say that his moral code "supposes nothing and implies nothing but what is universally current and familiar." In this code, murder (no matter who commits it) is the "scientific zero," and the persecution of the weak, the starving of the poor, the terror against those who committed no crime is a crime and should be called by that name. Acton does not mean that his "moral code" should in any way replace or cut short painstaking objective historical analysis but that it should serve as an ever-present corrective against the *ex post facto* justification of successful power which "has made history." Only as a moralist in this sense can the historian preserve objectivity and the dignity of history as a science.

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DE ZIN DER GESCHIEDENIS: EEN WIJSGEERIGE BESPREKING VAN DEN GANG DER MENSHEID. Eerste Boek, GRONDSLAG; Tweede Boek, GESCHIEDKUNDIGE THEORIEËN; Derde Boek, DEBOUW DER GESCHIEDENIS. By *P. van Schilfgaardde*. (Leiden: E. J. Brill. 1946-47. Pp. viii, 327; viii, 338; viii, 284. 10 guilders each.)

THESE three volumes, which bear the title *The Meaning of History* and an elaborating subtitle *A Philosophical Discussion of the Course of Man*, constitute just one more proof that the question "What is the meaning of our civilization?" calls imperiously for a satisfactory answer. Too much has been taken for granted by our historians; while they have labored with almost ascetic devotion to collect data about institutions, persons, wars, diets, technology, religions, and social customs, they have usually assumed some easily adopted principle governing these things, for which, however, they have not been able to give adequately reasoned grounds. The methods inspired by historical positivism have rendered us well-nigh incapable of seeing the wood for the trees. Of what use are these accumulations of facts about the past—long distant or in the shadow of yesterday—unless we have some adequate way of evaluating them, some principle by which their meaning may be probed?

Such evaluation, however, is an arduous task, as the author wishes to make clear to his readers. The reviewer would like to emphasize the point, however, that its first requisite is a sufficient grounding in the basic philosophical disciplines, logic and metaphysics. To attempt these alone is arduous enough. And the second requisite consists in scientific mastery of the subject matter we usually include under the label of history—language, institutions, thought (especially religion)